

Chapter 9

## THE OPEN ANTHROPOLOGY COOPERATIVE

### Towards an Online Public Anthropology



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We attempt here to explore the relationship between anthropology, social media and public engagement through a web-based network that we helped to found and manage. We argue that obscure social and technical dynamics are at work here, but academic anthropology today also poses significant obstacles for this enterprise.

The Open Anthropology Cooperative (OAC) is an online organization for professionals, students and the general public with an interest in anthropology. It was founded in mid-2009. A small network of mostly young anthropologists raised the possibility of such an organization on Twitter, and then moved for a few days to a forum that allowed more extended discussion; shortly after, on 28 May, they formed the OAC as a social media platform. The response to the OAC's formation was explosive. Over one hundred members joined on the first day, seven hundred in the first month and one thousand in the first three months; by the end of 2014 it had eight thousand members around the world. The ad hoc, volunteer 'committee' that launched the OAC was taken by surprise and the initial months were turbulent. In the first year, some political crises had to be overcome, but eventually things settled down. The OAC is rather quiet now, punctuated by short bursts of activity around hot topics. A majority of the members appear to be dormant, but identifying active and engaged readers or tracing social media 'sharers' is always problematic on the internet. The promise of this social experiment is great, but we still have many problems to solve.

The OAC consistently receives, on average, five hundred visits a day. The top ten countries varies, but the United States accounts for almost a third of these visits with Britain a clear second, followed at the time of writing by India, Australia, Canada, Germany, France, Italy, Japan and Brazil. Visits are divided roughly as follows: United States 30 per cent, other Anglo-phone 30 per cent, Europe 30 per cent, Rest of the World 10 per cent. This distribution understates the remarkable geographical and social range of the OAC's membership, which is much broader. The OAC has over fifty members in each of twenty countries, and double-figure membership in over thirty more countries (see Appendix 1). Active participation through posting comments on the site, however, is skewed towards native English speakers, although the OAC early on hosted specialist groups operating in German, Norwegian, Italian, French, Russian, Portuguese, Spanish and Turkish. Yet despite this initial diversity and the OAC's worldwide reach, the trend is inexorably towards Anglophone dominance. The language issue is crucial for a site with global aspirations.

In practical terms, the OAC is a place of online interaction, with discussion forums, blogs, groups, messaging, a chat room, and facilities for sharing photos and videos, announcements, posting offers and making friends. It also serves as an archive with each member able to store photos, videos, music and texts on their home page and to post similar material around the site. This, along with its social media look, gives the OAC a Facebook feel. Interaction on the site is ego-centric for technical and cultural reasons, and despite the founders' collectivist aims, the result is a conglomerate of individually curated pockets of information. We also built up a repository of source materials and advice that might be of professional, educational and public value. There is an underused wiki for course outlines, reading lists and similar material. The OAC Press publishes working papers which are discussed in online seminars lasting a couple of weeks. We also republish classical papers and have a book reviews section. There is thus a balance between ephemeral and more durable contributions. Given our initial focus on openness and freedom, however, we underestimated what it would take for the OAC to become a viable social concern.

The world is going through a major transformation that is social, technological and cultural in scope. It has fundamental consequences for the human condition and hence for anthropology. The best way to learn about these developments is to take an active part in them (Hart 2009). There are analogies between the print revolution and today. For most of human history, information was hard to come by and had to be sought out. With printing, information became omnipresent and for the first time people had to learn how to select what to read. Once this became acceptable,

the way was then open for the mass media. But the relationship between sender and receiver was still asymmetrical. The internet and especially social media, commonly referred to as 'Web 2.0' (O'Reilly 2005), have made a plethora of options available through easy-to-use tools that allow anyone to become a communicator in their own right (Barone 2010: 239–42). New social forms adequate for channelling this unprecedented freedom of self-expression are at best incipient. They are, moreover, compromised by a bureaucratic capitalism whose command-and-control system and intellectual property regime continually provoke vigorous demands for more open access to information and for the democratization of its production, distribution and consumption.

Activists too often envisage change through models shaped by what has been rather than what could be. Contemporary anthropology had its origins in the democratic revolutions of the eighteenth century, but has been reduced since to compiling passive descriptions of exotic phenomena or implementing bureaucratic imperatives rather than engaging with revolution. Few of us have received an education in revolutionary practice. Moreover, the universities are going through a crisis that gives many would-be anthropologists the choice of being medieval apprentices, precarious piece-rate workers or just unemployed (Kendzior 2012; Stoller 2012). This is the main constituency for something like the OAC, but their social predicament often conflicts with the liberation they aspire to. The new organizations we try to create are often hamstrung by the old intellectual equipment we bring to the task.<sup>1</sup> We unknowingly reproduce the dominant social forms in striving to resist them.

The Open Anthropology Cooperative's founders believed that they were launching a new social movement; and the heady first weeks reinforced that feeling. But the OAC was born as a short-term reaction to academic bureaucracy, and its leadership has been trying to catch up with events ever since. At present, the OAC lacks dynamism and a transparent identity. Building an open association as an antidote to a closed academy turned out to be more complicated than we realized, not least because the prisoners do not know what to do when they have been broken out of jail. The ethnographic detail, historical reflections and political commentary of this account of the experiment we launched may help others to plan similar initiatives in public anthropology with greater foresight than we brought to the task.

The shift from the OAC's charismatic launch to more routine issues of organization and development posed some hard questions. Its brief history bears on the new social media, anthropology, its public face and the dynamics of innovation. We first outline the circumstances of the OAC's formation, then the social and technical questions that arose in its early

development and how the organization has changed in ~~three~~ years. We also identify our main concerns for its future. Finally, we draw some lessons from this public experiment on the relationship between anthropology and democracy.

## Origins

The OAC was founded in a way unique to its time: via social media. Through blog comments and an exchange of tweets, a few individuals across several countries, most of whom had never met face-to-face, produced a new online anthropology forum with astounding ease. Back in May 2009, frustration with the American Anthropological Association's hostility towards open access led Savage Minds blogger P. Kerim Friedman to express his disappointment over the AAA's foot-dragging (Friedman 2009a). This is now once again a hot issue.<sup>2</sup> Kerim's initial post led to a heated exchange of comments by readers agreeing that the AAA's impenetrable bureaucracy had built a wall between those who govern it and its supposed beneficiaries. For instance, anthropologist Chris Kelty remarked that the professional organization mainly served the interests of its employees; it was a 'neurotic institution' run by non-university staff, made worse by academics' lack of interest in participating in its governance (Friedman 2009a).

This blog post resonated for anthropologists around the web. Responses revealed widespread frustration with the AAA's actions. Casual griping rapidly spread to Twitter, where a loose network of anthropologists had already formed. Before long, quasi-revolutionary suggestions were made to start a new, open, less bureaucratic and more inclusive worldwide community of anthropologists. The pool of participants in the early conversation on Twitter grew rapidly. Twitter was ideal for spreading the news and gaining momentum, but when the discussion turned to actually constructing a new network for anthropologists, more space and organization was needed. Keith Hart and Justin Shaffner set up a forum on Keith's website, 'The Memory Bank', to that end.

From 20 to 28 May, a small group of these Twitter friends, most of them Anglophone graduate students, plus a couple of senior academics and one interested outsider, committed to specifying a name and purpose for this collective undertaking. The key voices in this early exchange included: P. Kerim Friedman, Paul Wren, Keith Hart, Francine Barone, Carol McGranahan, Jeremy Trombley, Steven Devijver, Cosimo Lupo, Olumide Abimbola, Àngels Trias i Valls and Justin Shaffner. This group shared an attachment to anthropology, an interest in new media and a commitment

to open access. A consensus was soon reached to take advantage of the momentum before individual commitments waned. In the new forum we brainstormed two pressing issues: 'structure' and 'function'. What would a new organization look like and do?

Graduate student Jeremy Trombley suggested that 'we should begin by offering a structure that is open enough to allow it to become whatever it can down the road' (TMB forum). In contrast to the AAA's bureaucratic intransigence, Trombley proposed that 'every member [should] be able and willing to take an initiative. There's no need to get bogged down in unnecessary voting (like the AAA poll that started this discussion); if there's something you think needs to get done and you can do it, then go for it'. This philosophy, which most of us shared, was opposed to the AAA's perceived shortcomings, especially its predilection for top-down control and failure to support open access initiatives. The OAC's founders, relying only on digital tools, aspired to truly global scope, egalitarian ideals, and the abolition of academic hierarchy. Aiming to reach a far wider audience beyond the universities, its social and organizational model sought to negate academia's typical malfunctions. This antithetical framework proved to be both liberating and a handicap in the months ahead.

## Naming the OAC

The name of the website was itself a response to the 'closed' and confining nature of the dominant professional associations – hence 'open anthropology'. Rejection of authoritarian control was axiomatic. Yet the term 'open' was difficult to pin down. As Paul Wren (later an administrator) pointed out: 'We should view "open" as having many faces – open access, open membership, open to new ideas, open to whatever the organization might do or become'. This approach was refreshing, especially for academics frustrated by the slow pace and restrictions of the universities.<sup>3</sup> It also made sense, at a time when open access was becoming a fashionable buzzword for change (Kelty et al. 2008), that the OAC's philosophy should harness the passion of geeks for open technology.

Defining openness became slippery and contradictory as the site grew. We soon learned that in order to keep some aspects of the OAC open, others had to be closed. This is analogous to freedom and its antithesis, necessity: you cannot be free in everything at once, but need to hold some things constant in order to be free in others. Freedom of movement requires fixed places like airports and train stations. We felt that an open community should accept anyone who signs up. But that let in the 'trolls' (people who bait their opponents in ways that undermine the aims of the site, its moral

code and the comfort of its participants)<sup>4</sup> – not to mention the spammers. The administration team was occasionally called upon to discipline public offenders, but decisions to do so and communications with offenders were normally conducted in private. In retrospect, we could have avoided the information maze that the site became if we had imposed stricter standards on members opening new groups, but we encouraged the trend for new members to open one as soon as joining. Crucially, being ‘open’ made it harder to reach agreement on our common goals.

The dialectics of openness merit more serious consideration than they usually get in internet circles. If as anthropologists we aim to extend our public reach beyond the boundaries of academia, we should be aware of the pitfalls of treating the internet as an open medium. While information is instantly accessible to a wide audience, the quality, consistency and usefulness of that information may not match the site organizers’ intentions. If there is no way to control the audience (given full public access), regulating members becomes essential – even if it contradicts the site’s ethos.

The term ‘Anthropology’ should have been self-evident, but we did not want to just replicate institutionalized versions of the discipline. We hoped rather to revolutionize the field of anthropology, beginning with its presence on the web. Keith Hart spoke of an inter-disciplinary project involving ‘whatever we need to know about humanity as a whole to make a better world; and anyone who wants to place their self-learning within the most inclusive framework of human history’. This broad scope inspired – and challenged – the OAC’s new members to think outside established boundaries.

The last part of the name was trickier. Was this going to be a network, a community, a movement, a conversation, an organization, a platform or just a group? ‘Cooperative’, with its ‘sense of action and movement in addition to the collaborative aspect’ (Àngels Trias i Valls, TMB forum) had the right tone to encourage open interaction towards shared goals. It avoided the weasel word ‘community’ and put distance between the new project and the idea of being yet another professional ‘association’. Such a cooperative would offer its members democratic involvement, be more inclusive and make better use of social media for transparent access within and beyond anthropology itself. As a label for a network of anthropologists, each part of the OAC’s name had deliberate and recognizable meaning, but it was also subject to diverse interpretations and intense debate. Career anthropologists will find this unsurprising.

The issue of the name became more divisive once the site was launched, leading to quarrels between founding members, a site-wide referendum and eventually several departures from the core administration team. Bouts of bickering, in-fighting, relentless debate and disputed meanings and in-

tentions chipped away at the upbeat mood of free-flowing consensus that launched our enterprise with such high aspirations. We inverted academic power relations, encouraging equal participation by students, teachers, researchers and outsiders alike, but this had unexpected consequences. This effacement of hierarchy turned out to be a social experiment in itself. At different times, new site hierarchies, factions and divisions formed. Where decisions had to be made, it was inevitably through 'cooperation' – the key pillar meant to hold up the OAC – and we often failed to follow through on them before attention faded. Is this symptomatic of online interaction (a tragedy of the digital commons) or does it just reflect anthropology's lack of an agreed core and the individualism of anthropologists?

### **New Media, New Possibilities**

We certainly did not want to form another professional 'association', but this model did influence some of our members' aspirations, if only by negation. Kerim Friedman saw the OAC more as an anti-AAA<sup>5</sup> which nevertheless shared some of its goals, such as using 'a set of tools and platforms which allow people to accomplish the same things that associations have traditionally provided'. We aimed to build a global space for intellectual exchange, workshops and seminars, research publications, and a pooling of syllabi and teaching materials, while providing an attractive interface for relaxed conversation between students, amateurs and professionals. We also wanted blogging and messaging facilities; a repository of anthropological resources such as photos, videos and podcasts; and to offer practical advice concerning fieldwork and technical matters. Some of these features involve more programming knowledge than others. What we needed to put it all together was mostly available around the web in fragmented pockets, and offered endless possibilities. The same could be said of anthropology.

The OAC needed a permanent and fitting home. We had to build a platform quickly while interest was still fresh. Nine days after Kerim's initial blog post, Maximilian Forte joined the conversation and suggested that we might try setting up a site on Ning, a relatively new online service that allowed users to create their own Facebook-style social networks with many useful features (described below). On 28 May 2009, Keith Hart created a free Ning network as a base for the OAC with a few clicks of the mouse. Producing a 'Facebook for anthropologists' took no time at all, but making it work has been another matter.

The team that launched the OAC had only our own volunteer labour and no funds, so we naturally drew on whatever free and easy-to-use tools and applications could be found on the web. For most of us, being

'open' meant the freedom to be creative and free from proprietary control over our data. Pursuing our lofty goals and adhering to the egalitarian ideals represented in the OAC's name thus depended on the technological tools at our disposal in mid-2009. In short, the OAC piggybacked on the Web 2.0 revolution which had lowered the technical threshold and already captivated anthropologists who were sharing, publishing, promoting and interacting online. At best, we were striving for 'Anthropology 2.0' (Friedman 2009b).

There are now hundreds of anthropology bloggers and thousands of anthropologists with an active presence on the web. Students and academic anthropologists with varying levels of computer literacy use Tumblr, Blogger, Wordpress, Typepad, Drupal and other platforms. They share photos on Flickr, interact on Facebook, produce videos for YouTube and create wikis for teaching and research. Although there are still some active academic mailing lists, they are only a small fraction of the public conversations that anthropologists now engage with online. The OAC's founders came together as a result of one such conversation. Web projects are formed and abandoned all the time. The OAC has already lasted for six years.

The most useful lessons coming from the OAC experiment are pragmatic. The social web offers an ever-evolving selection of sites, apps and services, many of which are free or relatively low-cost. Innovation is rapid and open source is increasingly common. On the other hand, the speed of application launches and failures means that free<sup>6</sup> sites are not always stable over long periods. Most anthropologists know little of computer programming and often feel powerless in the face of technological change. New desktop software and web applications may not be tailored to academic needs, but they are often flexible enough, given basic technical knowledge, and a willingness to endure many bouts of trial and error can go a long way. One simply has to invest the time and energy to find out what works and what does not.

Even though the OAC's future is still as uncertain as it was in the beginning, we can offer some insights that may be relevant to similar projects. Use of social media has enabled a small group of strangers of varying technical ability to build a richly interactive network for thousands of anthropologists. Moreover, the OAC has a well-recognized presence and is an often-cited source of anthropological information on the web.

## No Turning Back

Ning<sup>7</sup> distils the essence of Facebook (a fully featured social networking site) into a simple design template with a limited, but flexible, modular

interface. It offers a fairly elegant solution for website development that requires no server maintenance and minimal knowledge of programming or web design. User profiles, discussion forums, groups, blogs, a chat room and multimedia uploads (photo- and video-sharing) are built in and ready to use, so that new members can just sign up and start adding content. User interactions, member contributions of all types and activity across the site are visible on the home page, which acts as both a landing platform and a navigation hub. Each site feature, from the public discussion forums to individual blog posts, allows other members to comment or reply, and may be followed by email subscription or RSS feed.

Founded in 2005, Ning was still undergoing changes in ownership and vision around the time of the OAC's launch. Its monetization features, such as advertisement and subscription services, proved popular with corporate brands, musicians and celebrity fan sites, but were less than ideal for an open quasi-academic network. From the beginning, we were challenged to make Ning work for us. Without any ready-made viable alternatives, it provided an ideal test for at least one key aspect of our global experiment: to see if our movement could sustain itself on 'free' technologies and volunteer efforts.

After the OAC's almost accidental launch, its membership grew exponentially with each passing day. Keith sent invitations to his professional email address book and this provided a catalyst for the OAC's growth, attracting hundreds of anthropologists in the first few days. Hundreds soon grew into thousands, much faster than anyone expected. We felt that if we were to back away from Ning we would lose momentum. This was decisive. The initial structure, including the benefits and limitations of the platform we had chosen at a whim, greatly shaped the OAC's development in form and function.

The site owner (or Network Creator, here Keith Hart) and a self-appointed team of administrators have access to a control panel of management functions, activity records and appearance settings. The network and its accumulated data are hosted and controlled centrally by Ning. Simple at first glance, the power and complexity of this system should not be underestimated. It took the administrators time to master navigation, control of certain features, privacy protocols and the more complex tasks of editing, organizing and keeping track of site and member information. Ironically, we had chosen this *proprietary* service as a platform for opening up anthropology to the online public. Ning's de facto ownership of network data (it has only recently offered backups and exporting) was always at odds with our open source ethos.

Members were quick to point out Ning's faults. Any structural changes made by Ning, downtime, glitches, or imperfect features directly affect the

day-to-day running of the OAC. Its social features are similar to Facebook, which means that preconceived notions about communication there, including privacy concerns, turned some people off. Academic snobbery was reinforced by Facebook's emergence as the commercial antithesis of attempts to build a genuinely free and open internet. More significantly, the OAC's 'social network' appearance practically constrains how content may be displayed and arranged. Organizing and moderating the site is complicated by the fact that it only takes seconds to add and delete information. Before Ning provided a fix, members could inadvertently leave gaping holes or delete whole conversations by quitting the OAC. Spam was rampant before stronger controls on access to membership were put in place.

All of this contributed to a sense that it was easy to lose track of information for large portions of the site. The administrators have had to take on the roles of editor, sub-editor and curator of a site that rapidly passed the threshold of information overload. Web development left less time to focus on site culture, impact and productivity. A majority of our creative energies went into keeping the site functioning and clean rather than developing its social integrity. When the OAC was formed, questions of administrative function were never raised. Yet, however open the network was in conception, its vitality hinged on the few people who agreed to run it. An informal division of labour emerged between us, with Keith paying more attention to content and crowd control, while Francine focused on site development. But apart from routine decisions, the team as a whole pitched in as we could, given the constraints of our 'offline' lives.

By the end of the first year, we had more or less weathered the storm. Shortly after, Ning's new management team converted its free accounts to a paid, premium fee structure. By now we had amassed enough content for the OAC to be widely recognized as an invaluable repository. The possibility of moving the network to free, cheaper or more open alternatives was mooted in response to the new fees. Migration to a new server, however, required the time and dedication to learn a new platform all over again; and Ning's services made it easier for non-technical administrators to help to manage the site. We decided, therefore, to absorb the premium subscription costs. These were initially covered by Keith and later by member donations.

## **Governance**

The task of site governance became a pressing problem for our new cooperative. The OAC was founded on principles opposed to elitism, bureau-

cracy and academic hierarchy; so we optimistically (or naively – probably both) set out to avoid centralized leadership and control. But what kind of leadership replaces hierarchy? Bureaucracy was originally intended to provide equal access to public resources, but in the twentieth century many came to see it as a means of impersonal domination. Resistance to state and corporate control made it difficult for some to see how self-organization and bureaucracy might be fruitfully combined. Calls for less bureaucracy could transmute into anti-bureaucratic slogans. It was against this background in academic anthropology that the OAC adopted a *laissez-faire* policy privileging self-regulation over firm ‘rules’. This is like promoting the free market without rules of oversight. No one would try to build a community on free market principles; but in retrospect, this is just what we did. Liberals masquerading as consensual democrats were recruited as volunteer administrators. Minimal regulations limiting anti-social behaviour were drafted collaboratively. Writing a ‘mission statement’ proved to be too divisive and was deferred time and again, so that only a brief statement of our common objectives is on display for visitors to this day.

It seemed sensible then to make all major decisions on the OAC’s governance, appearance and purposes available for review by the membership, and even occasionally for a vote. Everyone should have a say. Before long, however, it became impossible to sustain such an unwieldy decision-making chain even for simple matters. Opening every major site decision to public referendum – from rules and regulations to designing a site logo – extended each task and made a consensus hard to reach. Building our organization by an open committee was a mistake that we unwittingly borrowed from academic bureaucracy.

In the end, the administrators had to cut through the indecision. From the beginning we had kept a private back channel going by email, and resort to this became increasingly necessary to weed through the contradictory, even baffling, ‘open’ discussions that took place in the public forums. We were soon saddled with more formal governance and crowd control than with anthropological substance, although Keith still saw his main role as greeting members and contributing to forum discussions. It did not help that the administrators were effectively strangers who never met each other. What might have happened if we had a regular offline rendezvous?

There were some quite radical differences among administrators and members concerning how the site should be run. These were mainly over freedom and accountability, since if members were to be accountable they could not be free in any absolute sense. The membership struggled to come to terms with the site’s commitment to transparency. There is a liberal tradition that considers anonymity to be the only guarantee of

true internet freedom, since otherwise people might be held to account for transgressions against authority.<sup>8</sup> But this can also provide cover for anti-social behaviour, and we opted for insisting that members participate as who they 'really' were or how they were known elsewhere in their professional lives. We requested full personal names as a basic prerequisite for membership, and spent our time chasing members up on this before deciding to screen new applicants. We refused to delete content except in clear cases where privacy had been violated, and in instances of bullying. Some of our members indulged a propensity for antagonistic behaviour and extremist attitudes. We were slow to moderate applications for membership because it felt wrong to control entry to an 'open' network.

We had no way of requiring members to take greater responsibility for their actions and contributions to the OAC, even less to invest in its future. For instance, people are allowed to set up new groups on any topic. There were soon over a hundred. Most of them became moribund and their owners drifted away. The administration team's philosophy of non-intervention simply caused more tail-chasing in the long run. Without firm rules in place, abuse of the site's openness became rampant. This forced us to acknowledge that, in order to be 'open' to all, we had to install more bureaucracy of the type we had hoped to avoid. We were forced to acknowledge that some rules and tighter controls were required to keep the site civil and productive. To be responsibly open, we had to also keep some aspects of site governance closed.

The rocky moments in the OAC's development were interpersonal more than technical. This was usually a question of people talking past each other or succumbing to the norms characteristic of open exchange on the web. Unfortunately web-based discussion allows some people to regress to childish bickering. Perhaps less is at stake than in face-to-face situations. Left unchecked, this kind of behaviour can ruin the atmosphere and discourage many from participating. Our experiment attracted young and old, bullies and zealots, rebels and slackers. Novices were sometimes slow to learn the ropes. The majority of members undoubtedly lurk rather than expose themselves to the slings and arrows of internet discussion. Social media cannot sustain a revolution alone. Just because the tools are available does not mean that they will be used as expected.

When thousands of members descended upon the OAC, managing day-to-day tasks sapped our energies, diverting us from what motivated us in the first place. Before we could get around to purposeful collaboration, we found ourselves on the defensive and overwhelmed by trivia. In short, we have been preoccupied until now with duct-taping together a ramshackle vehicle for changing the scope of anthropology rather than with actively cooperating to effect such a change.

The original team expected to be temporary stewards for a term of six months each. Four years and seven thousand members later, only three were still on board (the third being Justin Shaffner) and no one has ever stepped up to take our place. Our level of commitment has slowly subsided. Several attempts have been made to reinvigorate site activity and to inspire a new burst of energy. We have asked more members to help us to look towards the future and to renew excitement over the OAC's achievements and prospects. There is usually a flurry of interest at first, but it does not last.

### **A Provisional Assessment of the OAC**

The OAC is an online organization on a social networking website with forums and file storage open to anyone. Structurally, this is true. But we aspired to do something better than previous anthropological initiatives have achieved; and who knows, after this first stage, what we or others might achieve in the long run? The OAC places few restrictions on new members' initiatives. Perhaps people assume that the administrators wish to retain their powers of direction as a monopoly. It is not so, but equally we have not succeeded in harnessing fresh energies to develop the OAC. At least we have kept open many possibilities for the future.

For the majority of the OAC's members – semi-regular participants, lurkers and absentees – what we have outlined here will sound unfamiliar. First, only a tiny minority contribute to discussions on the OAC's purposes, or are committed to its organizational tasks. The site has remained more or less unchanged in appearance and practice since the 3,000-member mark. Second, even in periods of low participation, the OAC receives regular visitors. Links to OAC content are shared around Twitter, Facebook, Google+ and other sites daily. Our conversations are cited on popular anthropology blogs like *Savage Minds*<sup>9</sup> and *Neuroanthropology*.<sup>10</sup> OAC members have created offshoots like the *Anthropologies Project*<sup>11</sup> and *PopAnth*,<sup>12</sup> in part inspired by exchanges on the site. For the vast majority of our members today, the trials and tribulations detailed here are probably inconsequential.

Many members are apparently happy to visit regularly, share resources and personal stories, engage in vibrant discussions, debate anthropological theory and practice, and discover new media and interesting people. Anyone who browses the site will learn something new on every page. The number of members grows each day. Some are not formally trained anthropologists or even anthropologists at all. We have personally received thanks for creating the OAC, for keeping it alive and for giving

anthropologists a place on the internet to come together in a more relaxed atmosphere. The social aspects of the site – personal user profiles, chat, blogging, forming ‘weak ties’ (Granovetter 1983) – should not be underestimated just because they are not easy to track or quantify. Informality reduces barriers for interaction between established anthropologists, students and interested amateurs. This is helpful to anyone finding their way in anthropology, and to part-time adjuncts, unemployed postdocs and retired senior faculty who feel disenfranchised from the academic mainstream.

Much of the internet is made up of fleeting encounters and hurried searches for information. Commitments change from one day to the next. These are the unavoidable limits of the online world, but the benefits of having a global communication network outweigh any of its disadvantages. The OAC experiment relies on borrowed energy and volunteer labour, with no promise of social reward beyond an opportunity to take anthropology somewhere it has not been before. The real challenge for web-based enterprises like ours lies in the *longue durée*.

Rob Borofsky (2011) asks, ‘How do we transform anthropology into a more publicly engaged discipline in the sense discussed here – moving beyond talking the talk of change to making a real difference, as a discipline, in the broader world?’ The OAC’s founders proposed to do this through new media, open technology, cooperation, public outreach and a passion for anthropology. If the old way was not working, we would try something different. We hoped to establish a universal medium capable of expressing the unlimited potential of an anthropology that ought to be universal, but often is not. What concerns us now is not that we have failed to revolutionize anthropology, but that we may have plateaued and fallen into the same lethargy that is afflicting anthropology in universities. Have we, too, simply reverted to the anthropologists’ safe zone: observing, participating, collecting more and more data, but not putting it to any useful purpose? Almost six years on, it is hard to judge where to place the OAC within the wider movement for creating a more engaged anthropology, since such a project is at best incipient.

### **Between Social Networks and Academia: Anthropology Online**

Participation in the technological revolution today is both passive and active. We are all affected by the internet’s impact on academic life, whether we choose to join in the change every day or only occasionally, or even to ignore it. The internet and social media are powerful tools for growth pre-

cisely because anyone with access can take some kind of action with little effort. This chapter grows out of a serendipitous online meeting between two academics at opposite stages in their careers, which would not have happened without Twitter. Yet blogging, communicating via social media and producing freely accessible publications online is still relegated by universities to the status of an academic hobby, and not seen as significant work. This is a serious impediment to moving the OAC forward as long as the majority of our members frame their participation by an academic career.

We have both been active in the use of information technology in teaching and research: Francine as an alumna of Britain's most computer-sensitive anthropology department, Keith as the head of the relevant university committee at Cambridge. Departments of anthropology vary in the speed and commitment with which they adopt new technologies and, with the exception in Britain of University College London's programme in digital anthropology, do not usually train their students to make the best of the technological revolution. This is sad for a discipline as global in its reach as anthropology. It also leaves great gaps in technical capacity between people of various ages and backgrounds. The profession has been slow to recognize promising developments in the new media, such as online publishing and blogging, because they do not fit traditional models of academic achievement.

The OAC has shown us that anthropologists can be adaptable *bricoleurs* online, piecing together various communication technologies for chatting, learning, teaching and sharing. The sheer volume of its contributions is difficult to keep up with. Yet the OAC's participants struggle to break through established academic prejudices about online publication and interaction. Regular contributors make up a tiny fraction of our membership. Some still hesitate to participate openly in our forums since the OAC bans the use of pseudonyms and everything is indexed by Google's web crawlers. Many are reluctant to give up control over how they appear online. Anthropologists do not easily let their guard down. Perhaps our formation as apprentice fieldworkers encourages self-protective behaviour. If so, it is inconsistent with opening anthropology to the public to cherry-pick only the best parts. The OAC's online seminar series most closely recreates an acceptable academic mode of production and its value system. This is also our most popular feature, drawing the most traffic from members and online visitors. It seems that we can only draw participants if we reproduce the academic values that the OAC was founded to escape from.

The OAC aspires to be a transparent academic community, so we encourage informal chat alongside formal debate with other anthropologists

and across disciplines. This makes the experience hard to categorize, especially given the universities' dominance in our membership. The network is an anomaly in an otherwise tidy classification system, a sad reflection on anthropology as an exclusively academic practice, where online and academic conversations are treated as being mutually exclusive. The OAC is a compromised public island that seeks to avoid the formal restrictions of university life, yet is largely populated by its denizens.

How then do non-academics find a place among us? How effectively do anthropologists use technology, even those of us who acknowledge its usefulness, not just for teaching, but as a way of changing the public face of anthropology? How accessible are anthropologists? Why are we so rarely approached by the outside world? As a discipline, we are only comfortable talking amongst ourselves. Perhaps we do not know what anthropologists really have to say. These questions point to a direct parallel between where anthropology is today and why the OAC keeps hitting a wall. We started out focusing on the social and technical constraints of the platform and soon confronted the cultural intransigence of the network's object, anthropology.

There are significant differences between social networks and academic networks concerning return on time investment, volunteer labour and long-term objectives, not to mention power relations and status hierarchies that carry over online from the academic world. Much activity on the social web need not concern itself with aims, intentions or long-term goals. It keeps ticking over until boredom or newness force change – whichever comes first. Academic networks do not work the same way. The OAC mixes them together, which may be one source of its current identity crisis.

Playing around on Twitter or keeping in touch on Facebook are not the same as what goes on at the OAC. Twitter is fleeting and impermanent, while Facebook is an intimate meeting point for friends and family. Being an active member of the OAC takes more time commitment, at least some critical thought, and involves the shared expectation of some kind of pointed exchange or response. We have tried to add site features that lower the barrier to participation (such as share buttons, a Twitter tab and RSS feeds), but the returns on this are quite low. Content that is uploaded without any expectation of reciprocity or a response (e.g. sharing a video, 'liking' something, listing an event) has only a marginal place on the OAC.

The more significant products of the OAC's concerted efforts require investments of time and energy. Among these, the OAC Press stands out. It produces online publications in html, pdf and epub formats with a Creative Commons licence. There is no restriction on further use. Working papers by old hands and novices alike are each discussed in OAC online

seminars, as already mentioned; but we also republish classic articles by distinguished authors and review articles on newly issued texts. Before long, we expect to publish longer manuscripts. These activities have a clear end-product and fit long-standing models of academic value; but they also break new ground in form, content and authorship. We may think that new modes of communication make a difference to how we live and work, but academics change slowly. This is why email has not yet imploded as the main means for transmitting academic information. Mailing lists are still popular because they are semi-closed/private and simple. They do one useful thing well enough to stick around. In the OAC's early days, Twitter was a big deal, a real paradigm shift that led to our developing a new medium. Today, few in our circle are bothered to engage on Twitter. Perhaps it no longer occupies the communicative niche it once did. We have recently developed an OAC Facebook page, ~~which has fewer members, but could develop in a new direction. There is~~ not much interaction between the two sites.

A plethora of content prevents adequate use and navigation of the OAC. Hence our future plans for site development always involve streamlining access to the most interesting content. Instead of hoping for some new impetus to what we started, we should probably concentrate on making better use of what we have already produced. Not much more can be done without wider and more engaged interest for more members. In short, it is one thing to propose a strong, free and public-facing anthropology online, but achieving it in practice is another.

## **On Models for Change and Social Movements**

Our report has so far replicated the ethnographic model that dominates contemporary social anthropology. But that model was never intended to inform a movement to change the world. We stumbled into writing this chapter without an active plan for what we hoped to achieve with it. Both of us relate to the site in a very different way. Francine has written an extended reflection on the social impact of the internet in her Ph.D. thesis (Barone 2010), and Keith has published a short memoir of his own experience of the world revolution in communications (Hart 2009). We have provided the ethnography. All we need now is the anthropology or, breathe it softly, a dose of social theory.

Contemporary anthropology (or social science more generally) reflects the world, but is not designed to change it. Anthropologists are conservative. After all, we spent the last century – a century of urbanization, war and the break-up of empires – seeking out isolated places to study as if

they were outside modern history. Then, having realized that we are part of a world unified by transnational capitalism, we spend our time bemoaning the fate of the universities and our own irrelevance to public discourse. The internet's growth has generated a strong counter-movement to the status quo that a few anthropologists are taking seriously (Coleman 2013).<sup>13</sup> The years 2011–12 have seen some dramatic political responses to the world economic crisis in which the new media have played a marked role. Even anthropology may be affected by this development. The OAC can as yet claim only to have played a flawed part in such a process.

The OAC was born as a reaction more than a movement. Its slogan of being 'open' turned out to be contradictory. The leadership we mustered to implement an abstract rejection of hierarchy became merely managerial and half-hearted. We preferred to maximize membership at the expense of making rules that might exclude people. People left anyway. We were always catching up, never ahead of the game. We failed to identify ideas that some members could believe in and work for, preferring to let a thousand flowers bloom, except that they did not. The contradictory hybrid that is Ning hardly sustained revolutionary zeal; graduate students were a majority of the team, and writing a thesis left little time for building an alternative. It is disheartening, but not unexpected, that a cooperative of seven thousand people yields no volunteers to help in its development. Perhaps Web 2.0 makes it so easy to do your own thing that few see the point in joining other people's initiatives.

It is remarkable that we have hardly used anthropology or social theory – old or new – to address the problems we face. We point here to just a couple of examples that might have helped. Max Weber's notion of 'the routinization of charisma' (1978: 246–49) certainly gets at some of these problems. The OAC leadership was never charismatic and we rejected the notion of leadership in the first place. But we did aspire to a sort of collective charisma aimed at putting the boundaries of traditional authority at risk. We saw ourselves as a revolutionary movement. Weber argued that the power of a revolutionary challenge inevitably subsides. By 'routinization' he meant that charismatic authority is replaced by bureaucracy or at least by a mixture of bureaucracy and traditional authority. Weber developed this typology because he was interested in understanding power with a view to using it.

But why stick with the classics? Perhaps anthropologists should be more open to the reflections and even concepts of the people who currently shape social media. Most progressive intellectuals have a twentieth-century baggage that inhibits learning from the successful exponents of Web 2.0. To take one example, Seth Godin is a mega-blogger whose self-promoting excess would make most of us cringe. He has a little book called

*Tribes: We Need You to Lead Us* (2008). Anthropologists may not have noticed that many people out there use our traditional label (which we have largely abandoned) to describe the social forms that they see emerging online. Here are some extracts from that book:

A tribe is a group of people connected to one another, to a leader and to an idea. A group needs two things to be a tribe: a shared interest and a way to communicate. Tribes need leadership. Sometimes one person leads, sometimes more. People want connection and growth and something new. They want change. You can't have a tribe without a leader. A movement is the work of many people, all connected, all seeking something better. The new tools of the Net make it easier than ever to make a movement. Tribes need faith, belief in an idea and a community. Management is about manipulating resources to get a known job done. Leadership is about creating a change you believe in. A tribe grows by transforming a shared interest into a passionate goal and desire for change, by providing tools to tighten communications between members [and] by gaining new members. The first two are more important than the last. [We] need a story of who we are and what future we are building, connections between leaders and the tribe, and something for members to do with each other. A crowd is a tribe without leaders or communication. Participating isn't leading. Leaders are generous. (Godin 2008: several pages)

Most academic anthropologists would dismiss this as muddled hype, a misappropriation of 'our' concepts. But something important is happening to how leaders and followers are conceived and portrayed in society today; and this is not limited to the genre of business sales, education or self-promotion. When the Latins decided it did not pay to be a disorganized rabble, they formed themselves into 'tribes', three named groups, killed a cow and 'distributed' the meat among themselves in a ritual (Hart 2003). They then made ad hoc alliances with neighbours for mutual protection and called each of them *socius* (an ally), the whole thing *societas*. These words share the o-grade root of *sekw-*, meaning to follow (as in *second* and *sign*). Whoever was attacked would assume de facto leadership and the rest would follow them, but such leadership was temporary and contingent. The idea of society as a bounded hierarchy synonymous with a state was a medieval French invention. If we are now living in the 'network society' (Castells 2000), it seems to be one in which 'followers' and 'friends' play a major part. These relations are often ephemeral. Maybe we should think a bit more about the implications of all this for anthropology and the academy.

Anthropologists, it seems, suffer from an inability to catch up with a changing world, at the same time as they meticulously document it. Meanwhile, we are losing control of our master-concepts like 'culture' to other

disciplines, and even to web moguls who are not afraid to engage with popular media.<sup>14</sup> Anthropologists do have something to offer the general public. It is just that we are terrible at communicating it. We all know this, and perhaps the volume as a whole will help us to understand why.

This very real PR problem carries over to the OAC, where we have had difficulty formulating a clear identity or public face. This is reflected, for instance, in our failure to post a coherent site-wide statement of purpose. More often than not, anthropologists are confounded when interacting with the world outside academia. The OAC has failed to reverse this trend, and reinforces it by producing little that might attract general audiences. Fear of marketing our expertise, of 'branding' anthropology or seeking out media attention could fatally undermine an innovative project that once promised so much. Our web-based activities closely resemble office-based politics in this respect. The OAC began as a public-facing anthropological experiment and became a self-serving exercise by academics and for academics, subject to similar prejudices and hierarchical constraints to those of anthropology in the universities.

## Conclusion: Anthropology and Democracy

Our story began with some friends meeting on Twitter and ending up on Ning. A chaotic explosion of collective action was followed by slow quiescence. The principles and limitations of the social media have undoubtedly shaped our attempt to expand anthropology's horizons to a global level, yet we have not been able to draw on our own discipline to help us fulfil the OAC's promise.

Anthropology was born in the eighteenth century as a tool for making a democratic revolution. The liberal philosophers asked what it is that human beings have in common (their 'human nature') that might be the basis of a truly democratic constitution. This tradition was revived in the twentieth century by the ethnographic turn, as a result of which, for the first time, a segment of the academy left the ivory tower to join the people where they live, and to find out what they do, think and want. We all know what has happened since. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, corporatized universities produce young anthropologists in droves with scant prospect of ever plying their trade there; and academic writing is confined to formats dictated by publishing monopolies.

A visitor to our site from America's leading anthropology blog once wrote that he did not 'get' the idea of the OAC. For many the point of a public anthropology is to project one's ideas onto a more general plane than the introverted professional circle with which we are familiar. Intel-

lectuals generate ‘ideas’ and would like the public to be aware of them. But ideas are cheap. Everyone has ideas. The real challenge is to develop new social forms capable of expressing our ideas more effectively. C.L.R. James concluded that democracy has two facets: the freedom to be a fully developed, creative, individual personality, and to be part of a community based on principles conducive to that aim.<sup>15</sup> This was the unity of private interest and public spirit that de Tocqueville found in the early American democracy.<sup>16</sup> Today it has become a universal goal with the emergence of the people of Latin America, Africa and the Middle East as potent symbols of the collective force of humanity in its opposition to the forces of unequal society.

It is no simple thing to create new social forms, and the most radical ideas are often subverted by unconscious retention of old social forms. The OAC is a genuinely new social form. For example, it allows female Asian graduate students to express themselves more freely than in any other serious forum; it encourages all types of anthropology students to network with academics well beyond their departments; and it enables those without institutional affiliations to have access to information, publications and discussions that are normally locked behind university doors or journal pay walls. Of course it still lacks a big idea, and old social forms lurk beneath the surface ready to suck the life out of its capacity to support invention and self-expression. But we would claim to have contributed to public anthropology by providing a genuinely global and largely status-free medium for exploring anthropology’s potential to change the world. Humanity has recently discovered universal media, but we are still searching for a genuine democracy. The OAC is, more self-consciously than most initiatives of its kind, part of that search.

## Appendix 1

OAC members by country on 17 June 2012 (Total 6,300)

USA	1,594	25%
UK	855	14%
Canada	260	4%
India	258	4%
Portugal	247	4%
Germany	192	3%
Italy	169	2%
Brazil	167	2%
Australia	154	2%

Norway	135	2%
Netherlands	117	2%
France	108	2%

Denmark 97, Spain 88, Romania 84, Turkey 79, Greece 74, Sweden 64, Poland 60, South Africa 51

Slovenia 46, Mexico 44, Belgium 43, Ireland 39, Nigeria 37, New Zealand 37, Russia 36, Finland 36, Georgia 34, Pakistan 33, Japan 32

Israel 29, Iceland 29, Taiwan 27, Czech Rep 26, Argentina 25, Kenya 22, China 22, Croatia 22, Bangladesh 21, Peru 21, Slovakia 20

Serbia 19, Hungary 19, South Korea 18, Chile 18, Colombia 17, Bulgaria 15, Iran 15, Philippines 14, Egypt 14, Ethiopia 11, Singapore 10.

Europe	45%
North America	30%
Asia	10%
Latin America	5%
Oceania	3%
Africa	2%
Under 10 and NA	5%

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## Notes

1. For a related discussion, see Hawks 2011.
2. See Thompson 2012; Anderson 2012a, 2012b, 2012c.
3. See Taylor (2012) for a impassioned discussion launched at the OAC by Erin Taylor, 'Producing academic scholarship: If universities are failing, where else do we go?'
4. See Herring et al. 2002; Shin 2008; Hardaker 2010.
5. Keith Hart formed an anti-AAA in the 1990s called the *amateur anthropological association* (motto: 'Amateurs do it for love') known as the *small-triple-a*.
6. As in zero-price (*gratis*) and with few or no restrictions on use (*libre*).
7. <http://ning.com>
8. As in the subversive hackers' network, Anonymous – see Coleman 2012.
9. <http://savageminds.org>
10. <http://blogs.plos.org/neuroanthropology/>
11. <http://anthropologiesproject.org/>
12. <http://popanth.com>
13. When Gabriella Coleman, who holds a Chair in Scientific and Technological Literacy at McGill University, decided to study the free software movement, she was told not to expect a job in academic anthropology – a prophecy that has so far proved to be correct.
14. See Breidenbach and Nyiri 2009.
15. James 1993.
16. Tocqueville 1840.

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