

# AnthroSource—Actually Useful?

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It is easy to get too excited about technology and scholarship. As Rousseau once remarked in a different essay competition, the progress of the arts and sciences isn't all that it's cracked up to be. Here I'll argue that anthropological research is already being transformed by digital genres, and that while AnthroSource has the potential to bring the anthropological community together in deeply productive ways, there is a good chance it will not transform anthropological scholarship at all. Eric Raymond—Rousseau's contrarian hacker reincarnation—famously argued that centrally organized and scrupulously planned “cathedral” style software development is less effective than “bazaar” schemes in which loose collections of projects coalesce into constellations of stupendous utility. AnthroSource, I'll argue, has spent too much of its time decorating altar frontals when it should be leasing storefronts.

It is simply not true that AnthroSource is somehow new or interesting because it is digitizing anthropology's textual patrimony. Compared to the natural sciences—or even political science—anthropology has been behind the curve in moving to digital distribution of content. In fact, the biggest thing holding content-aggregators like JSTOR back from slurping up all AAA texts into one gigantic database is the AAA's (very proper) insistence on reserving its rights to its own journals for AnthroSource. So Voltaire's quip about God is equally true of AnthroSource—if it did not exist, we would invent it.

## A “Bazaar” of Applications

In fact, we already have. A “bazaar” of web applications of the sort that Tim O'Reilly has labeled *Web 2.0*—sites like del.icio.us, Bloglines, Amazon.com, CiteULike, Google Scholar and JSTOR—have developed a method of browsing that revolutionizes scholarship. Here's how:

Today most blogs, newspapers, and yes, academic journals, use RSS feeds to send you updates automat-

ically when they've added new content and send these stories to you so you don't have to visit the website to see them (tech-savvy readers will notice I'm simplifying). And RSS (unlike email alerts) lets you sort and organize information in new and powerful ways.

One of the most popular things to do with feeds is “aggregate” them so you can browse through tons of them at once. For instance, I subscribe to a popular free website called Bloglines. Every morning I get up, turn on my computer, and read 116 different news sources. This includes the table of contents of the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, *Law and Society Review*, *History and Anthropology* and *Annual Review of Anthropology*.

If I find a webpage I like I bookmark it using del.icio.us, a free website that lets me manage my bookmarks by tagging them—classifying them by keyword. If I find a citation I like, I add it to CiteULike, a free bibliography website which takes a book or article from Amazon.com or JSTOR and automatically sucks its citation into its database. I can tag and sort my digital library based on keyword, I can export the data to EndNote, and since CiteULike is a website I can work with my PDFs and citations on any computer that has an Internet connection from Peoria to Port Moresby.

## From Applications to a Networked Community

It gets better: these bookmarking services are social—I can read the tags of people I like to discover new articles, or I can discover new colleagues by paying attention to who has been tagging the same things I have. Best of all, these tags and authors themselves have an RSS feed. So every morning I don't just read the table of contents for new journals—I read an RSS feed of all the articles that people have tagged as “anthropology” to get some sense of where the discipline's attention is.

Here's how we AnthroGeeks do research:

At a conference I heard someone mention “Rabinow and Rose's new paper on biopower.” I went to Google Scholar, typed in “Rabinow Rose biopower” and the article popped up. I saved the PDF to CiteULike to read later. An anthro blog with an RSS feed reported that Donna Goldstein's *Laughter Out of Place* won the Margaret Mead Award for Applied Anthropology. I bookmarked Goldstein's cv on del.icio.us and her book on CiteULike. If the Mead Award homepage had a feed I'd have subscribed to it so I could be updated about new winners. I was browsing through books when Amazon.com recommended *Thinking from Things* by Alison Wylie to me. I tagged the book on CiteULike, googled her homepage and bookmarked it on del.icio.us.

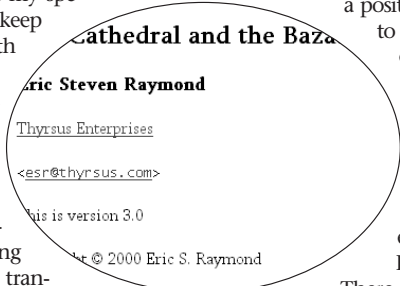
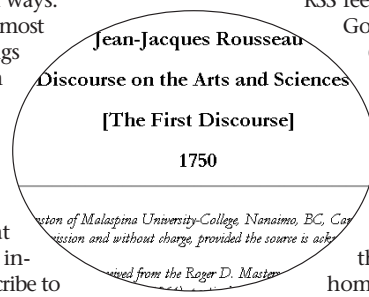
This bazaar-like information ecosystem makes research heart-stoppingly powerful and precise. I'm a Melanesianist who studies kinship but now I'm able to keep up with trends in anthropological theory, learn about ethnography in areas outside my specialty, and keep in touch with the four fields without having to go to the library. As a newly minted PhD trying to make the transition from specialized research to generalized teaching at a liberal arts college, this sort of power surfing is invaluable.

AnthroSource works with a small number of journals. It lets me bookmark articles, but it doesn't let me tag them or share them. It sends me emails about new content, and by the time you read this they may have even rolled out an RSS feed. But if they consistently supported open source, standards-compliant formats, I wouldn't have to wait for them to implement features—the community could develop them itself. In comparison to my anthropological infor-

mation bazaar, AnthroSource's centralized, cathedral-style service is clunky and unlovable.

But what could it become?

Put it this way: Why join the AAA at all these days? You can usually get the journals online or from the library, the kaffuffle about the 2004 meeting had something to upset everyone, and, believe it or not, some of us just aren't interested in talking about the Yanomami any more. But AAA is where hiring happens, so people join because they have to, not because they want to.



## Connecting Members and Content

I believe that AnthroSource can best be developed by taking its rich, peanut-buttery center of digital content and wrapping it up in a delicious chocolate coating of socially-oriented web applications. I think that AnthroSource, reconceived, could be a positive reason for people to reconnect to the AAA community. AnthroSource could be a place people will want to come if it allows them to connect both to digital content and each other.

How do we do this? There are, of course, issues of budget, privacy and institutional politics. But let me mention some things that are technically feasible and have proven successful elsewhere.

First, AnthroSource must “open up and let go.” These days, websites become de facto standards by making themselves indispensable, not by locking users in. AnthroSource must give away as much free content as possible in as many forms as possible to make people hunger for what is behind the membership

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## Changing Field

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Internet reaches into the more remote margins of the world, Internet resources in the field will become not only more useful, but more essential. Because we do not yet know how AnthroSource can be employed in these ways, there are still functions within the database that have not been developed, but which will prove useful. The possibility of searching by or within geographical regions or cultural and demographic categories would aid comparative investigations, or at least, narrow results to topics within these overarching domains.

The heat has become unbearable now here in the field, the cicadas screech deafeningly in the trees, but I am lucky enough to have at least a fan to heave the wet air around the room. I am struggling with a place familiar to me, but pursuing a project that in its breadth and depth is larger than any research endeavor I have attempted before. I am fortunate to be able, via the Internet, to communicate with my mentors readily, to stay in touch with friends, to keep up-to-date on world events. But when I face this project that still stretches 11 months into the future and I feel I am grasping mere slivers of data each day, rather



Jessica Busch (R) does crafts with Japanese women in preparation for the Tanabata festival in August.

Photo courtesy of Jessica Busch

than great revelations, I also turn to AnthroSource for reassurance. Its resources remind me what has been achieved by those who were once in the same position as I and that there is a history to the endeavor I now undertake. It renews the ambition and confidence that the experiences and understanding I pursue here will soon become a resource in turn for those scholars who will undergo their own initiations in the field. ☐

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## Laptop Dance

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still looked at as the area and time in which the raw ethnographic data is acquired, technologies of transport and communication allow the fieldwork period to be a far less exclusive immersion than it was for Bronislaw 90 years ago. With such technologies as the personal computer, the ethnographer can work with one foot in "the field" and the other in "the stacks." While the Internet and digital technology have blurred some kinds of boundaries for the production of anthropological knowledge, it has also erected different kinds of barriers, as illustrated by Bronislaw's initial setback. However, there are many exciting things that we can look forward to, such as the attachment of sound files, or video clips to academic articles, or the possibility of a video or audio database as part of AnthroSource. After all, since when is writing the only way to communicate anthropological knowledge?

In spite of its obvious and exciting benefits, what the digital age does demand of people like Miles is interest in and sensitivity to the materials that are not on an Internet database. While at one

time it was difficult to lure students out of the public library and into academic libraries, now the pattern has shifted to an increasing dependence on the convenience of using Internet sources. And conveniently-acquired sources are more likely to grace the bibliographies of essays of both students and professionals alike. Just because she can find hundreds of thousands of articles online does not mean that Miles should neglect the scholarship on the shelves of the Siamese library. But, what it does mean, ideally, is that we can have access to both worlds, provided we have the necessary technical apparatuses for accessing the digital database, and the language skills for accessing the paper one. Crucial as well, is an ability to learn from informants in the field, if that wasn't obvious already. Though this may not be the end of the field as we know it, it is certainly an exciting time to be doing such work, and the wealth of information which is becoming increasingly accessible can only stimulate further inquiry. ☐

*In addition to playing bass in a Shan rock band, Jane M Ferguson, a PhD candidate at Cornell, is currently conducting her dissertation research in a Thai-Burma borderland village on topics of popular culture, digital media production and stateless subjects.*

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wall (we could even investigate [open-access scholarship](#)). RSS feeds for every journal, author and keyword in existence. Multiple ways to access abstracts. APIs—application program interfaces—so people can write new programs to coordinate with and extend AnthroSource's functionality.

Second, learn the lessons of successful socially-based web applications and make AnthroSource a [cooperation amplifier](#). Create multiple ways for users to organize information in their accounts. Then let them *share* that information with other users. Let them rate, recommend and tag articles, authors and

journals. Make friends' lists and groups they can join. By creating technology that enables cooperation you create a network that increases in value every time a new user joins.

Third, make AnthroSource a [true portal for anthropology](#). Integrate it with AnthroCommons and the AAA homepage. Have AnthroSource, like CiteULike, index existing RSS feeds of interest to anthropologists—like IngentaConnect's RSS feeds for journals—and include them in the journals that AnthroSource tracks. Offer free or discounted hosting for journals from third world countries to give them a voice. AnthroSource needs to become a nexus which integrates not just AAA-related websites, but *all* freely available information on the web that anthropologists care about.

Fourth, and most ambitious, establish an optional web presence for your users. Let them have a profile page where they can share information about themselves such as publications, preprints and some form of public cv. If I found a journal by an author I liked, I could visit their homepage, learn more about them and even see if they are giving a paper at the next AAA. Giving people a place where they can simply and effectively manage their online identity if they choose in the heart of the professional association of their discipline will increase our sense of connection.

The essay competition has always been a genre that institutions with a certain breathless enthusiasm use to simultaneously spread the word and figure out where they're headed. Here I've tried to help AnthroSource do both. I've claimed it is in danger

of reinventing the wheel, and possibly even creating a version with corners. However, if AnthroSource manages to [learn from other virtual communities](#) and integrates two of its major roles—a provider for digital data and the largest anthropology professional organization—it could play a vital part in the production not just of anthropological research, but anthropological *community*. Build it (well) and they will come. ☐

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