

# De-anthropologizing Ethnography: A Historical Perspective on the Commodification of Ethnography as a Business Service

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## Introduction

The relationship between anthropology and ethnography has evolved significantly in the past two centuries, and it has influenced our understanding of both fields (Marcus and Fischer 1986; Pels and Salemink 1999; Stocking 1995). At various points in the past (e.g., the mid- to late nineteenth century), the diverse practices we now associate with ethnography were separate and more or less distinct from what was then called anthropology, while at other times (e.g., the mid-twentieth century) anthropology and ethnography were closely intertwined and identified with one another. Methodology is constructed within a social, political, and historical context (Pels and Salemink 1999:34), so what we think of as ethnography in the contemporary context continues to evolve, just as anthropology has changed in its relationship to the sciences and humanities (see Faubion 2001; Kuper 2011). The association between these two fields is in a state of flux, and nowhere is this more apparent than in the domain of anthropological business practice (e.g., Cefkin 2009; Malefyt 2009; Malefyt and Morais 2012; Sunderland and Denny 2007). Here, anthropology and ethnography are under constant pressure to justify and rationalize themselves, not necessarily as one integral entity, but as multiple and potentially quite different approaches to representing and/or understanding human and social phenomena.

A major premise of this chapter is that intellectual developments within the discipline of anthropology and cognate fields have converged to open the space between anthropology and ethnography, and as a result ethnography has become less dependent upon anthropology for its identity and practices. At the same time, anthropology has evolved toward a highly heterogeneous state with diverse and some might even say fragmented perspectives on its mission (Kuper 2011). These developments have taken place within a capitalist context in which much of the value added in developed economies is associated with service(s). Within this context, ethnography has emerged as a service that is provided not only by business anthropologists but also by social science, humanities, or even technical professionals in consultancies and market research firms that claim to bring consumer knowledge to design, development, or production (Malefyt 2009). Through the process of commodification (defined later in this chapter), ethnographic services can be denuded of craft knowledge or skill base and rendered less expensive or more pliable (Braverman 1974). This need not be (consciously) motivated by “scientific management” (i.e., Taylorism [Taylor 1911]) but may stem from other contemporary trends, such as the “industrialization of services” described by Karmarkar (2004), in which business services become more standardized and automated through the use of information and communication technologies (ICT). Alternatively, business services that represent information to a client may be influenced by the wave of “Big

Data” that is challenging firms to access, organize, and interpret the ever-increasing volume of digital information available as a result of networking and information technology (see Maxwell 2012). The twentieth-century concepts of anthropology and ethnography (e.g., expertise in the exotic, interpretation of the other, attention to detail and difference [Marcus and Fischer 1986; Suchman 2013]) may not have caught up with these tendencies.

In this chapter, I elaborate on some of the mediating forces that have widened the distance between anthropology and ethnography, while propelling the latter into the slipstream of commoditized services. One of the main influences on this shift has been the relationship between anthropology and technology stemming from the discipline’s increasingly humanistic orientation. This has affected the anthropological gaze upon technology, both as subject and as object, just as businesses have become increasingly interested in streams of digital data from sources that did not exist even a few years ago (see PCAST 2013). This confluence of forces has altered the juxtaposition of anthropology, technology, and businesses in a manner that has serious implications for business anthropology.

### **Anthropology & Ethnography: the Standard Model**

For centuries, a variety of professions conducted ethnography-like practices long before anthropology was established as a discipline. These included not only explorers’ journals and travelogues but also aspects of classical ethnography, including long stays in the field, participant observation, in-depth discussions with local people, and translation across linguistic boundaries (e.g., see Pels and Salemink 1999:34–7). It was only with the rise of anthropology as an academic discipline that such practices became known as ethnography, and were closely affiliated with the nascent academic discipline, including points at which the boundaries between ethnography and anthropology were blurred (Stocking 1995:16).

Long before anthropology became institutionalized as an academic discipline in the 1920s and 1930s, “armchair philosophers” read and analyzed the works of writers, travelers, explorers, missionaries, and colonial administrators who engaged in ethnographic or “proto-ethnographic” observations and thinking (Pels and Salemink 1999:7) without doing any fieldwork themselves. Alternatively, colonial administrators took government-sponsored courses on anthropology and became semi-professional anthropologists, undertaking a self-styled form of ethnography.

By the early twentieth century, a quasi-professional ethnography emerged. For example, British government officials in Africa, such as those in Nigeria and on the Gold Coast, could be seconded to anthropological work, gathering demographic census data and other ethnological information (Stocking 1995:369–86). On the Gold Coast, for example, Robert Sutherland Rattray established an Anthropological Department of Ashanti as part of his colonial administration, through which he undertook detailed studies and produced a series of published works that remain of value to students of the Ashanti (e.g., Rattray 1923, 1956, 1959).

Yet it was academics such as Frazer who aimed to provide a more rigorous and objective analytic framework for raw material collected in the field by practicing professionals and who developed more grounded theories about the evolution of humanity and the development of its

institutions, even though the practitioners (e.g., missionaries) provided valuable ethnographic evidence and insights for the grand schemes of anthropologists such as Tylor (Stocking 1995:17–46). This reflected the state of anthropology up through the early decades of the twentieth century.

In none of these earlier guises was ethnography a full-fledged profession standing on its own merits. One did not pursue a career as an “ethnographer.” Rather, proto-ethnography was the idiosyncratic practice of individuals following other career paths, each of whose ethnographic labors were identified and made manifest by anthropologists. Nevertheless, “amateur” or co-vocational ethnography could be practiced without anthropological sanction.

Toward the turn of the twentieth century, scholars started to shape the discipline of anthropology and ethnographic fieldwork into a more unified endeavor that combined empiricism and theorization. This era saw the rise of positivist social science, and anthropologists were expected to develop theory regarding the nature of humanity and the development of society (Bulmer and Bulmer 1981). There was a political charge to the emergence of the social sciences, as the question of colonial power was looming on the transatlantic horizon, as well as the stirrings of sociobiology and eugenics (Kohler 1978; Ross 1991). These issues became important in the relationship of anthropology and ethnography in both Europe and the United States in the coming decades.

In the mid-twentieth century two British social anthropologists developed a theory of practice for ethnography and a theoretical framework for socio-cultural anthropology that in turn influenced American anthropology. Bronislaw Malinowski established a framework for integrating ethnographic fieldwork and anthropological analysis of field data that was superior to the separation of these activities (Stocking 1995). Radcliffe-Brown’s structural-functionalism, based upon Durkheimian functionalism, was crucial in establishing an anthropological (or comparative sociological) theory developed upon the basis of ethnographic field data collected by the same anthropologist(s) who constructed the theory (see Harris 1968:515–16). These were substantial intellectual breakthroughs that legitimized social anthropology and led to an increase in academic chairs at universities in Great Britain (Mills 2002:186).

Though proponents tried to “sell” this combined anthropological-ethnographic science, potential consumers often were scarce. Colonial administrators did their own ethnography, and some were alienated by poor producer-consumer relationships: for example, early anthropologists promised policy-relevant research but then studied whatever they chose (Kuper 1983). Even serious “applied anthropologists” such as Malinowski found it difficult to fulfill overly optimistic expectations for policy-oriented research (Stocking 1995). Anthropology’s first “brand” identity was not ideal for its intended sponsors (i.e., colonial government) in a number of respects, and this probably affected relationships with other external constituents such as commercial concerns over the long term (see for example Mills 2006). The sponsors that eventually supported the anthropology-ethnography combination were not colonialists but American philanthropists (forerunners of later state sponsors) with their own agenda pertaining to the establishment of empirical social science and long-range hopes for social welfare and perhaps “control” (Fisher 1993:12).

After anthropology became established as an academic discipline in the early decades of the twentieth century, ethnography emerged as a distinct career. Under anthropology, ethnography is both a literary genre (writing that portrays cultural practices and beliefs) and a qualitative fieldwork practice (observation of and participation in people's lives, recording and describing social and cultural processes, interpretation of the point of view of the people being observed, and the production of accounts of their cultural beliefs and practices [Marcus and Fischer 1986:18–25]). Holistic representation in ethnography is an effort to contextualize cultural elements and make systematic connections among them, a goal early ethnographers had not envisioned prior to the twentieth century.

It is important to note that these two meanings of ethnography—a product and a process—are closely related in anthropology, not just because one produces the other but also because the product of the process was used to train students in the practice of ethnography. Rather than break ethnography down into component parts and teach students how to perform them, many academic departments taught ethnography by having professors lead seminars in which students read and discussed ethnographic works, including works in which the anthropologist confronts the issues of producing ethnography (see Marcus and Fischer 1986:21).

The process of producing ethnography is perhaps the central rite of passage in sociocultural anthropology; to become a full-fledged professional anthropologist in the subfield of sociocultural anthropology, one must conduct ethnography and produce it (Macdonald 2001). This suggests that the practice of ethnography within the discipline of anthropology remains a form of “craft knowledge,” generally held tacitly by the practitioner. The informal rule of “one anthropologist, one field site” has discouraged repeat studies that might invalidate previous research and expose actual practices. The exception here “proves the rule,” so to speak, in that in perhaps the most famous case in which one anthropologist challenged the validity of another's fieldwork (the Mead-Freeman controversy), the consensus has been that the challenger is the one who is suspect on both personal and professional grounds (Freeman 1983; Marcus and Fischer 1986:3).

Anthropological ethnography cannot be considered a true craft profession, since training is not conveyed through “apprenticeship.” Rather, students are immersed in the product and then thrown into the process, to sink or swim. Anthropology departments may rationalize and teach the components of ethnographic practice (e.g., qualitative fieldwork methods; textual analysis methods) as “skills” required for a degree. There has been no discipline-wide effort to certify or accredit practitioners. This is a point of vulnerability: any other field could appropriate the ethnographic method, since anthropology has not formalized, validated, or certified its approach. This may be related, at least in part, to the crisis of representation.

### **The Rise Of Criticism & The Distancing Of Anthropology & Ethnography**

A number of developments led to a gradual decoupling of anthropology and ethnography. Many of these resulted from challenges to the authority of anthropology as a “science of man” and were linked to the epistemological uncertainty arising from critical movements associated

with postmodernism. Over time, anthropology and ethnography became more distinctive and not necessarily coupled endeavors. It was through this process that the practices of ethnography were incorporated or hybridized into those of other disciplines and professions, which initiated the emergence of ethnography as a business service.

The integral relationship of anthropology and ethnography was sustained through the middle of the twentieth century, as American anthropology moved beyond structural-functionalism and split theoretically into orientations that attribute causal primacy in cultural patterning either to tangible material forces and interests (materialist) or to the forces of the human mind (mentalist). The materialist school was influenced by Marxian theory, while the mentalist school, which became more influential over time, was shaped by the work of cognitive and interpretive anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz and David Schneider (Ortner 1984).

Geertz's view that cultures could be "read" by the observer, just as texts are read, marked a difference between materialist behavioral science approaches and cultural interpretive accounts in anthropology. Of course, the observed also interpret, and this idea inspired interest in how interpretations are constructed by anthropologists, who really are working from interpretations by informants (Clifford 1988; Marcus and Fischer 1986). This led to wider-ranging critical reflections upon the practices of ethnography, which was considered a social science methodology: but was it?

The split between the materialist, behavioral science, and interpretive approaches to culture was not resolved in anthropology, in part because the discipline was overtaken by postmodernism, a movement that reflects a set of critical and rhetorical practices that destabilized epistemological certainty across the human sciences and related professions (Aylesworth 2012). The post-modern critique that began in the 1960s called into question some of the most fundamental conceptual foundations of anthropology. This criticism is important because it has relevance for anthropology's orientation toward professional fields such as computation, design, and other industry practices.

In *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* (1973), Talal Asad and his co-authors pointed out that anthropological ethnography did not acknowledge the circumstances that shaped the phenomenon that anthropologists studied, and that the subjects formed under colonialism could not be separated from that context. Anthropologists were criticized for distancing themselves from the relationships between their own native societies and those of their subjects and by "essentializing" selected traits, not only of the observed but also of the observer. In the practice of ethnography, anthropologists classically established a dyadic relationship with a subject of research, who is a coproducer of knowledge but who receives little or no benefit (or recognition) from the process. Thinkers such as James Clifford (1988) questioned whether anthropologists can presume an authoritative stance with respect to the Other, when ethnographic relationships presume rapport and trust that may not exist, and embed an implicit relationship with readers whose interests and conceptions are encoded in texts but never raised to the level of consciousness. Through such criticism, anthropological ethnographies faced a "crisis of representation," illustrated by Derek Freeman's (1983)

assertion that Margaret Mead's representation of Samoan society and its childrearing practices in *Coming of Age in Samoa* ([1929] 1949) was romanticized and naive, since Mead, as a young white woman, did not have access to all of the key actors in Samoan society.

This critique also raised doubts about anthropology's construct of "culture," forged in the context of colonialism and its successor regimes. Ascribing essentialized, set traits or integrated, coherent features to the "essence" or nature of a subject that cannot or do not change is suspect (Faubion 2001). It also seems unlikely that we can know that such traits exist or existed when the anthropologists engaged in "salvaging" a culture also are allied with the institutions that aim to "develop" it (see Stocking 1995). Many anthropologists represent "cultures" as if they are pristine isolates even when they are enmeshed in relationships with external economic and political forces, and some have had reasons to overlook such complications (e.g., see Miller 1995). Anthropology never resolved the problem of how to preserve cultures while engaging in the process of changing them, and the idea of culture now is less a scientific construct than a literary or vernacular one that has been widely adopted but is poorly understood.

George Marcus and Michael Fischer (1986) have argued that anthropology lost its *raison d'être* as decades of twentieth-century criticism took their toll upon its founding vision. The idea of "salvaging" vanishing cultures could not animate a discipline in a world where most societies were connected to global networks. The public appetite for learning about exotic peoples waned, and people began to question the importance of cultural differences.

Marcus and Fischer (1986) thought anthropology might have another mission in which ethnography could play a vital role. They reminded anthropologists that criticism of their own society was a major justification for social research in fields across the social sciences, and that anthropology could engage in such critique if the discipline compiled accounts that recognized and distinguished homogenizing factors compared with substantive distinctions in the contemporary world. Examining what is the same and what is different across human societies, within the context of globalization, would require anthropologists to become students of the contemporary and to become cross-cultural rather than studying only one society: both major challenges. They suggested two forms of cultural critique, neither of which had been fully accomplished by anthropologists in their view: (1) defamiliarization by epistemological critique (finding things that are exotic and using them to illuminate a unity among people and inspire reflection upon our own practices) and (2) defamiliarization by cross-cultural juxtaposition (ethnographic study in one society, compared with ethnographic study in the home society, developed to show the opportunities for recombination).

Marcus and Fischer's (1986) seminal work attempts to distinguish between the components of epistemology and methodology that are ethnographic and those that are anthropological. Ethnography focuses upon detail in situ, while anthropology respects context and recognizes ambiguities and multiple possibilities inherent in any situation (which are necessary for theorization). They not only emphasize that the prerequisites for criticism come from anthropology (they are not inherent within ethnography), but also recognize the overall strengths and limitations of the two distinct endeavors.

Marcus and Fischer (1986) noted that the social consensus on anthropology's role had broken down, and they proposed a new mandate that redirected anthropology toward cultural criticism. The question was whether anthropologists would agree with their proposal, and whether society would buy in to it, since a disciplinary mandate requires broader social legitimization if it is to stand (Kuklick 1991).

Just prior to the publication of Marcus and Fischer's book, American anthropologists were introduced to the work of the French historian and philosopher Michel Foucault. One of Foucault's key interlocutors is Paul Rabinow, an anthropologist at the University of California at Berkeley whose work focuses on contemporary knowledge-production practices and relations of power in institutional venues. Rabinow's study of Foucault was part of an investigation of anthropology as an interpretive science. In subsequent research, Rabinow developed an anthropology of the contemporary in which he elaborated upon the ramifications of Foucault's concepts, especially power/knowledge for the discipline.

Despite the fact that he is not an anthropologist, Foucault has become one of the most cited intellectuals in the literature of contemporary American anthropology. One of the reasons that Foucault may have been so widely accepted in the United States is that his writings and lectures appeared on the American scene in parallel with the crisis of representation, offering a means for thinking through the crisis of representing others who are less powerful by engaging analytic frameworks of power/knowledge. Foucault steers anthropology away from colonial subjects and toward the contemporary, while providing an original epistemology for critique that is relevant to cross-cultural contexts, resonating well with Marcus and Fisher's influential call to cultural criticism.

Foucault's influence on anthropology's relationship to ethnography stems from a particular methodological approach to critical study, his interest in subjects related to science and technology, and the increasing importance of these subjects in the evolution of contemporary ethnography, especially in the United States. His way of thinking "problematizes" a situation space, which means that he uses an "ensemble of discursive and non-discursive practices that makes something enter into the play of true or false and constitute it as an object of thought (whether in the form of moral reflection, scientific knowledge, political knowledge)" (Foucault 1994:670; compare with Collier et al. 2004). His method suggests an intellectual framework that has been highly conducive to the practice of contemporary anthropology in America. "Problematizations" are framed as intellectual challenges when "something prior must have happened to introduce uncertainty, a loss of familiarity; that loss, that uncertainty is the result of difficulties in our previous way of understanding, acting, relating" (Foucault 1994:598). Most remarkably, he suggested that such situations may be studied from the perspective of the second-order observer; that is, it is not necessary to be present in the moment to do a Foucaultian analysis, a possibility that further opens the distance between anthropology and ethnography. Anthropologists need not be ethnographers to conduct Foucaultian analysis and criticism. The goal is to see a situation not only as a given but equally as a question: to see how there are multiple constraints and multiple responses (see Collier et al. 2004). From this perspective, Foucault's analytic mode connects with Marcus and Fischer's recommendations

for cultural critique (e.g., alternative possibilities), but may lose some of the face validity of classical ethnographic fieldwork.

### **Implications of the Critical Turn for the Commodification Of Ethnography**

Not all of the influences of the critical turn in anthropology are fully understood at this point, and some of them are still in motion. Nevertheless, it is possible to discern the outlines of some of them upon the relationship between anthropology and ethnography and the position of ethnography in business. Ethnography has been increasingly hybridized with the methods of other disciplines, and ethnography has continued to evolve into a commodity service in the business domain.

### **The hybridization of anthropology & ethnography**

Starting in the 1970s, anthropologists began to explore venues and modes of discovery outside of former colonies and traditional cultural field sites (Fauzion 2001; Macdonald 2001). This shift reflected not only resistance to Western anthropologists' presence in former colonies and anthropologists' increasing discomfort with their position in these locales, but also a crisis of representation in anthropological ethnography and a gradual decline in the scientific status of the culture construct. Experimentation within anthropology led to a situation in which a range of ethnographic fieldwork practices were repatriated to the United States and other first-world locations where political resistance was less acute and other disciplines were exploring ethnography as a means to address their own methodological crises. Laura Nader at Berkeley made her famous challenge to "study up" (Nader 1969), meaning to shift our locus of analysis from relatively less powerful to relatively more powerful subjects, and this gave legitimacy to those who wanted to pursue research in venues other than typically remote and exotic locations. The hold that anthropology had over ethnography was loosened as anthropologists radiated over many different field sites and came into contact with other disciplines and professions eager to learn about ethnography. Gradually, a process of hybridization unfolded, as anthropologists and members of other fields worked their knowledge(s) and practices together (Suchman 2013). Many new "institutional anthropologies" (e.g., medical, legal, educational, and so forth; see Bennett [1996]) emerged, each with its own hybridized constructs, methods, and approaches.

Among these is a new interdisciplinary field that some have called "design ethnography" or "ethnographically informed design," which reflects a hybridization of anthropology, ethnography, participatory design, industrial engineering, and several other cognate fields in which practitioners are interested in making a difference in the development of new products, services, and systems (Squires and Byrne 2002). The relationship between anthropology, ethnography, and the design industry can be used as an illustration of the way in which hybridization loosens the hold of anthropology upon ethnography and moves ethnography toward the business domain. From an anthropological perspective, the hybridized design



field can be traced to the critical wave in anthropology and its influence on graduate students in the 1970s and 1980s to conduct research outside the academy.

One such student was Lucy Suchman, who decided to conduct her doctoral research at Xerox PARC. Suchman conducted an ethnomethodological study of computer supported work—video studies of engineers working with a copying machine compared with engineering instructions for use of that machine—that led to the discovery that natural human interaction and communication practices were unlike those envisioned by the designers of equipment. This led Xerox to make changes in the way it designed its equipment, and gave Suchman credibility to organize the research group that established the Work Practice and Technology area at Xerox PARC in 1989 and advanced ethnographically informed design of prototype technology in research and development.

Suchman's group at Xerox PARC was involved for a decade in interdisciplinary research and development oriented toward understanding the workplace of the future and the kinds of work environments and designs that might emerge with it. Funding for the Workplace Project came from Steelcase and Xerox, which were brought together by the design firm Jay Doblin and Associates of Chicago. Suchman hired a talented group of individuals to work on the project, and Doblin Group research director Rick Robinson created a methodology combining ethnography and design, which became the basis for Robinson's start-up firm E-Lab. From the research laboratory environment of the Workplace Project, E-Lab spun off a sophisticated methodology for multidisciplinary "design ethnography": how to conduct ethnographic studies of consumers in the field for clients to use as input for design and development projects. E-Lab integrated ethnographic practices into all of its client projects, which were conducted by multidisciplinary teams. However, Robinson acknowledged that business clients did not appreciate the value of anthropology or ethnography, and worked to demonstrate ways in which his approach could be *added in* as a complementary feature to what the client was already doing (Reese 2002:41). In other words, the design ethnography was not a standalone value-added service but at most a "chunk" of the product development process.

Wasson, a project manager at E-Lab in 1996 and 1997, provides a detailed description of the firm's methodology (Wasson 2002). E-Lab made extensive use of technology in its approach, including videotaping, software for analysis and mark-up of video clips, team-based analysis sessions, verbal and graphical frameworks for client presentations, and other means to enable anthropologists, other social scientists, designers, and other technologists to participate in all phases of the creative process. In working out the methodology, it was necessary for anthropologists to explain and demonstrate the elements of ethnography so that other members of the team could participate and learn. Even so, Wasson (2002:87) suggests that ethnography became a "pale shadow" of itself in this new incarnation:

In its most emaciated form, the term [ethnography] is simply used to refer to a designer with a video camera. Even in somewhat richer versions, the term has become closely identified with the act of observing naturally occurring consumer behaviors. The need to analyze those behaviors and situate them in their cultural context is poorly understood,

even though these activities are essential parts of developing a model of user experience that leads to targeted and far-reaching design solutions.

E-Lab established a template that was imitated and improved by other design and market research firms. Anthropology was not an essential element of the equation, since it was not considered necessary that ethnographers be anthropologists. Hybridizing ethnography and design required that the componential elements of ethnography be made explicit and tangible, so that they could be learned (copied) by others and fit within the multidisciplinary frame. Once made explicit, the elements could be rationalized or enhanced through various means (e.g., conducted by other employees with different skill levels, replaced or improved by technology, left out altogether if not budgeted). Thus, at its inception, design ethnography established a model for what was to become the commoditization of ethnography as a service to other firms, which even at this early stage was alarming to anthropologists. Anthropology was experiencing its “crisis of representation” and so was not in a strong position to argue against such developments.

### **Commodification of services: the rise of techno-ethnography**

Business services to other businesses (or “producer services”) comprise a large and growing sector of the economy in developed nations (Bryson et al. 2004:75). Such services may represent virtually any aspect of a firm’s operations, from human resources to marketing and advertising to manufacturing, all contingent upon how the firm defines its core operations. The reasons for this expansion of business-to-business services are complex, and include anticipated reductions in transaction costs, improvements in flexibility, risk reduction, and concentration on core skills. E-Lab’s innovative business-to-business service provided a means by which clients could investigate contemporary or future consumer experience worlds.

Services often are portrayed as fundamentally different from manufacturing and agriculture, with the distinction centering upon intangibility (Bryson et al. 2004:24). In many ways, however, manufacturing and other forms of tangible production are intertwined with services, and one could not happen without the other. Services support tangible production in various ways, and the deeper one delves into the fine details of tangible production processes, the more “services” one discovers (e.g., planning, maintenance, delivery, collection, accounting). Such complexity means that it can be difficult to distinguish between manufacturing and service.

The increasing division of labor in capitalist economies that Adam Smith described more than two hundred years ago is now occurring in service economies as a process of increasing specialization (Karmarkar 2004; Levitt 1976). Business services are experiencing a wave of change that in some ways resembles that which overtook manufacturing: services are gradually becoming “industrialized” through the processes of standardization, automation, and resulting commodification (i.e., a tendency toward outsourcing [Davenport 2005; Karmarkar 2004]). This is being driven by developments in ICT that make it possible to automate services, with sophisticated hardware and software taking over roles that previously

were performed by people. Technology enables supply chains to be shortened, creating an “information assembly line” in which data in digitized form can be standardized: “built to order, assembled from

components, picked, packed, stored, and shipped, all using processes resembling manufacturing” (Karmarkar 2004:2). The most important aspects of business services now are labor and intellectual property, which cannot be automated. How this process affects anthropology and ethnography depends upon the extent to which our practices have or may be standardized or automated.

Another feature of services “industrialization” is self-service. This process usually means that occupations or professions that provided such services previously lose status and control (or shrink and disappear), and competition in the market intensifies (Karmarkar 2004:6). Such changes are increasingly affecting more complex services such as market research and other information-intensive fields. The increasing availability of standards for various processes is expected to make standardization and automation of services more widespread in the future (Davenport 2005).

The standardization and automation of ethnographic research services has been reported previously in the anthropological literature, following the distancing of ethnography and anthropology and the operationalization of ethnographic components and their substitution with people and processes other than those developed within anthropology. In a recent paper, Malefyt (2009) observed the rise of consumer research firms that brand themselves through the offering of technology-enhanced ethnography as a service. These companies offer a specific form of “technomethodology” (Malefyt 2009), with the anthropological analysis missing or invisible (Sunderland and Denny 2007). Malefyt notes that it is no longer difficult to find anthropologists who offer consumer research services, so technology enhancement may do more to distinguish brands than the anthropological component. Firms use cell phone calls, digital photo-reporting, blogging, and other technologies to support “ethnography,” which may be conducted by just about anyone who can wield the equipment, including the consumers themselves.

Ironically, Malefyt’s observation is almost the reverse of Suchman’s assessment that anthropology in the late twentieth century became a brand that companies wanted to publicize as a means to signal that they were exploring the exotic and therefore were innovative and on the cutting edge (Suchman 2013). This brand image for anthropology (exoticism and interpretation of the Other) follows the development of academic anthropology in mid-twentieth-century America, when most academics preferred to conduct research in exotic locales (Shankman 2000).

Now, a kind of reversal may be in progress, at least in certain business domains such as marketing. Boutique consulting firms that specialize in technology-enhanced ethnographic services are shedding or at least squeezing anthropologists—cutting out the middle man, so to speak—and using various forms of ICT to connect their clients directly to the consumer. According to Malefyt (2009), a high degree of agency is assigned to consumers, and technology is the means to access them.

Vendors may rename ethnography in terms of their own proprietary technology (e.g., “cellnography,” “photo-ethnography,” “blography”), while claiming that consumers engage in self-service fieldwork “without the aid of an outside observer,” yielding insights that are not possible with traditional ethnography. Techno-ethnography replaces longer-term anthropological approaches to fieldwork and the authenticity of “being there” with the rapid mode of “fast” technology, engaging modern self-aware consumers without anthropological theory, questions, or interpretations. A transparency of meaning is taken as self-evident (Malefyt 2009). This is a radical departure from the work of anthropologists representing others through the analysis of one’s own experience in the world of these others.

Again, the irony is deep, given anthropology’s “crisis of representation” and all of the intellectual angst that has gone into the effort to counter distortions created by the postcolonial observer. Is the anthropologist just a “middle man” who slows down the process and can be eliminated with the click of a mouse? Have we come full circle to the age of exploration when just about anyone could write a narrative about the “natives,” including the natives themselves? After all, the anthropologists are doing this too (e.g., native ethnography), so could it be so wrong?

Vendors don’t necessarily worry as much about the play of truth and falsity as about whether their brand of ethnography sells. But business anthropologists should worry about whether the anthropological brand is becoming obsolete, and all anthropologists should take more seriously the elision of anthropology from ethnographically branded consumer research firms. Malefyt (2009) suggests that technology-enhanced, ethnography-branded consumer research firms are reifying a version of social relations based on an ideology of technology, progress, and innovation. That particular ideology could be derived from or related to the implicit truth claims underpinning science-based modes of representation (e.g., technology) and their cultural dominance over the more humanistic narratives presented by anthropology, which has drifted away from science in recent decades.

A parallel explanation or hypothesis is that anthropology is not being “consumed” in the marketplace (Suchman 2013): what is being incorporated into business practice is not the anthropology but the bits of ethnography that can be operationalized and commoditized, and anthropologists are being deskilled out of the process where cost-effective. This follows Braverman’s theory of monopoly capital, in which many knowledge-based work skills eventually are broken down into component parts and taken over by lesser-skilled roles and technology. New ICT enables techno-ethnography-branded firms to shorten their supply chains from consumer to client, whereas self-service consumers are not paid for their labor. We know that business clients do not always understand or value anthropological knowledge (Malefyt and Morais 2012; Sunderland and Denny 2007; Wasson 2002). This explanation has the advantages of a Marxian inflection, while it also “problematizes” the aestheticization of ethnography in the discipline of anthropology for those interested in history and criticism.

The deskilling of ethnographers engaged in business services was observed by Lombardi (2009:46), who described his clients’ desire for the immediacy of direct experience at a “pre-analytic level” as a substitute for costly data interpretation.<sup>5</sup> He linked this tendency to

Lyotard's body of theory when he noted that clients appear to be increasingly disinterested in ethnographic metanarratives regarding consumers (Lyotard 1984:xxv, 37; compare with Lombardi 2009:46).

Lombardi (2009:43–44) criticized the development of a software tool for coding visual image data that allowed part of a complex qualitative data analysis project to be outsourced to India, where the work could be accomplished at much less cost. He objected to this practice on several grounds, noting that outsourcing created a multitier work force, rendered levels of accuracy unpredictable, and created a congealed set of database entries that were resistant to further evolution and revision. Indeed, this process would be a questionable practice in anthropology; data torn from context means the value of interpretation declines, even if the “business proposition” appears reasonable on the surface. In this paper, Lombardi never mentions the discipline of “anthropology,” leading to the inference (from this and other evidence presented here) that the decoupling of anthropology and ethnography within the context of late-twentieth-century capitalism has hastened the process of commodification.

The de-anthropologization of ethnography in consumer research is not an unexpected turn, given the developments in both anthropology and in technology. Sociocultural anthropology has not fully embraced the pragmatic aspects of technology, which is one of the means by which business services are commoditized (e.g., see Hakken's [1999:65] discussion on the marginalization of the technical in anthropology). Without command of technology, anthropologists have less influence in the development of trends such as techno-ethnography. Although there are important exceptions (e.g., the [National Science Foundation \[NSF\] Summer Field School for Anthropological Methods](#) and the [University of Florida's online methodology courses](#)), the tendency within academic anthropology is to view technology as a “problematized site” to be examined and explored from a critical angle, rather than as a means to enhance ethnography. Meanwhile, more of society is being infused by technology, and it is becoming a medium of social discourse and action, leaving anthropologists at risk of falling out of step with the culture. Anthropology departments are not necessarily equipped to teach students to use digital technology; students may need to go elsewhere to acquire these skills. Yet, in the job market, if one does not want to become an academic, the capacity to manipulate social media is vital, and anthropologists who are not cognizant and facile with these tools will not be on the cutting edge.

Technological developments in other fields continue to automate higher functions of data analysis, further challenging the need for skilled researchers in remote areas. For example, probabilistic topic models are a “suite of algorithms whose aim is to discover the hidden thematic structure in large archives of documents” (Blei 2011:1). This computational modeling technique permits an unsupervised approach to textual analysis where no *a priori* information exists about the nature of the text. The technology accepts a collection of documents as input and produces output representations as topics that underlie the texts. As an illustration, Mark et al. (2012) used topic modeling and pronoun analysis to study Iraqi blog contents as an indicator of the health or state of an affected population in a war zone from 2003 to 2011. They found that people exhibited a collective identity when blogging about the war, as exhibited by

higher use of the first-person plural pronoun (“we”) when writing about the war compared with blogging about other topics. They also showed that blogging about daily life decreased as war-related violence increased, as correlated with validated body counts from independent sources (Mark et al. 2012:37). This is only one example of the ways in which technology is gradually making inroads into the practice of qualitative research.

Anthropology was created not only to give people calling themselves anthropologists a more systemically connected, empirically grounded, and theoretically sophisticated approach to describing and explaining what was going on “out there” compared with just any other gatherer of datum or storyteller, but also for larger political reasons. In Great Britain, the government needed a justification for remaining in and “developing” the colonies, and a “scientific” anthropology helped provide it (Mills 2002). Similarly, “applied anthropology” exploded in the United States and was institutionalized only after Americans began moving into Britain’s former colonial areas (see Baba and Hill 2006). Globalization and neoliberalism tend to reduce the need for our discipline because these political economies work toward greater homogenization, although this is a very long project (and may never be realized). However, it is necessary to keep in mind the possibility that the larger reasons for retaining anthropology may be on the wane.

### **Anthropological “Brand Identity” & the Challenges Ahead**

So far we have explored three eras in the relationship between anthropology and ethnography, each of which suggests a different potential “brand identity” for anthropological ethnography. Brand identity in this context suggests a mark of difference or distinction that anthropological ethnography carries compared with other approaches to quests for knowledge about the human world (e.g., demography, psychology, economics, and so forth). This difference may be sustained when aspects of anthropological ethnography are combined with components from other disciplines and professions (i.e., hybridization). However, there is also the possibility that the anthropological features may be elided and only the ethnographic elements sustained, such that a new brand is created (e.g., techno-ethnography with no anthropology).

In the first era, anthropology and ethnography were coupled as a distinctive enterprise in which the same individuals engaged in both endeavors together. This was a new premise, joining theory and practice in a brilliant move that created a new discipline. Ethnography became a kind of “theory of practice” for anthropology: a way to obtain knowledge through practice. But these endeavors are not one and the same, and they have different historical origins, so it is not a simple matter to keep them conjoined. The early proponents of the anthropological-ethnographic union tried to create a distinctive “brand” identity that would be useful to potential sponsors (i.e., colonial administration) because the practitioners needed to have financial support, but the initial phase of this campaign has been deemed largely unsuccessful (Kuper 1983; Stocking 1995).

In the second era, anthropological ethnography found private-public sponsorship for its union and was given a legitimate place within the academy to pursue a “science of humanity” (Marcus and Fischer 1986; Mills 2002). This “golden age” was rather short-lived, spanning

from the 1920s to the 1960s or so (Faubion 2001:45). The “brand” was a science of the exotic and esoteric (but serving hegemonic interests [Baba and Hill 2006]), which laid the basis for businesses’ initial interest in anthropologists as sources of fresh, innovative, and counterintuitive information (Suchman 2013).

Since then, anthropology and ethnography have drifted apart once again, each finding other partners, at times even repudiating the former relationship. In this third era, the “brand” of ethnography has taken on a life of its own and in some ways is scarcely recognizable. As Wasson (2002) noted, the “brand” could be any design employee E-Lab sanctioned wielding a video camera. It is not clear that anthropology has a “brand” at this point; the members of the discipline probably would disagree on the nature of such a thing, which exacerbates the problems identified earlier concerning the distinctive value of anthropology.

None of these depictions are the “truth” or the “way things are”: they are all partial views from different angles, and there are doubtless others that could be brought forth. Anthropologists are still engaging in powerful ethnographic fieldwork that brings to life substantial narratives of other worlds. I recommend Caitlin Zaloom’s *Out of the Pits* (2006) or Karen Ho’s *Liquidated* (2009) for different visions of the financial past and present in America through the lens of modern ethnography. There is a contemporary conjunction of anthropology and ethnography that brings us new understanding of business realities in a way that is different from any other discipline. This is important and significant, but it is not especially “branded” in the marketplace. Does this matter? Is there any possibility of learning from our own practice to strategically reposition anthropological ethnography in business at the higher end of the services market, where the specialized talents of knowledge workers are factored into price in acknowledgement of superior results?

Some observers, such as Robert Morais (2012), suggest that the conflation of anthropology with ethnography, and its delivery as such by anthropologists, established conditions for the situation described here as commodification. He recommends that anthropologists become more strategic (see also Morais in this volume) in delivery to sponsors and clients; that is, crafting “blueprints” or conceptual frameworks for the embedding of research results that would incorporate creative and novel ways of thinking about the world designed to attract new constituents and sponsors. Strategic thinking may be distinguished from the purely analytical because it places research within a larger (macro) problem-oriented frame of reference that unites disciplinary knowledge with knowledge(s) from other sources (e.g., other disciplines, institutions, or competitive analyses) and seeks the achievement of societal goals or other specific aims. Institutional anthropologists in fields such as medical anthropology or educational anthropology are acquainted with strategic approaches because their sponsors (e.g., National Institutes of Health) may explicitly seek such solutions. Morais notes that anthropologists, who are uniquely positioned to learn from other disciplines and to learn about clients’ businesses, have the means to become highly creative strategic consultants who will produce valuable insights. This may be a way to move toward the higher end of the services market and reverse the process of commodification.

Some cultural critics would like to turn anthropology into a moral and political enterprise,

although it is not clear whether this mandate will garner the broad social legitimization that leads to the permanent university positions needed to ground the discipline. Regardless, there is little question that anthropology in America has taken a decided turn toward the humanities, and this has been clear in its theoretical orientation since the 1980s. A humanistic orientation for anthropology has significant implications for the future because of new data collection, analysis, and interpretation challenges facing the social sciences, which are evident in the direction of federal funding agencies.

The NSF recently published “Rebuilding the Mosaic,” a document summarizing the results of a two-year study of the social, behavioral, and economic science communities, projecting where these fields are going in the next decade.<sup>7</sup> The information was drawn from a crowdsourcing initiative in which 252 authors from around the world wrote white papers on the future of their fields (primarily social science). The NSF analyzed the documents via a text mining or topic extraction technology at the Institute for Quantitative Social Science at Harvard.

The summary reveals that the social science community predicts its future research will be interdisciplinary, data intensive, and collaborative. For example, papers about environmental and climate change point to the importance of integrating data and synthesizing results across archaeology and anthropology, sociology, politics, technology, ecology, and other natural sciences, including astronomy.

Ideas about collaboration, data, technology, and infrastructure are closely intertwined. Accessing and working with data and collections, especially heterogeneous data, data at scale, or data that are sensitive pose significant issues. The challenges of working with very large quantities of data were addressed in many of the papers. Some addressed the need for centers to support computation resources, training, and access to analytic and modeling tools, diverse data and expertise that could be assembled to test different models in a culture where interdisciplinary, collaborative research is nurtured. Others discussed the equivalent of clinical trials for possible interventions, or the value of mounting large proof-of-concept projects that exceed the funding typically available for small-scale research projects. Still others considered the relatively large-scale simulations of the results of proposed interventions and an evaluation of the utility of the models being proposed.

All of these approaches would require that NSF change the way in which it conceptualizes and funds the social, behavioral, and economic sciences, and the way in which these sciences are organized. This is not the kind of change that happens quickly, given that the federal government and academia are involved, although both are facing the need for major changes, and quickly. Both the NSF and the National Institutes of Health displayed willingness to move in new directions that “will advance the core scientific and technological means of managing, analyzing, visualizing, and extracting useful information from large and diverse data sets. This will accelerate scientific discovery and lead to new fields of inquiry that would otherwise not be possible” (from the NSF’s Grant Proposal Guide).<sup>8</sup>

Such public sector proposals complement discussions going on in the commercial world



about large data sets or “Big Data,” defined as data sets whose size is beyond the ability of typical database software tools to capture, store, manage and analyze” (Manyika et al. 2011). Organizations are capturing an increasing volume and detail of digital information through multimedia and social media, and the “internet of things” that are expected to fuel innovation and economic growth. The major domains for the growth of Big Data are health care, retail, manufacturing, personal location data, and the public sector in Europe. A number of features distinguish digital technology-driven data collection (Maxwell 2012). Often these data are passive or automated in their mode of collection, meaning that the individual whose behavior is being recorded could be unaware of that fact, leading to privacy issues. The data also are more granular (i.e., fine-grained) than would be possible through traditional social science methods (e.g., video surveillance with digital enhancement), yielding highly detailed evidence that may be mined and cross-referenced to other data. Another distinguishing feature is hybridity; data sets combine information from diverse sources that previously would have been distinguished as either quantitative or qualitative, but now are combined into a unified system (e.g., an electronic health record containing insurance codes, medical history, and laboratory test results).

Traditional statistical methods are not well suited to the nature and scale of Big Data, a situation that has provided an opportunity for commercial producers of software to create specialized tools (analytics) that support the aggregation, analysis, and interpretation of digitized data sets. These tools work more quickly and are able to analyze more data at a lower cost than ethnography, and are increasingly more “mechanized, commoditized, assumed and culturally embedded”; yet at the same time, their underlying algorithms often are proprietary “black boxes” based upon non-open source rules and norms that cannot be validated (Maxwell 2012:183). One consequence of overreliance upon nontransparent analytic models is an increased risk of system vulnerability and the potential for collapse, as witnessed in the 2008 financial crisis. Another risk relates to the privacy and security of individuals whose identities may be revealed within the data array.

New strategic roles for anthropologists and ethnographers emerge as opportunities from the competitive pressures of Big Data and its analytics. Two distinct realms of opportunity may be noted: (1) contextualization and probing of patterns reported from analysis of Big Data; and (2) deeper understanding of the organizations and institutions of Big Data industries.

First, there should be checks and balances upon on patterns reported by data analytics, as well as means to further examine the underlying realities. Social scientists, including anthropologists with ethnographic skills, can put their legacy knowledge and mission to work with other fields to probe and validate the patterns and ask even more fundamental questions about the nature of the data that are being collected. For example, very large data sets available through electronic medical or health records can be analyzed to identify patterns and trends related to disease occurrence. Kaelber et al. (2012) showed that data from nearly one million patients could be pooled and searched through a Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA)-compliant, patient-blinded web application that

standardized and normalized the data using common ontologies.<sup>9</sup> In this study, patient race and ethnicity were correlated with the incidence of venous thromboembolic events (VTEs). According to the study authors, Hispanic individuals had the lowest VTE rate, both for women and men, compared with white individuals, and this trend persisted among the studied body mass index (BMI) and height categories. The study also found that African-American individuals had the highest VTE rate (women and men) compared with white individuals. White individuals had generally two to three times the odds of VTE compared with Hispanic individuals, whereas African-American individuals had three to four times the odds of VTE compared with similarly sized whites (Kaelber et al. 2012:3). Remarkably, the study does not provide reasons for these differences or factors that may underlie them, even though the stated intent of the study is to demonstrate the potential value of data mining electronic health records using analytic tools. These findings raise questions regarding the context in which race and ethnicity information is collected and interpreted, and the more general issue of health disparities. We may ask: to what extent is the information encoded in electronic health records valid and accurate for the patient population represented? Although race and ethnicity are mandatory demographic fields in electronic health records (EHRs) implemented under the American Recovery and Reinvestment and Health Information Technology for Economic and Clinical Health (HITECH) Acts (see Ulmer et al. 2009), the accuracy of physicians' records on patient race and ethnicity is not clear, nor do we know whose perspective is represented in the recording of this information. We may ask also to what extent the racial and ethnic differences reported in the study reflect health disparities such as access to health care for different segments of the population. These are sensitive socio-technical matters that require investigation by persons with the skills to interpret across linguistic and cultural domains. These questions represent contextual information missing from the data mining exercise; without this information, the findings cannot be interpreted with confidence. These are questions that anthropologists, working with colleagues in health care and technology fields, could address with their interpretive and critical skills, and in doing so make a significant contribution to the evolution of Big Data, as well as illustrate through a strategic approach joining organizational/business and medical anthropology.

A second opportunity for anthropological ethnographers is the emergence of a new industry and contemporary field site (Maxwell 2012). Each application domain for Big Data (e.g., retail, health care, public sector) is defined by a distinctive set of institutional actors such as software vendors, consulting firms, large corporations, public agencies, and so forth, whose interactions define the nature and evolution of an institutional field.<sup>10</sup> There is a need for more fundamental understanding of the organizations and institutions that comprise these fields, including the cultural rules and norms of their engineers, code developers, systems creators, and other professionals, not only to “demystify” the analytic tools they produce (Maxwell 2012:186), but also to better comprehend the interactions of these professions and their technological products with other social actors (e.g., consumers) and their larger social contexts. Anthropologists also can partner with analytics practitioners in adding value to their explanations; data mining pattern-recognition does not preclude the incorporation of

sociocultural knowledge, to the extent that these fields are not alienated from one another. If anthropology becomes and remains a humanistic enterprise with the tendency of its practitioners to stand back and ask critical questions regarding technological phenomena rather than getting into the field site and grappling with the first-order data “on the ground”—including an understanding of technology on its own terms—then the next culture to be salvaged may be our own.

## Conclusion

We should consider the possibility that business clients may be willing to forego anthropological analysis and link directly to the consumer for understanding because we (anthropologists) have not yet done all that we could to enhance and explain our discipline-based and interdisciplinary expertise as means to analyze and interpret the world. It could be a matter of our disciplinary trajectory over a long period of time and an unanticipated consequence of that pathway. But history may be interpreted in many ways. As we have learned about our past, we have changed our practices so that our field is strengthened. Still, there has not emerged an integration of this knowledge to bring anthropology to new understanding(s) of itself. The fragmentation of the field makes us vulnerable.

While we might not want to fully revive any of anthropology’s past brand images, it may be prudent to reassert the value of anthropological ethnography as an enterprise dedicated to understanding the complexity of the world we are living in now and to explain how the distinctive advantages of this union brings insight in *this* new world, whether it is continuing to explore new worlds that are emerging every day, or through finding ways to recognize patterns in massive quantities of data, or asking questions about the nature of such data and what it means to whom and why. There should be a place for business anthropology here in its role as a field that is interested in human difference and similarity while remaining grounded in the epistemological and methodological fundamentals that have made anthropology distinctive throughout time, including the moral and ethical questions that anthropology has always addressed. The “most humanistic of the sciences and most scientific of the humanities” could become a critical nexus for the interdisciplinary world of the future.

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1 Service(s) in this context means a “negotiated exchange between a provider and an adopter (supplier and customer) for the provision of (predominantly) intangible assets” (Chesbrough and Spohrer 2006:37).

2 Ethnomethodology is a sociological method that represents human action and interaction by describing phenomena from the perspective of the participant(s), making visible the participants’ methods for establishing the coherence of the phenomena.

3 Industry is defined as production on a large scale.

4 The following examples were selected from Malefyt (2009), but all are still current as of this writing based on a web search. *Research International, USA* calls its brand of ethnography—a self-service fieldwork that consumers conduct using cellphones—“cellnography.” “Photo-ethnography” is a trademark that claims that consumers conduct their own ethnography in which the consumer monitors, organizes, and assesses his or her own thoughts and assumptions. Technology instantly transfers “facts” through self-aware individuals without interference from a researcher. Cheskin claims that their version “innovates” upon the standard of ethnography because “ethnography is no longer a leading-edge research method” (Rhea and Leckie 2006:20–1; compare Malefyt 2009:205). Digital technology applies new technology to the process of ethnographic observation. Now What Research combines face-to-face interviews with consumer blogs in a branded technique called “blography,” and Red Dot Square emboldens consumers through virtual animated 3-D shopping.

5 Lombardi (2009:46) also described “disintermediating technologies that create a simulacrum of identity with the consumer’s point of view.” Corroborating Malefyt (2009), he reported on a French market research firm that used a video camera hidden in the nosepiece of a wearer’s glasses to allow one to experience the visual reality of the wearer “remotely and in real time” (Lombardi 2009:46).

6 See the NSF field school’s website at <http://qualquant.org/methodsmall/ethnographic-field-school/>; see UF’s website at <http://catalog.distance.ufl.edu/course.aspx?s=21449>.

7 The results may be viewed at [http://www.nsf.gov/sbe/sbe\\_2020/](http://www.nsf.gov/sbe/sbe_2020/).

8 See the NSF’s Grant Proposal Guide at [http://www.nsf.gov/funding/pgm\\_summ.jsp?pims\\_id504767](http://www.nsf.gov/funding/pgm_summ.jsp?pims_id504767).

9 An ontology is a formal representation of knowledge; in this case, for clinical information that exists in an electronic health record.

10 An institutional field may be described as a diverse set of social actors operating within a specific domain or arena, in which all actors seek to advance their interests and impose their conception of “the rules of the game” upon the others (Scott 2008:183).