



IN FOCUS

## VISUAL ETHICS

As access to digital media increases, ethical considerations regarding the collection and dissemination of visual data become ever-more imperative, particularly given the varying, sometimes conflicting interests of those who produce and consume visual data, including research communities and anthropologists across all subfields. This series explores negotiation of representational authority, control in the circulation of images, display of images in different contexts, relations with and responsibilities toward research subjects and communities, balancing rights to privacy and knowledge circulation, and collection and dissemination of visual materials within the context of globally expanding use of digital media.

## Access and Accountability

### The Ecology of Information Sharing in the Digital Age

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Debates about open access in anthropology have mirrored similar debates elsewhere. There have been discussions about publishing models and revenue streams, the expansion of intellectual property law and new licensing arrangements, and the need to reach broader audiences and open up our work to the “commons.” Anthropology is not a leader in open access, even though it is happening all around us (see Kelty’s *Anthropology News* 49[2] and *Cultural Anthropology* 23[3] articles). But what is even stranger about this debate is that discussions among anthropolo-

gists have not been “properly” anthropological. Anthropologists are acutely sensitive to the excessive reliance on binaries like “open and closed” or “proprietary and free” and yet our debates don’t reflect this. We are intimately familiar with a wide range of historical and cultural systems for sharing knowledge, and yet we aren’t bringing this to bear on our understanding of open access debates or their ethical and practical implications.

Although the social life of things is not news to anthropologists, it has been muted in our debates over open access/open anthropology. Projects that begin with assumptions other than corporate enclosure or commons-like openness help us think about “open access” not just as a publishing model, but as part of deeply social and ethical relations people have to and with “information.” In addition to debating open access for publishing monographs and articles, we need to also question the “openness” of our visual

collections and the ethical parameters for “sharing” materials in the digital age. This article grapples with the questions of access to and accountability for anthropologists’ visual collections by examining how these materials might be circulated to provide various scales of access. The flexibility and relative low cost of new technologies have allowed me to work with Warumungu community members in Australia’s Northern Territory to create digital projects grounded in their pre-existing, yet always changing, cultural protocols for non-digital cultural materials. These projects—a dynamic online space ([www.vectorsjournal.org/issues/03\\_issue/digitaldynamics](http://www.vectorsjournal.org/issues/03_issue/digitaldynamics))

and a locally adaptable and accessible digital archive ([www.mukurtuarchive.org](http://www.mukurtuarchive.org))—highlight both the processes that anthropologists can engage in and the creative workarounds that exist for extending the open access paradigm to include local cultural protocols and practices within the management of cultural and academic knowledge.

#### Questions of Properness

During my fieldwork, Warumungu people constantly reminded me about the need to make things “proper” or “properly Warumungu” (see “Tracking Properness” in *Cultural Anthropology* 21[3] and “Changing the Default” in *World Anthropologies Network* 2). This sense of properness is certainly related to the people-land-ancestor relationships that permeate Aboriginal life, particularly in the Northern Territory. While Trisha Narrurlu, Michael Jampin and I worked on another project, we spent a lot of time online searching for information.

Undoubtedly we would come across images and materials that were uniformly not proper in relation to Warumungu protocols for the distribution, circulation and reproduction of cultural materials and knowledge. Images of people who were deceased were online with no warnings; pictures of sacred sites were divulged with no connection to the people or ancestors who care for those places; and ritual objects were disconnected from the practices, people and places they need to be efficacious.

In the Warumungu system of accountability, there is a dynamic tension and ongoing dialogue concerning the relative openness or closure of cultural materials. This discourse often seems binary—that is, Warumungu people will say that something is “open” or “closed.” However, in practice, there is a continuum of openness and closure onto which all materials are grafted and within which they are constantly shifting. A ritual song may be open only to women from a certain country. After someone passes away certain knowledge may “die” only to be “opened” again by a relative who re-dreams the knowledge. The point is: this system of accountability is an ethical mandate that urges people to act responsibly by being in constant conversation and contact with others (including other-than-human ancestors and land). It was this system that Jampin and Narrurlu wanted *papulanji* (whitefellas) to learn from and follow.

In 2006, we launched the Digital Dynamics Across Cultures interactive website as part of the University of Southern California’s *Vectors* online journal. The site is meant to demonstrate Warumungu modes of information sharing based on the cultural protocols that define how, when and by whom information should be viewed and

distributed. Because all knowledge is attached to place, the website begins with a graphic representation of Warumungu country. As users maneuver through the site they can access information about specific places, their cultural significance and history. But within each area a random sampling of content is tagged with protocols that disturb their viewing. As a visitor begins to get acquainted

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with a place, a video clip may stop halfway through because the material is restricted by gender, or audio of a song may fade in and out because elements are restricted to only those who have been ritually initiated, or a photo may be only half visible because someone in the photo has died.

In every case, users must grapple with their own biases about information freedom and knowledge sharing online. After each restriction pops up with a short textual explanation, an animation plays describing the Warumungu

protocols for that specific type of content. The site is designed to frustrate Internet users who function out of an “information wants to be free” paradigm—that is, those who expect that clicking on something or searching for information *should* necessarily result in unrestricted access to the materials they find. Our goal was to use the medium itself as a means of reflecting on the limits of the Internet to value other knowledge systems, and at the same time challenge people to take seriously different types of information distribution and production systems.

Jampin and others imagined site visitors as global and thus narrated the site for an audience unaccustomed to Warumungu cultural protocols. The bulk of the materials on the site are photos, audio and video that I recorded. Once the project was complete we had an extensive database of materials. In addition, the community received thousands of photos back from former missionaries, schoolteachers and researchers. These virtually repatriated digital objects posed a challenge because they

could be reproduced endlessly, accessed easily and distributed without consent or consultation.

Most digital and analog archives share the same paradigm: preservation and access are their first priority, while the social life of the objects is secondary, if considered at all. Search engines such as Google begin with the premise that all information should be open and dissectible into bits and bytes for transmission. What we wanted instead was an archive *and* search engine whose primary goals were not preservation and universal access, but respect for the dynamic social and cultural systems, relationships and cultural protocols within which information is embedded. After two and half years of design, community consultation and technical roadblocks, we produced the Mukurtu Wumpurrarni-kari archive, which enables Warumungu people to dictate the terms of access to and distribution of their cultural materials. Everything in the archive is annotated and linked to a set of cultural protocols defined by the community as significant for circulating and reproducing

cultural materials and knowledge (see “Archival Challenges” in *SAA Archaeological Record* 8[2]).

### Open Anthropology

Digital technologies and web 2.0 applications can aid anthropologists not just in publicizing our work, but also in enlarging debates about openness, access and accountability. Mukurtu and Digital Dynamics show viable intellectual property systems in their own right—systems that function to continue the circulation and production of knowledge by placing value on things other than the market or vague notions of openness and freedom alone. Indigenous knowledge systems make clear other ways to conceptualize how information can and should be shared, how access is constructed, and how expanding our understanding of openness has been limited by our own default notions about the boundaries of information freedom.

The choice is not between an open or closed anthropology. Reorienting our discussion toward the politics of openness within the circulation of visual materials

allows us to emphasize the ethical dimensions of information sharing, not just the monetary ones. I have been critical of open access in the past because of the ease with which it has been aligned with a progressive notion of a “public good.” Information in the digital age supposedly wants to be free. Corporate greed and legal straight-jacketing have clouded the debate so that any type of access control, sharing protocols or information management looks suspicious. What Digital Dynamics, Mukurtu and similar projects offer is a view of information not as wanting to be “free,” but as already part of ethical systems in which it wants to be responsible.

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## Virtual Repatriation and Digital Cultural Heritage

### The Ethics of Managing Online Collections

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Museums have embraced digital technologies for their ability to make their collections visible on the Internet. Anthropologists are digitizing their ethnographic archives to share them with research communities, and a new wave of anthropologists is exclusively using digital recording technologies in their fieldwork. In what is amounting to a paradigm shift in the ways that institutions and individual anthropologists can display and create access to their collections, digital technologies—paired with innovative programming and design that is responsive to the needs of community stakeholders—are



providing significant possibilities for sharing curatorial and ethnographic authority with originating communities. Material culture in museum collections is being digitally photographed for online collections databases and virtual exhibits, while documentation of intangible cultural expressions is being transformed from analog photographs, film, video and tape recordings into digital files. Significantly, these technologies are allowing members of originating communities to access images of objects, audio and video recordings, and texts documenting their relatives and their material, cultural and linguistic history. Visual access by these communities to their cultural heritage in online museum and ethnographic collections is known as “virtual repatriation.”

As copyright and intellectual property regimes that have

defined the ownership of collections are also made visible, ethical questions about the digitization and circulation of cultural heritage are being raised. Who has the right to determine how digital cultural heritage should be restricted or circulated? How might this change the relationship between descendant commu-

histories of Prophets called *Dane Wajich- Dane-zaa Stories and Songs: Dreamers and the Land* ([www.virtualmuseum.ca/Exhibitions/Danewajich](http://www.virtualmuseum.ca/Exhibitions/Danewajich)). This collaborative web-based project was in large part inspired by anthropologists Robin Ridington and Jillian Ridington’s repatriation of over 40 years of ethnographic docu-

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nities, their digital cultural heritage, and the anthropologists and linguists with whom they work?

#### New Practices, New Relationships

My work since 2004 with the Doig River First Nation has relied heavily on digital technologies. With folklorist Amber Ridington, I taught web design and digital video production to youth, and co-curated a virtual exhibit of Dane-zaa oral traditions and

mentation to the community, in the form of a digital archive and password-protected online database. The Doig River leadership initiated media training projects that would teach community members how to access and utilize these important resources, and these digital projects facilitated relationships between elders and youth, who worked together to record content and

*See Repatriation on page 6*