The discipline of anthropology presents librarians with a unique set of problems because of its ambiguous position within the intellectual structure of the university. Although anthropology has traditionally been categorized as a social science, this dynamic field of inquiry draws on diverse and disparate sources, referencing and contributing to both the humanities and the physical sciences. Anthropologists’ conceptions about the identity and boundaries of their discipline have fluctuated dramatically since its inception in the Eighteenth Century. This article traces the shifting conceptions of anthropology and investigates how librarians have historically responded to the needs of scholars conducting research in this discipline. The response of librarians to recent intellectual movements and developments, including the emergence of cultural studies, and advanced communication technology are also reviewed. Current and future trends for providing reference services in this broad field of human inquiry are discussed, including the call for a renewed partnership between anthropologists and information specialists.

INTRODUCTION

What is the domain of anthropology? This “study of man” has confronted librarians with its unsettling ability to be both everywhere and nowhere. It is a chameleon discipline which may at one moment don the garments of philosophy while theorizing on the grandiose and in the next disappear under the calico cloak of the quotidian. The wide variety of methodological practices passing through the gates of anthropology is eclipsed only by the diversity of its subject matter. Since it was formalized in the Eighteenth Century, scarcely an aspect of human endeavors has evaded the scrutiny of anthropologists. Anthropology has become the quintessential interdisciplinary field, progressing without a center, operating instead within the lacunae of other established subject areas. As such it presents information specialists with a challenge: How can academic librarians provide the best reference support to scholars engaged in this nebulous human science?

The question has become more pertinent today as we move more fully into the age of technological achievement and cross-disciplinary research. The advance of computer and transportation technology has increased cross cultural contact and relations. The coming of age of desktop publishing and electronic distribution has fundamentally altered the channels of intellectual communication. The study of culture in increasingly complex social systems has lead to the hybridity and diversification of traditional schools of knowledge. All these factors have further exacerbated the challenge to anthropology subject librarians.

This article will outline how librarians have historically sought to catalog and organize anthropological material, and review the steps taken today by anthropology information specialists in response to the challenge of providing reference support in a discipline that seems to be constantly reorganizing itself.

BETWEEN THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

Anthropology grew out of human curiosity concerning the different ways life may be lived. As early as the Roman Empire librarians were confronted with documents describing human differences. In 98 AD, Tacitus penned Germania, a treatise describing the folkways, religion and economy of these neighbors living on the periphery of his home society. Little is known of where this early ethnography was shelved. It is said to have escaped the fall of Rome and the European dark ages in the form of a single manuscript which was represented to the world in 1455 by the Enoch of Ascoli. When the manuscript was republished in 1509 it soon became the...
The Nineteenth Century saw tremendous growth in scientific knowledge. The influence of Charles Darwin, marked by his *Origin of the Species* in 1859, profoundly affected the organization of all the sciences, including the nascent human science of anthropology, where it lent credence to theories which organized culture by race and heredity. Arthur, Count of Gobineau contested the geographic organization of human culture as a sub-field of geography in his *Essai sur L’Inegalite des Races Humaines*, where he showed “that ‘geographical theories’ cannot give satisfactory explanation of the racial and cultural differences of peoples” (cited in Sorokin, 1956, p. 226). Biology became the basic organizing principle of anthropology, supplanting the geographic classification.

Although both the theories of the anthropo-racialists and those of early human geographers are largely discredited today, their influence is still felt. They generated a dialogue over the causes of human diversity. They communicated to each other through the first anthropological journals and associations, and in doing so defined the field of anthropology as the science of humankind.

Currier traced the parallel histories of anthropology and library science in her 1976 article in the *Annual Review of Anthropology*. She related that in 1875 the Peabody Museum of American Archeology and Ethnology was constructed at Harvard University. Its curator, Frederick Ward Putnam, collected human cultural artifacts from natural history museums and founded a specifically anthropological museum. Currier states that the adjoining museum library was the first of its kind. The New Peabody Museum library was small with less than 1000 books and pamphlets at the cusp of the Twentieth Century, but it was poised for tremendous growth.

The Twentieth Century can be considered the information century. The advent of new communication and transportation technology coincided with new efficient methods of bibliographic control. Anthropology like most sciences benefited from these advances. The 1907 establishment of the *International Index* by the H. W. Wilson Company was invaluable to researchers. It had the effect of exponentially increasing scholarship by categorizing like articles by subject. As Currier relates, such bibliographic tools play a role in determining the structure of academic disciplines.

In 1956 the *International Index* became the *Social Sciences and Humanities Index*, separating it from journals classified as physical and biological sciences. In 1974 the index was further bifurcated into the *Social Science Index* — including general anthropology, geography, and sociology — and the *Humanities Index* — with archaeology, folklore, and religion (Currier, 1976).

These shifts in the providence of bibliographic control contributed to the fragmentation of the discipline we know today. In the late 1980s Choi conducted two empirical studies on how anthropological sources are used and cited (Choi, 1988a, 1988b). Her research contests the definition of anthropology as the “holistic study of man.” The results of her citation analysis show that the sub-disciplines of anthropology are becoming increasingly isolated from each other. She also provides data indicating that between 1962 and 1983, nearly 40% of the articles appearing in anthropology journals were authored by writers affiliated with other disciplines. Choi presents a troubling picture of fragmentation in a field undergoing what may be called an identity crisis.

In 1967 Erasmus and Smith were already questioning the future integrity of the discipline, albeit from a different angle. Their quantitative analysis concerning articles published in *American Anthropologist* from 1900 to 1967 grouped the articles into three genres: criticism, explanation, and description. The authors found the data disconcerting. Anthropology’s reliance on unique fieldwork necessitated both as a method and as a pathway to career advancement had caused a proliferation of descriptive studies. They found the journal cluttered with unanalyzed ethnographic accounts. Anthropology was encouraging additive studies in lieu of comparative, cross cultural analysis. Without the later they felt the discipline was in danger of becoming a collection of unique experiences held together only by the loosely knit conception of the ethnographic method.

A testimonial to anthropology as an additive discipline devoid of cumulative development is the massive *Index to the Human Relations Area Files*, a guide to the files of over 5,000 sources concerning ethnographic data on close to 300 cultures. Like anthropology itself, this resource’s emphasis “is on non-western, non-industrialized cultures . . . [and it is] . . . used by social scientists in all disciplines” (Perry, 1984, p. 37).

**EMERGENCE OF CULTURAL STUDIES**

Recently, the unifying principle of the Human Relations Area Files has been called into question. In texts such as
Clifford and Marcus’ (1986) *Writing Culture*, the ethnographic method was put under intense scrutiny by anthropologists themselves. Descriptive methodologies such as narrative anthropology and travel writing, which have always existed on the fringes of the discipline, became an accepted part of anthropological discourse, and anthropologists scrambled to deal with what is referred to as the “predicament of culture” (Clifford & Marcus, 1988).

Librarians have had to deal with this predicament as well. Akuffo (1996) discusses problems regarding anthropological documentation in the African context, arguing that the historic link between anthropology and colonialism on the African continent has made anthropological research suspect. Akuffo reveals the history of anthropology as a description by the industrial society of all things pre-industrial. As such, the discipline has become a study of an unmarked field for it has yet to definitively answer the question of what constitutes anthropological documentation. For instance, why is it that a text descriptive of Zambian economics or art is considered anthropology when tracts on European business or art are not? Akuffo concludes that the anthropological research material cannot by current ideological standards be distinguished from research materials of other disciplines.

The predicament of studying culture was brought to the fore when the people on the periphery of western society — the pre-industrial subjects of traditional anthropological research — began to write and study anthropology. Hay (1995) compared the ethnographic work of Caribbean writers to foreign observers. He concluded that the challenge of describing a cultural system so intimately forged by its contacts with the West — e.g., the Caribbean — betrays a Western bias in traditional anthropology and simultaneously advances the discipline through the presentation of new methods and solutions. Hay's thesis is that the cultural complexities of the African Americans in the Caribbean Islands have forced anthropology to expand the scope and vocabulary of the discipline.

The new ethnographic literature, the politicization of anthropology and efforts to apply anthropology to urban, industrial settings have lead to the burgeoning field of cultural studies. Librarians are currently attempting to deal with this vast literature, but since there is a great disciplinary dispersion in cultural studies, it is not represented in the current forms of reference sources. Kieft (1994) traced the intersections of this multifarious material by its philosophical and ideological classification. He contends that cultural studies researchers rely on the bibliographic information contained in the key texts, following ideas beyond geographical, biological, or methodological boundaries.

Compounding cultural studies’ challenge to the domain of anthropology are the implications of computer and communications technology. David Zeitlyn, an active member of the Anthropology and Sociology Section (ANSS) of the Association of College and Research Libraries recently co-published an article with Gustaaf Houtman (1996) in which they predicted the force of computer networks to eclipse all previous discipline changing technologies, including tape recorders and cameras. New forms of manipulating data are said to be changing the analysis anthropologists make. The easy interchange of information is allowing a global collaboration of experts. New forms of publishing have developed and will continue to grow, allowing multimedia ethnographic presentations. Academic research is being spread quickly and non-academics are becoming interested in anthropology and framing their identity. New ideas introduced by the cultural studies debate, are combining with new communication technologies to restructure the discipline once again.

**The Library as the Field**

The explosion of anthropological information in both the arena of cultural studies and through the use of new technologies have cast anthropological subject librarians into a proactive role vis-a-vis the discipline. Librarians are in a position to educate people about the resources available, and discuss the opportunities and challenges the Internet poses. They can describe, review, and provide access to numerous computer sites of interest to anthropologists, including but not limited to listservs, online databases, and electronic journals. These forums are no longer just the place where cultural research is discussed, they are increasingly becoming the stage for intercultural contact and relations.

The metaphor of the library as the place where fieldwork takes place is underscored in a reference source, *Fieldwork in the Library* (Westerman, 1994). Westerman describes and provides access information on a wide variety of sources of interest to both anthropologists and librarians. He also offers search strategies and explains how to use each of the resources he cites. The sources he reviews are diverse, including but not limited to journals, directories, indexes, abstracts, web sites and listservs. Each citation becomes a site calling for different evaluation techniques, and unique translation and interpretation skills.

Through further extrapolation, the metaphor of the library as field may engender a marriage between information and culture specialists previously unforeseen. The union is warranted today as librarians attempt to deal with complex multi-cultural societies and anthropologists find themselves in need of powerful information management skills.
CONCLUSION

As we have seen, the field of anthropology has always had an identity problem. Contemporary times show this problem to be acute. Schwimmer (1998) discusses the future of Internet reference services in anthropology in utopic and dystopic terms. He sees researchers and information providers at a cross-road and offers three scenarios:

One predicts a narrowing of opportunity and enhanced control by cultural and social elites . . . A second promises an evaporation of traditional academic barriers and structures and the emergence of a new order marked by collaborative research and altruistic sharing of knowledge and benefits among all components of the scholarly community. The third warns of a chaotic system in which scholarship is trivialized by the disintegration of regulation and standards.

It appears that traditional barriers are falling. Whether or not anthropology is poised to enter a fruitful era of cooperation and knowledge sharing, or is instead in danger of slipping into a state of further fragmentation, is left unanswered. Certainly librarians and anthropologists will have to join forces more vigorously than in the past.

Librarians will have to re-conceptualize the library. The information age has placed the library “in-the-world.” It can no longer be seen only as a storage place for culture but must be viewed as a place where cross-cultural relations take place and influence future cultural dynamics. Anthropologists on the other hand must embrace the widening scope of the discipline. Simplistic schematics can no longer organize the world’s ever changing cultures. They must work with information specialists to create the flexible platforms necessary to integrate anthropology in its fullest form. Only then will anthropology satisfy humankind’s innate curiosity toward the diversity of life ways.

REFERENCES


ADDITIONAL READING


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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Michalski is a documentarian and curator living in New York City. He is the editor of XCP: Cross Cultural Poetics Website (http://bfn.org/~xcp). He has a Master's degree in American Studies from the State University of New York at Buffalo and is currently pursuing his MLS at the City University of New York, Queens College, specializing in Anthropology and Sociology Librarianship.