# Chapter 8

# The Use and Misuse of Anthropological Evidence: Digital Himalaya as Ethnographic Knowledge (Re)Production

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## COLLECT, PROTECT, CONNECT: THE BIRTH OF DIGITAL HIMALAYA

Almost twenty-three years ago, in December 2000, a group of four anthropologists and historians at the University of Cambridge (of which I was one) set out to explore new methods for collecting, protecting, and connecting historical anthropological collections in a range of media formats relating to the Himalayan region in ways that would widen access to the materials through emerging digital platforms. Motivating us was what Natalie M. Underberg and Elayne Zorn have described as the desire to "investigate the social impact of new technologies, with the goal of responsibly integrating technology into cultural representations."[1] Structured through the emerging "participatory culture of the twenty-first century,"[2] we were eager to explore whether an opportunity existed to challenge traditional hierarchies of anthropological data, evidence, authority, value, and voice.

Sarah Harrison, Alan Macfarlane, Sara Shneiderman, and I named this pilot project "Digital Himalaya," a placeholder title that has since come to stick. We began by digitizing older sets of ethnographic data held in university and personal collections across Europe to protect them from

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[1] Natalie M. Underberg and Elayne Zorn, *Digital Ethnography: Anthropology, Narrative, and New Media* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013), 4.
[2] Ibid., 41.

obsolescence and decay, forward migrate them as new standards emerged, and share them back with originating communities in the Himalayan region and with scholars everywhere through the Web and other digital media as appropriate.

The process, challenges, early successes, and ethical quandaries—not to mention the more technical steps involved in selecting the original collections for digitization, the process of curation, the frequency of updates, and the necessary international collaboration that ensued—have been the topic of many academic and popular articles[3] and are beyond the scope of this current contribution. In this chapter, I rather address thorny questions about data and evidence, both visual and textual, through the experience of establishing and then directing Digital Himalaya. In the process, I explore the past, present, and future of ethnographic data and anthropological evidence through the work of the Digital Himalaya Project, and I ask: Is knowledge always, and by definition, information that has somehow been organized, and is knowledge organization therefore necessarily reductive and selective?

## ETHNOGRAPHIC DATA AND THE PRODUCTION OF ANTHROPOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

Lurking behind understandings of "evidence" and "data" are entrenched assumptions about the nature of knowledge in different disciplines. Writing about history, Joan W. Scott acknowledges that the status of evidence is at best "ambiguous," and that a "narrative can be said to determine the evidence as much as the evidence determines the narrative."[4] As an area of study, anthropology has long positioned fieldwork as an almost sacred process—"diacritical"[5] as Kirsten Hastrup has described it—a *rite de passage* through which the ethnographer passes in order to generate prized

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[3] See Sara Shneiderman and Mark Turin, "Digital Himalaya: An Ethnographic Archive in the Digital Age," in *Interarchive: Archival Practices and Sites in the Contemporary Art Field*, eds. Beatrice von Bismarck et al. (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walter König, 2002), 359–61; Mark Turin, "Born Archival: The Ebb and Flow of Digital Documents from the Field," *History and Anthropology* 22 (December 2011): 445–60; Mark Turin, "Salvaging the Records of Salvage Ethnography: The Story of the Digital Himalaya Project," *Book 2.0* 1, no. 1 (2012): 39–46; Mark Turin, "The Unexpected Afterlives of Himalayan Collections: From Data Cemetery to Web Portal," in *The Anthropology of Expeditions: Travel, Visualities, Afterlives*, eds. Joshua A. Bell and Erin L. Hasinoff (New York: Bard Graduate Center, 2015), 242–68.

[4] Lionel Gossman, "Towards a Rational Historiography," in Transactions of the American Philosophical Society 79, pt. 3 (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1998), 26, quoted in Joan W. Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17 (Summer 1991): 776.

[5] Kirsten Hastrup, "The Ethnographic Present: A Reinvention," *Cultural Anthropology* 5 (February 1990): 45.

and potentially verifiable anthropological knowledge. In addition, and unlike other disciplines, there is widespread agreement and understanding among practitioners that in ethnography, research materials are co-produced by the researcher and the researched, "before they become commoditised into 'data.'"[6]

Co-production, as Sheila Jasanoff argues, is "shorthand for the proposition that the ways in which we know and represent the world (both nature and society) are inseparable from the ways in which we choose to live in it."[7] In other words, we co-produce, just as we are ourselves co-produced. Although contemporary anthropology takes pride in a strategic marshalling of co-production that is positioned as an ethical innovation or rebalancing of expertise, Jasanoff's argument runs deeper. To anthropologists, she suggests, the very idiom of co-production "offers further tools for analyzing problems of essentialism and stereotypic reproduction, showing how the cultural capacity to produce and validate knowledges and artifacts can account for long-term stability, as well as creativity and change."[8] And yet, as those who have studied the history of the discipline have shown, anthropological knowledge tends to have an intrinsically "elusive quality,"[9] meaning that "if what is reported is not to be dismissed as mere recording or description, it must be recognised as understanding."[10]

From its very beginnings, anthropology has had an ambivalent relationship regarding its location on that rather unrefined scale outlined by C. P. Snow in his *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*.[11] Some practitioners situate the discipline firmly within the humanities, whereas others were—and still are—lured toward the scientific end of the continuum. The bedrock of much anthropological thinking still aligns with a broadly conceived "positivist view stipulating that a theory needs to be tested against data; if theory is the text, data become the corrective context."[12] But if we admit that anthropological knowledge is usually derived from ethnographic data—gathered and collected through fieldwork which is an inherently communicative, subjective, historically contingent,

[6] Peter Pels et al., "Data Management in Anthropology: The Next Phase in Ethics Governance?" *Social Anthropology* 26, no. 3 (2018): 391, doi: 10.1111/1469-8676.12526.

[7] Sheila Jasanoff, ed., *States of Knowledge: The Co-production of Science and Social Order* (London: Routledge, 2004), 2.

[8] Ibid., 4.

[9] Timothy Jenkins, "Fieldwork and the Perception of Everyday Life," *Man* 29 (June 1994): 444.

[10] Johannes Fabian, "Ethnographic Misunderstanding and the Perils of Context," in *The Problem of Context: Perspectives from Social Anthropology and Elsewhere*, ed. R. M. Dilley (New York: Berghahn Books, 1999), 85.

[11] C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures: And a Second Look: An Expanded Version of The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution* (New York: New American Library, 1963).

[12] Fabian, "Ethnographic Misunderstanding," 91.

and necessarily imperfect event—what is the evidentiary basis for anthropological knowledge? Moreover, underlying the anthropological endeavor lies lingering discomfort with the very idea that knowledge is essentially data "that are *already commodified*,"[13] or put another way, data that have been "alienated from the social relations of research by contractual forms of informed consent and anonymisation."[14]

Along the way, anthropology has on occasion fallen prey to the same self-important weakness as Narcissus, that impossibly handsome hunter from Greek mythology who fell in love with his own image reflected in a pool of water. "That we must go to extreme lengths to allow the field of study to *actually exert* the desired constraints on the information construed," writes Karin D. Knorr-Cetina, witheringly, "is demonstrated by the development of anthropology, which long ago denounced societal ethnocentrism, only to find itself continuously engaged in its own professional ethnocentrism."[15]

Many have asked whether it is useful or even "possible to distinguish the collection of information from interpretation or analysis,"[16] given that ethnographic understanding "happens always after the fact,"[17] rather than in the moment itself. Hastrup has more recently noted that "the question of evidence is acute if anthropology shall aspire to anything but reporting quaint stories from strange places."[18] Thinking in this vein, and echoing Hastrup, the Digital Himalaya Project team approached knowledge as a "social phenomenon rather than simply a substance."[19] We challenged ourselves to think through by what process analogue data can become digital evidence, what is lost when certain data points are excluded and others are amplified, and—perhaps most fundamental—what it means to edit and publish data in the digital age. In this, we were preparing to enter an ethically fraught space in which ethnographic data were being increasingly "gathered, produced, stored, circulated and shared digitally through online third-party services,"[20] as stated by Igor Boog, in ways that could never have been anticipated by either the original researchers or the ethnographic subjects.

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[13] Pels et al., "Data Management in Anthropology," 393 (italics in the original).

[14] Ibid., 391.

[15] Karin D. Knorr-Cetina, *The Manufacture of Knowledge: An Essay on the Constructivist and Contextual Nature of Science* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1981), 19.

[16] Fabian, "Ethnographic Misunderstanding," 91.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Kirsten Hastrup, "Getting it Right: Knowledge and Evidence in Anthropology," *Anthropological Theory* 4, no. 4 (2004): 455.

[19] Ibid., 456.

[20] Pels et al., "Data Management in Anthropology," 399.

Hastrup describes the transformative sleight-of-hand and intellectual conceit of ethnographic fieldwork with forensic precision: "While it lasts, it is a radical experience of estrangement and relativism. Afterward, it becomes memory and the backbone of objectivism."[21] Frederick Barth gets at this same point, albeit through less lyrical language: "Actions become knowledge to others only after the fact."[22] Exploring how that "magic" is affected and how the transformation is produced involves unpicking the threads of anthropological knowledge creation. One of the elephants in the room is that at the very center of anthropological evidence lies the unassailable monograph or academic article—"before fieldwork becomes science, it has to be transformed into text."[23] Where does that leave the rich audiovisual materials that ethnographers have collected—and continue to collect—in the field, including 16-mm film, reel-to-reel audio, and later, analogue and then digital video that we were planning to digitize and share through the Web? Or, more simply put, is film data or knowledge?

## THE (DE)VALUING OF ETHNOGRAPHIC FILM

Matthew Durington and Jay Ruby come to the rather depressing if inescapable conclusion that for the first half of the twentieth century at least, while the ostensible purpose of ethnographic film was educational, "there is no evidence that they were ever used in teaching."[24] Marcus Banks and Ruby show how the "claims made for the value of ethnographic film in the broader anthropological project are just that—claims. It is significant that … films are very rarely cited as data sources in written ethnography."[25] Faced with the potential for sharing hundreds of hours of ethnographic moving images and thousands of photographs through new online and offline technologies, Digital Himalaya would have to make a strong case for spending precious time and limited resources digitizing and mobilizing historical visual media, an aspect of the ethnographic endeavor that had been systematically undervalued by the academy and consistently referred to in most disparaging terms.

By way of illustration, when Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, whose exceptional film collection would become the core of the Digital Himalaya

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[21] Hastrup, "Ethnographic Present," 45.

[22] Fredrik Barth, "An Anthropology of Knowledge," *Current Anthropology* 43, no. 1 (2002): 1.

[23] Hastrup, "Ethnographic Present," 47.

[24] Marcus Banks and Jay Ruby, eds., *Made to Be Seen: Perspectives on the History of Visual Anthropology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 6.

[25] Ibid., 10.

moving image collection, mentioned to anthropological founding father Bronislaw Malinowski in 1935 that he intended to photograph in the field, the grandfather of ethnography dismissed this as "Thomas Cook-ism," a form of "tourist activity, below the dignity of an anthropologist and of only decorative use."[26] In his autobiography, written many years later, von Fürer-Haimendorf describes this trivialization with characteristic tact but expressed that it "widened the range of those who held such a view."[27] "Apart from his brilliance Malinowski had surprising prejudices," writes von Fürer-Haimendorf, "he and his followers looked down on anthropological photography and considered any visual documentation unnecessary and not worthy of serious academics."[28] Film was simply not considered an effective and appropriate tool for that generation of ethnographic knowledge.

Cost was an issue. It's interesting to note that in the 1940s, von Fürer-Haimendorf had struck up a relationship with Osman Ali Khan Siddiqi, Asaf Jah VII, the Nizam of Hyderabad in India, who supplied the expensive film stock that von Fürer-Haimendorf used to document the Chenchu and other communities. After the war, the British Broadcasting Corporation, along with Austrian and Bavarian television, were looking to commission ethnographic films to quench the seemingly inexhaustible appetite of television audiences for romantic ethnographic travelogues, but they lacked the experience and networks to make such films themselves. The solution was a creative and mutually beneficial arrangement: television companies would provide the film stock and cover some of the costs of travel and fieldwork, while von Fürer-Haimendorf would act as their contracted filmmaker, shooting 16mm with the steady hand and good eye for which he was already known. On his return to Europe, he delivered the reels to the commissioning body, which then, through a process of cutting and editing, would composite the raw footage into dramatic-sounding documentaries with titles such as *The Men Who Hunted Heads*[29] and *The Land of the Gurkhas*.[30]

Through the editing process, television producers would regularly intermix ethnic groups from different districts (and even countries), lay down a classical European orchestral score as the soundtrack over footage of Himalayan rice paddies, and add a commanding voiceover by David

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[26] Alan Macfarlane, "Early Ethnographic Film in Britain: A Reflection on the Work of Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf," *Visual Anthropology* 23, no. 5 (2010): 379.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, *Life Among Indian Tribes: The Autobiography of an Anthropologist* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), 9.

[29] Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, *The Men Who Hunted Heads—The Nagas of Assam* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1971), filmstrip, 50 min.

[30] Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, *Travellers' Tales: The Land of the Gurkhas* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1957), filmstrip, 1200 ft.

Attenborough or a similarly authoritative narrator, airing the finished "documentary" to public acclaim. What little evidential authority these films might have had at the outset was shredded in the process, making the edited films far less historically and ethnographically interesting than the raw footage and "rushes" to which we had been given access through the Digital Himalaya Project's growing network. At the same time that these films were being produced for public consumption, "trustyworthy agents"—such as Attenborough and von Fürer-Haimendorf—"necessary to the constitution of any body of knowledge" were being identified and promoted.[31] In Shapin's analysis, gentlemen such as these—in our case, one English, the other Austrian—embodied authority and were seen to be conveyors of ethnographic evidence. They fit the dominant cultural paradigm "of the type of individual one could trust to speak the truth"[32] and could thus serve as a "reliable spokesman for reality."[33]

## IN DEFENSE OF THE RAW (OVER THE COOKED OR PROCESSED)

Although raw data and processed data are not categorical opposites in the way that high priest of structuralism, Claude Lévi-Strauss, positioned "raw" and "cooked" in his 1964 publication that launched his four-part *Mythologiques*,[34] it is useful to explore the distinction, certainly in the context of ethnographic film. Peter Pels et al. argue that anthropologists should "insist on making an epistemological distinction between 'raw' and 'processed data', even if such classifications only remain stable within specific, contingent contexts."[35] In the same series of essays, Heather Richards-Rissetto offers some pointers about how we might make sense of the difference: "What are data? Are they only the initial observations we record? What about post-processed data—are these simply data or have they become knowledge?"[36] Through the Digital Himalaya Project, we were learning how ethnographic film—as data—was being "cooked" and "processed," and not just through appropriate and judicious editing, but more troubling, through ethically questionable repurposing for consumption by television

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[31] Steven Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), xxvi.

[32] Ibid., xxvi.

[33] Ibid., xxviii.

[34] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Mythologiques*, vol. 1, *Le Cru et le cuit* (Paris: Plon, 1964).

[35] Pels et al., "Data Management in Anthropology," 394.

[36] Ibid., 410.

companies. As the "cooking" had involved creating cultural impossibilities that had never existed, and could never exist, it was imperative that if we were to make any use of these ethnographic films, we would have to return to the rushes and work from the raw footage itself.

# REVALUING ETHNOGRAPHIC FILM THROUGH DIGITAL RETURN

Through the von Fürer-Haimendorf collection and others, previously unanticipated collaborations began to emerge. The custodians of such collections in European holding institutions often had only limited knowledge about the footage that they curated, based on a few quickly scribbled notes on a film canister or on an ancient accession form. Back in the Himalayan region, descendants of the individuals who were featured in the films often had no way of knowing that such footage even existed in European collections. When we approached communities in Nepal, Bhutan, Tibet, and northern India about the existence of these unique visual records, all were eager to view them and then have permanent copies of the films and photographs of their ancestors. Relationships of trust began to develop out of a process that has since come to be referred to as *digital return*.[37]

Context is all. We know that there is no single anthropological knowledge, and that it cannot be "totalized," but is rather "constructed in the construal of specific encounters. This is as true for the anthropologist as for the informant."[38] The issue, until recently, has been that the "informant," of whom Jenkins writes, had little access and ever fewer rights to the tools of anthropological knowledge construction. Although context mattered enormously, the context was overwhelmingly shaped by the research goals and intellectual agendas of the powerful ethnographer. In his conversation with Nandi Dill, Fred Ritchin reminds us that "the history of photography is almost never told from the point of view of the subject. It is usually told from the point of view of the creator of the image, and we celebrate the photographer's vision."[39] Digital Himalaya had an opportunity to invert some of that authority and voice by consulting with community members

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[37] See Joshua A. Bell, Kimberly Christen, and Mark Turin, "Introduction: After the Return," *Museum Anthropology Review* 7 (Spring–Fall 2013): 1–21.

[38] Jenkins, "Fieldwork and the Perception," 452.

[39] Nandi Dill, "Notes from the Field: An Interview with Fred Ritchin," *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development* 4 (Winter 2013): 401.

and seeking their input on if, how, where, and when the images of their ancestors could and should be shared.

Through partnerships, such as Digital Himalaya, members of historically marginalized and ethnographically scrutinized communities can become revalued as knowledge holders and experts in collaborations that are mediated through visual records. The insights offered by community members are of immense value, contributing essential context to historically under-documented collections.[40] For Digital Himalaya, the process of engaging with source communities through DVDs and hard disks packed with historical footage, and later through online interactions, was more than a routine or mechanical process of cultural return in digital form. Instead, it became an exciting opportunity for collaboration through which collections were enriched and better understood. I am reminded of the inspiring work of Willow Cree writer, journalist, cultural advocate, and commentator—Paul Seesequasis—who writes about the collaborative social media project he started to collect archival photographs of everyday life in First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities from across Canada from the 1920s to the 1970s and harnesses the connective and communicative power of the Internet to "assemble, digitize and distribute"[41] them back to communities who recognized themselves and their ancestors. "This act of naming," writes Seesequasis, "brought another layer to the photographs: reclamation."[42]

Such recalibrations can be read in two ways, either as exercises in mediated "decolonization" or as a form of reciprocity that "strives to enable communities to have an equal say in how their culture is portrayed by bringing them into discussion";[43] although we should be skeptical of what level of representational "equality" is actually reached in such remediations. Even with equality remaining elusive, working to flatten hierarchies of authority, and seeking to broaden access to content can be effective in pushing back against entrenched colonial models of knowledge production. As Ritchin notes for social media, but is equally true of other forms of digital remediation, "the forming of hierarchies may be seen as a form of paternalism, as taking the decision-making power away from people."[44]

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[40] For a discussion of the forms that relationships between museums and source communities can take, see Laura L. Peers and Alison K. Brown, eds., *Museums and Source Communities: A Routledge Reader* (London: Routledge, 2003).

[41] Paul Seesequasis, *Blanket Toss under Midnight Sun: Portraits of Everyday Life in Eight Indigenous Communities* (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2019), 165.

[42] Ibid., 2.

[43] Underberg and Zorn, *Digital Ethnography*, 26.

[44] Dill, "Notes from the Field," 398.

## ACCESS AND AUDIENCE: CHANGING EXPECTATIONS

When we established the Digital Himalaya Project in 2000, we naively imagined that we were building a Web portal primarily for academic users in the Global North who would have unfettered access to the Internet through fast broadband networks, and that communities in the Himalayas would be better served by having us burn the digitized collections onto DVDs and for us to deposit hard disks to institutes, colleges, and universities across Asia. This certainly meshed with the prevailing dogma of the time, neatly encapsulated in Underberg and Zorn's description of projects that seek to "make collections of objects, texts, and audio and visual recordings available to the world—or more properly, that part of the world with Internet access. Those without access, primarily in the Global South, face a serious problem that scholars need to address."[45] As we quickly learned, however, Global North and Global South are insufficiently nuanced categories for understanding that had easy access to our collections. The terms say nothing about class and resources, perhaps the most important consideration in understanding the changing demographics of our users.

Ever since we started tracking visits to and downloads from our website in 2005, a strikingly different pattern has emerged. Of the 500,000+ unique "sessions" that Google Analytics has recorded, 19 percent have been from Nepal, 16 percent from the United States, 10 percent from India, and 8 percent from the United Kingdom. It is particularly satisfying that so many Web users in Nepal and India have accessed our content, offering a comprehensive challenge to our early and quite erroneous assumption in 2000 that the "West" would have the Web and the "Rest" would have hard disks and DVDs. Similarly arresting is the data provided by Google about device category. Of the half a million sessions (noting, of course, that a session may include many page views) that the site has received since we started to track in 2005, only 9 percent have been on mobile devices, and 2 percent on tablets, with the remainder from desktop or laptop computers. Yet the use of handheld devices to access Digital Himalaya content has increased dramatically over time: in the last year alone, mobile devices accounted for 20 percent of all visits and tablets for 4 percent. Given the increasing penetration of 3G mobile services across the Himalayan region, we can only expect this trend to increase in the coming years. At the same time, we receive as many requests from institutions in

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[45] Underberg and Zorn, *Digital Ethnography*, 5.

the Global North for offline copies of our collections on hard discs as we do from scholarly institutes in the Himalayan region. Some of our heaviest users download PDF files and films from our website using solar or hydro-powered satellite broadband Internet connections in Himalayan locations that would traditionally be described as "remote," as they have no vehicular access and are not connected to the national electricity grid.

## WHAT IS DIGITAL HIMALAYA? CHANGING EXPECTATIONS

As the project has aged and the Internet has matured, I have been interested to observe a slowly changing perception of what Digital Himalaya is and how it works. Is it an "archive" of fieldwork data? If so, by whom is it curated and by what standards and selection process are materials included or excluded for dissemination? Or is Digital Himalaya more of an *archive of an archive*: a constantly mutating, transmigratory, and postmodern "collection of collections"[46] that could never have been brought into conversation other than through a Web interface. What counts as evidence in such a collection? Those of us working in these spaces know, in quite embodied ways, that the form and structure of newer digital media impacts both the subject and the tools of archival practice.[47]

By Web standards, we are now an old project, designed and built before Google was a household name, when 4-megabyte (MB) downloads were still large, and our project team accessed a shared file folder through dial-up modems. Although we have redesigned the website more than once and have increased the size of our media collections as bandwidth has increased, I cannot escape the awkward feeling that our entire collection and approach is still rooted in an earlier, less interactive, and more traditional era of Web technology. A large amount of the correspondence that we receive in the project email inbox comes from scholars looking to publish in one of the many journals that we host online, even though we make it quite clear on our website that we are simply the online hosts, not editors or publishers. But as digital publishing has become the norm, and the front-end delivery of academic content becomes more widespread through open-access initiatives, perhaps we are fulfilling part of the role

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[46] Bart Harloe and John M. Budd, "Collection Development and Scholarly Communication in the Era of Electronic Access," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 20 (May 1994): 83.

[47] Richard Rinehart and Jon Ippolito, *Re-Collection: Art, New Media, and Social Memory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014.), 232.

of publisher, if only through dissemination, so this conflation of roles is to be expected.

As search tools have become more effective and more pervasive, we find that our collections are located, accessed, and downloaded without the user ever visiting or even knowing about our website. A simple search for a map, some census data, or a publication from the Himalayan region may send a prospective user to one of our file servers, bypassing the loose architecture of our website altogether. Although some technologists would perceive this as a problem, we rather view it as an asset: the visibility and discoverability of the data collections hosted by Digital Himalaya have now reached the point that they no longer require the fabric of our original website to facilitate access.

Similarly, we have opted for a redundancy approach to our multimedia collections, which are now housed on University of Cambridge streaming servers, in the University of Virginia's Tibetan and Himalayan Library (THL), and on YouTube. Not only is YouTube a very popular site for streaming videos, but it facilitates the very interaction, feedback, and commentary (in any number of languages) to which we originally aspired and which our own basic website does not permit. Our thinking about the importance of our own interface has changed as standards have emerged over time, and as media sharing sites have come to dominate the market. No longer are we allocating resources to developing sophisticated search-and-retrieval systems or static pages that house image, audio, and video collections. Rather, we are focusing on pushing our content and its associated metadata to the places and platforms where it is most visible and best utilized. This is indicative of a wider reorientation in some digital projects to move away from developing customized and curated interfaces of content collections to a "broadcasting" approach that makes use of free, albeit commercial, platforms to reach the widest possible audience.

## THE DIGITAL FUTURE: FROM VULNERABILITY TOWARD SUSTAINABILITY

In the back of my mind, as I finalize this chapter, is my growing sense of unease about the sustainability of digital projects, an unease shared by other commentators working with new media in the digital realm. Serge Abiteboul describes digital "recording formats as more ephemeral than

Sumerian tablets or paper,"[48] while also suggesting that "digitization offers a particular form of immortality."[49] In their 2014 volume *Re-Collection: Art, New Media, and Social Memory*, Richard Rinehart and Jon Ippolito ask readers to reflect on how increasingly digital forms of civilization—in which we would do well to include digital data and evidence—will persist beyond our lifetimes, and argue that the vulnerability of new media art illustrates a larger crisis for social memory. Rinehart and Ippolito's proposed "variable media approach" to new media, with responsibilities distributed between producers and consumers, "encourages creators to define a work in medium-independent terms so that it can be translated into a new medium once its original format is obsolete."[50]

Over Digital Himalaya's twenty-three years, as new standards and possibilities have emerged, I have come to the conclusion that *if* the data and material collections with which we have worked are "safe," however we might define that, then the structure that holds them together should be permitted to decay as new platforms take their place. In this, then, Digital Himalaya may be a simple Buddhist lesson in impermanence and nonattachment to form and structure, letting go of our now quite-dated website so that the collections may live on through a generative process of rebirth and renewal.

Although our current website will in time be retired, the collections that we have helped to digitize have secured a new and permanent (to whatever degree we may use that word in this context) online home within the digital library at the University of British Columbia where I work, through what my colleagues in the library are calling the *Open Collections portal*. As Rinehart and Ippolito note, "new media works are going to need to be managed and migrated on a continual basis."[51] Rather like the phoenix of ancient Greek mythology, I have now come to see—and even appreciate—how, if successful, Digital Himalaya will be cyclically regenerated and reborn, gaining new life by mutating and rising from the ashes of its earlier incarnations. The collections should and, I hope, will endure, while the form in which they are encoded will metamorphose over time and the social work that they do will also likely change. I have had to accept that the digital is just as transient, evanescent, and inconstant as other forms of existence.

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[48] Serge Abiteboul, "The Digital Shoebox," in *Memory*, eds. Philippe Tortell, Mark Turin, and Margot Young (Vancouver, BC: Peter Wall Institute for Advanced Studies, 2018), 225, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvbtzpfm.29.
[49] Ibid., 228.
[50] Rinehart and Ippolito, *Re-Collection*, 11.
[51] Ibid., 233.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS ON DATA AND EVIDENCE IN ANTHROPOLOGY

"Events are happenings of social significance,"[52] contends Hastrup. As a corollary, might we then ask whether evidence is data of social significance? Now that the pool of users, consumers, and creators of anthropological content is finally widening to include the descendants of the historical subjects of anthropological scrutiny—the observed and enumerated citizens so problematically referred to as *informants* by our disciplinary ancestors— the very fabric of what constitutes social significance necessarily changes and offers the potential to be more inclusive of previously marginalized and devoiced perspectives.

It is through a similar process of revaluing and broadening, that ethnographic films—previously consigned to the classroom as a babysitting tool for tired or ill instructors—can assume new life. To accomplish this, as Ritchin has said of photographs, one must stop thinking of the visual as objective, authoritative, fixed in frame, or "definitive 'proof.'"[53] Rather, we need to become comfortable in the knowledge that "making images, or being in media, is mediating,"[54] and that digitizing and disseminating images—whether static photographs or moving film—is an incredibly powerful form of remediation that itself can generate a form of "visual citizenship."[55] Seesequasis reminds us that "the story is only a small part of the picture and the picture is only a small part of the story."[56] Such work is also inherently humanistic, "a conversation between what is out there, ourselves, ourselves and other people, ourselves and the past, the future, and so on,"[57] and will always be an endeavor, more than simply "a dialogue among images."[58]

In their very readable *Digital Ethnography: Anthropology, Narrative, and New Media*, Underberg and Zorn outline how anthropologists were "relatively slow to adopt the use of computers as well as to consider the effects of digital technology generally on their field."[59] In the early days of interdisciplinary collaboration, they identify the main question as being: "How much computer science do anthropologists need to know?"[60] What

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[52] Hastrup, "Ethnographic Present," 49.

[53] Fred Ritchin, "The Web Waits for the Photographer, Too," *Nieman Reports* 52 (Summer 1998): 39.

[54] Dill, "Notes from the Field," 400.

[55] Ibid., 401.

[56] Seesequasis, *Blanket Toss Under Midnight Sun*, 3.

[57] Dill, "Notes from the Field," 400.

[58] Ibid.

[59] Underberg and Zorn, *Digital Ethnography*, 6.

[60] Ibid., 7.

they don't go on to say, but would certainly be what I would ask next, is this: How much anthropology do computer scientists need to know?

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