

Experience Rich Anthropology Revisited

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When I was an undergraduate at the University of Manchester in the late 1990s I recall being introduced by John Gledhill to something called 'Experience Rich Anthropology'. Established by the anthropology department at the University of Ken, the ERA project was an early attempt to use the possibilities of new media technologies to open up anthropology to new audiences, and to present anthropological knowledge in new ways. The site is still available to view [here](#):

It is remarkable then, that in the ensuing 20 years, anthropologists have been rather slow to embrace the possibilities of digital media. Particularly now, when as a matter of course most anthropologists carry around powerful digital research tools in their pockets (smart phones which contain a camera, sound recorder, GPS locator, mapping tools, access to mappable social networks), we still seem remarkably wedded to the form of the research monograph or written journal paper that perhaps includes a few well chosen photographs from our field sites. There are some notable exception to this (for example: Vector's journal which worked with several anthropologists - for instance [Elizabeth Povinelli](#), Kim Fortun's [Asthma Files](#) and Sarah Pink's [Energy and Digital Living](#) project but most anthropologists still communicate ethnographic findings in a very traditional format.

In an attempt to equip a future generation of anthropologists with a more creative, flexible, democratic, open and distributive understanding of how ethnography might be conducted and communicated, students enrolled on the MSC in Digital Anthropology at UCL all do the Digital Anthropology Practical. The end product of the course is a web-based presentation of a mini ethnographic project. Students are encouraged to be creative with their use of digital media tools available. Given the low level of skills required to build a conceptually creative and compelling website we do not ask students to demonstrate any competency with programming. The websites they build are all created on publicly available platforms. These platforms do have their limitations, but they nonetheless open up many opportunities for representation and presentation, that are not available in a written narrative forms. We encourage the students to work with limitations of the platform they choose to think about how they might present the findings of their mini ethnographies to a public audience. The aim of each site is to communicate an ethnographic understanding of a small group of people and their digital interactions.

Each year we give the students a topic to work on. Last year the topic was the Digital Anthropology at Home. We asked the students to do a mini ethnography of a household, looking at how people used digital technologies in their everyday lives. We encouraged students to think about what the project could tell them both about digital technology use and about the concept of 'home'. We allowed them to think creatively about what a household might be and to develop their own insights

into the relationship between the household as a field site and the home as a cultural concept.

The projects were all quite different as the three presented here illustrate. [Laura Parraga Gonzales](#) took the home itself as the structure of the site, instigating navigation through the home as a means of constructing an ethnographic narrative. [Luke Evison](#) in contrast, conceived of the home as a collective online space constituted by the interactions between three players, and asked the players to use the creative structure of the game to produce their own reflections on home, that themselves provided the ethnographic material for analysis. Louise Evan's [project](#) illustrated the potential of generating insight through the juxtaposition of many different platforms into one particular household, creating an enchanting palimpsest of insights that cross-cut different field materials.

This year the topic was **Digital London**. All of the websites for this year's projects have been collated on a single [website](#). Here you can look at the sixteen projects in detail, and explore the ways in which each of the students approached the question of what the digital experience of being in London might look like for the different communities that they studied.

There are many challenges that this assessment raises both for students and for those teaching them – including how to take students from no experience of ethnography to an engagement with new forms of ethnography in only 6 months, and the issue of how to mark this new kind of ethnographic work within the institutional structures of a university. But giving students the opportunity to experiment with ethnographic form allows them to move from playing catch-up with anthropology, to participating in the emergence of the discipline of digital anthropology and shaping in practical ways, the direction in which it might go.