Anthropological Storytelling & Social Media

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Building Careers in Anthropology

Gabelli School of Business, Fordham University

Anthropological Storytelling

Most anthropologists probably spend more time thinking about their research than about how to discuss it with non-anthropologists.

However, approaching your work as that of a storyteller can be an invaluable because we tell stories in many professional contexts:

- Job interviews
- Publications
- Informal conversations
- Social media content

Storytelling through Social Media

Social Media can be useful for

1) **Telling your story and building your personal brand**
    - Potential employers and clients may find you through engaging content they've found from you online.
    - Clients can range from people looking for researchers and strategists to those looking for speakers and subject matter experts.
2) **Discussing your work in relatable and engaging ways**
    - In some ways, social media has lowered the barriers to public intellectualism. However, there are many variables to how stories are best told on social media.

Social Media for Researchers

*At SAPIENS, we see **Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram** as having the most potential for researchers to reach audiences ranging from colleagues to interested publics. However, you might also consider being active on **Reddit**, creating a **YouTube** channel, or engaging on **Pinterest**.*

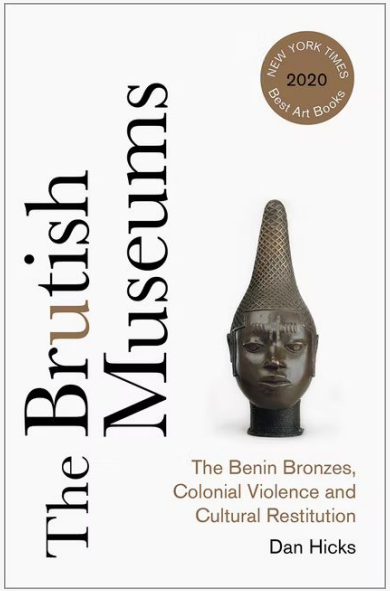
Engaging with social media is not a requirement for the 21st-century scholar. However, the platforms can be tools to help you establish your reputation, share and spread your ideas, and connect with a range of audiences.

If you do jump in, start out by wading slowly through the platform, learning and watching, observing and participating — like any anthropologist should.

How to Promote Research on Social Media by Chip Colwell (Sapiens)

Anthropology on Social Media is Evolving

Clubhouse
Drop-in Audio



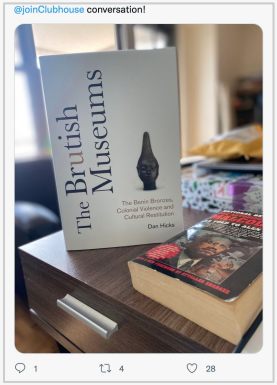
"I was in one (Clubhouse) room with Hammer hosting Dan Hicks, the author of a book called the Brutish Museums… and a couple of weeks later I was reading articles about how museums were either not showing their bronzes or creating plans to give them back."

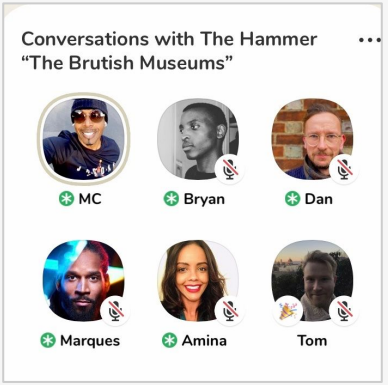
-Marques Anderson (Cyborg Anthropologist)

MC HAMMER @MCHammer · Mar 5, 2021

I'm discussing "The Brutish Museums"" with @profdanhicks. Today, Mar 5 at 2:00 PM PST on @joinclubhouse. Join us!
joinclubhouse.com/event/xpWVpQW5

Anthropology on Social Media is Evolving





Storytelling is Fundamental

“Anthropologists are extremely curious. We want to see the story behind the story, which is a lot like journalism.” - Gillian Tett, PhD

“Writing for the public is about storytelling.” - Chip Colwell, PhD

“How do you connect with people?... Usually, it's through narrative and being able to tell a good story because ***stories are sort of the connective tissue in social life*** *and stories connect us with one another.” - Paul Stoller, PhD*

Anthropologists Have the Stories

But telling them to audiences beyond our silos is easier said than done.

“You've got to have something to say… and you've got to know how to say it. Anthropologists have something to say. They just have to figure out how to say it.”
-Helen Fisher, PhD

But How?

What's Your Story?

The next section will outline the elements of an engaging story. But first, **think about a story that you would like to share** with an audience outside of anthropology. As we go through the next section, think about how you could tell your story with a time limit of 3 minutes.

This can be a story about anything, especially something that helps listeners understand your area of expertise or work as an anthropologist better.

30 Minute Story: Starstruck

- I cold emailed one of my favorite science writers because my dissertation topic, how the construction site for the Thirty Meter Telescope was selected, suddenly became a topic of interest to people all over the world.
- My research was effectively a behind-the-scenes look at the systemic causes of this global controversy.
- The story, which was very different from those being pushed by scientists in the physical sciences, illuminated an important part of what was happening with this multi-billion dollar project on the Big Island of Hawaii.
- The writer connected me with their literary agent because he liked the topic.
- But when we spoke, he told me there was one big problem with what I had written so far. **It wasn't a story.**

30 Minute Story: Starstruck

- I had begun working on a book that was more like an updated version of my dissertation than something that non-academics would want to read, so now I’m in the process of reworking it.

3 Minute Story: Train of Thought

Suitable for short-form platforms like Twitter and TikTok

Know Your Audience

Anthropologists often find themselves trying to understand people through their stories.

- We're trained to apply scientific rigor, but storytelling is more of an art. Like research, storytelling takes practice.
- While we may be inclined to tell a story in all its complexity, the most engaging writers prioritize telling stories that are interesting.
- A story can't be told the same way for all media, formats, and audiences. And while you may start with a story that is complex, simplifying your story can be even more difficult and time consuming. So tell a story that your audience audience will enjoy.

Know Your Goal

Understand why the story you want to tell is worth telling and think about how to convey that value to your audience.

- Realize that some stories will work better than others for particular audiences. Make sure the story you tell is relevant to your audience.
- Your hook is a concise way to convey what a story will help the audience understand better. If you're discussing your research, try to make it relevant to something happening in the world… that your audience cares about.

Mind the Gap

Stories have a beginning, middle, and end and the best stories transport their audience to someplace new.

- Malcolm Gladwell likens this process to giving an audience the pieces of a puzzle that ends with new insight.
- It’s not important that the puzzle pieces fit together perfectly. In fact, imperfect puzzles are often the most interesting and enjoyable to talk about.
- Another way to think about this endeavor is traversing a gap.

Create a Narrative

Be thoughtful about how you tell your story.

- Who are the characters? What should the audience know about them?
- What are the details of the setting that contribute to the narrative? Which details are necessary and which can be cut?
- When is the best time to reveal information to the reader or listener?
- How can you create tension that keeps your audience engaged with the story? Construct a world for your audience in a way that is enjoyable.

Create a Narrative

While the work of human scientists requires an understanding of the complexity of the human condition, the best stories about the human condition are only as complex as they need to be. Making the right choices is the art of storytelling.

Present Data Thoughtfully

Anthropologists work with all sorts of data. It's not the case that a general audience won't be interested in the information that you've used to tell the story, but **it's crucial to share data in ways that make them relevant to the intended audience.**

- Experienced storytellers only share the most relevant data
- They phasing in the information to avoid overwhelming the audience
- And present data in the most interesting ways possible

Use Anecdotes

Data are crucial but sometimes anecdotes are even more interesting.

- You can include anecdotes to help your audience understand the larger picture or simply to make a narrative more intriguing.
- Anecdotes can precede substantive analysis and hard data, but they are simply instances or examples of something happening that serves to help you illustrate a deeper point.

Edit Your Work

Editing is as important as writing.

- Oftentimes, the story will come together in a piecemeal way as sections begin to fit together with each editing pass.
- If part of the story doesn't seem to fit, it's important to write it down to see if and where it eventually fits.
- The end of your story may become clear before it's fully drafted. You can tweak your story to guide your audience more thoughtfully and intentionally as it develops.
- As you edit, you'll find your voice, style, and ability to convey the right tone by balancing aspects of your style such as confidence, humility, humor, seriousness, and sadness.

Edit Your Work

“The only kind of writing is rewriting”

-Ernest Hemingway

Read Your Work

Editing is as much about reading as it is about writing.

- As you read your story, note any unnecessary barriers between you and your audience.
  - If a sentence is too long, break it up into two. If jargon is unnecessary, replace it with terms that are commonplace.
  - When jargon is necessary, explain it simply.
- If there is a framework, model, metaphor, or analogy that readers and listeners can use to understand the story better, offer it to them.

Read Your Work

Consider that popular nonfiction writers use language that's at about the 9th grade level. You may find that reading aloud as you edit is helpful and that taking significant breaks between your readings helps you see your work more like a member of your audience.

Learn from the Best

Some additional resources and examples include:

- Susanna Harris, PhD (microbiologist and content creator)
  - TikTok
- Mike Wesch, PhD (anthropologist and content creator)
  - YouTube
- Other public intellectuals and nonfiction writers, like those mentioned in this deck (more will be shared later)
- Anthropologists on TikTok, like
  - Tina Lasisi, PhD (TikTok)
  - Adrianna Wiley (TikTok)

Lastly, Workshop Your Work (When You Can)

With the remaining time, let's talk about your stories and how you could share them on social media.

If you are interested, we can workshop your story after this session and share it online via a Wenner-Gren project called *Anthropologists on the Public Stage*.

Anthropologists on the Public Stage

Thank You!