Social Media, Current Interests, and the 2010 Winter Olympics
by Robert J. Muckle

It is an exciting time to be a social scientist in North America. Not the kind of excitement one might experience with a ride on a roller coaster or a weekend in Las Vegas perhaps, but exciting nevertheless. For some the excitement lies in the use of new technologies, particularly those associated with the internet to make research and communication easier. For others, it is the continued advances in traditional research topics, as well as increasing advocacy and research into topics such as food, the military, heritage preservation, and the Olympic Games.

This inaugural column provides an eclectic sample of recent interests and activities of anthropologists and other social scientists. Those who follow along will learn about the recent use of social media by North American anthropologists, some highlights of the recent American Anthropological Association meetings, an attempt at heritage preservation on the moon, and a glimpse into social science research on the Olympics, especially as it relates to the indigenous component of the 2010 Winter Olympic Games held in Vancouver, Canada.

Anthropologists Using Social Media

One of the most exciting developments in anthropology and other social sciences in North America that has occurred in very recent times is the widespread adoption of the internet for communication. A few have made the study of internet and digital technology the focus of research in itself but almost all have benefited from the way data, reports, and scholarly articles have become more accessible. Although the internet has been used effectively by anthropologists for a considerable number of years, it seems to have reached new heights in recent months with new internet tools such as Google Wave, more data being made available at little or no cost, and in addition to maintaining web sites, a significant number of anthropologists and anthropological organizations are adopting social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and blogs for communication.

Many North American anthropologists use Twitter to manage the phenomenal number of anthropology-related news stories and reports that are now appearing daily. Twitter has become a very important tool for learning about anthropology in the news, with users often forwarding stories of anthropological interest to others. The links are usually to stories in the popular press but some also link to scholarly literature. Many organizations are also now using Twitter and Facebook to communicate with their memberships. The Twitter site for the American Anthropological Association (twitter.com/AmericanAnth), for example, has more than 1300 followers. For following current news related to indigenous peoples in North America, Indian Country Today (twitter.com/indiancountry) is my personal choice.

Blogs by North American anthropologists are not new in the world of anthropology, but they are becoming increasingly common and many are of high quality. One of my favorites for both its insightful comments related to current events and links to current anthropology-related news, is by George Washington University anthropologist Barbara Miller, whose blog is called “AnthropologyWorks” (www.anthropologyworks.com). I highly recommend it to everyone interested in anthropology, especially in understanding how anthropology is or can be relevant in the modern world, in North America and elsewhere.

Another favorite blog is “Savage Minds” (www.savageminds.org), created and maintained by a group of mostly younger and North American based anthropologists, and which often includes insightful contributions and on-line exchanges on such topics as digital technology, popular culture, and media. The movie Avatar, for example, was the subject of one recent thread.

At the American Anthropological Association Meetings

Of course, the internet has not entirely replaced the traditional forms of communication between anthropologists, such as scholarly publications and presentations at conferences. The largest annual gathering of North American anthropologists is the meetings of the American Anthropological Association which last met in December, 2009. As usual, there were a few thousand presentations on anthropological research being done mostly by North American anthropologists.

I usually go to these meetings and find it interesting to identify the emerging research trends. As expected, when looking through the program I saw sessions covering the usual diversity of interests, including those on applied anthropology, archaeology, biological anthropology, linguistics, and cultural anthropology. I saw sessions on the traditional areas of interest such as the indigenous peoples, gender, identity, religion, art, theory, and ethics. It seems to me that there were clearly more sessions devoted to “The Anthropology of Food” and “Anthropology and the Military” than I recall ever seeing before. Anthropological interests in food and the military are certainly not new, but judging by the number of presentations on these topics, I suspect we will be seeing a significant increase in the number of publications on these topics. Food anthropologists appear to be interested in a wide variety of things relating to food such as the pathways of distribution, presentation, and disposal; nutrition; food as cultural representation; and security.

Anthropological studies related to war and the military are certainly not new but they do seem to have reached a higher than usual profile in the past few years. Of particular recent interest to many is the United States Military’s Human Terrain System, often abbreviated H.T.S. Initiated by the Pentagon in 2007, the H.T.S. embeds anthropologists and other social scientists with combat brigades in Iraq and Afghanistan, with the idea that social scientists on the ground are able to gain insight into the local populations and communities that ultimately reduces the need for lethal force. At the December 2009 meetings, the American Anthropological Association released a strongly worded report opposing the H.T.S. program. The opposition was based primarily on the violation of the association’s code of ethics which mandates that anthropologists do no harm to those they study. The full report can be accessed through the American Anthropological Association’s web site www.aaanet.org.

The meetings also highlighted the fact that United States President Barack Obama’s mother was an anthropologist. Obama’s mother, Ann Dunham, obtained her Ph.D in Anthropology at the University of Hawaii in 1992, based on research she undertook in Indonesia, which explains the president’s time there as a child. Her focus was on economic anthropology and rural development. She died of cancer in 1995. The December 2009 meeting had a special session devoted to her and her work, and Duke University Press used the meetings to launch a revised and edited version of her dissertation, called Surviving Against the Odds: Popular Anthropology Magazine