Istanbul feels very far away. In the spring, when Midwestern thunderstorms roll across the prairie, the sizzle of rotating kebabs and the rattle of dice on backgammon boards are just too faint to be heard beyond the distant horizon. In an earlier era, one might have been tempted to stow away on a tramp steamer bound for Levantine shores and spend a few years learning the local dialect before finding a good deal on a used camel and riding off into the desert. Of course, such Victorian adventurism is impractical these days. Not to mention somewhat frowned upon.

Fortunately, in this era the world is quite literally at our finger tips. Modern technology can keep us in touch with friends in far away countries as if they were across town. Even those of us thousands of miles from a decent kebab stand have the opportunity to stay informed of current developments and research in social science anywhere in the world.

The internet has not only internationalized knowledge, but it has also begun to erode those ivy covered walls between universities and the public. As a working linguist no longer affiliated with academia in a formal way, I am happy to report that there are plenty of websites that will allow you to skip the bursar's office and mainline some research directly into your brain vein.

Of course, this development may not be without its risks. As it turns out, not everything that you read on the internet is unbiased. Compounding this are the heated emotions that events in the contemporary Middle East inspires. As with everything in life, a little skepticism goes a long way.

As a general introduction to the culture and politics of the Middle East (with a particular emphasis on interactions with the United States and Great Britain), you could do worse than spend a few hours browsing the online library at the Middle East Institute (http://www.mei.edu). In addition to their own publications, the Institute provides links to a broad list of resources, guides and annotated bibliographies.

Bogazici University is one of Turkey's top public universities and their Social Policy Institute (http://www.spl.boun.edu.tr/default_en.htm) has published a number of studies and discussion papers focused on labor and social welfare issues that will be of interest to anthropologists with an interest in economic research questions. Here, for example, one can find studies of women and work in modern Turkey.

As an unrepentant television addict, I love browsing through Arab Media & Society (http://arabmediasociety.com), published by the Journalism school at the American University in Cairo. What makes this journal interesting is that it focuses not only on traditional media, but also the Arab blogosphere. If you have ever wondered about the role of Turkish soap operas in Arab culture, this is the place to read about it.

I have to admit that I have not actually spent much time studying things Persian, but Encyclopaedia Iranica (www.iranica.com) has been recommended to me by several academics that do. A collaborative work written by experts in their fields, it manages to be accurate and scholarly while still being very user friendly. The website layout facilitates browsing many articles related to a common theme.

The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies (http://www.tau.ac.il/dayancenter/) is part of Tel Aviv University and offers a surprising number of its publications online for free. Most are written in English, although there are a few in Hebrew. A survey of their recent publications reveals a focus on the modern Middle East and political history.

Compared to Arabic and Persian, the Kurdish language and culture is not as widely studied. The Kurdish Academy of Language (http://www.kurdishacademy.org) and Encyclopedia of Kurdistan (www.kurdistanica.com) want to change that. Both have a distinct mission and an undisguised point of view on modern policy issues, but offer some rare documents such as historical travel writing about the region.

Of course, reading nothing but scholarly research is like living off bread and water. It may be effective, but it often fails to capture the flavor of a place. The modern Middle East has sneakers and head scarves, football and folk music, traditions and contradictions. It is every bit as alive as it was when the streets of Babylon and Ur were loud and crowded. Sites such as the Iranian Cultural & Information Center (http://persea.org), Oghnia (www.oghnia.com), and the Turkish Football Federation (www.tff.org) can allow one to access the cuisine, music and even sport of this region. With that in mind, here are a few links that can bring the spice and color of this fascinating region of the world into your living room with a click of the mouse.

Another cold front is moving through the Ohio Valley, bringing with it a meteorological pyrotechnic show and the expectation of a soggy morning commute. With a tulip shaped glass of sweet tea and an internet connection, however, I can still feel for a moment a little bit closer to blue skies suspended on imperial minarets and skyscrapers.

I hope you all have enjoyed reading this inaugural contribution to Popular Anthropology. My plan for future articles is to highlight research from and about the Middle East, using specific studies as a lens to examine the wider patterns of inter-connectivity and interaction throughout the region. That is, to provide not only background knowledge, but also the context to be able to explore how the particular research question is interesting, and why it was asked in the first place.