

What is the Internet that Anthropology may know it and Anthropology, that it may know the Internet?

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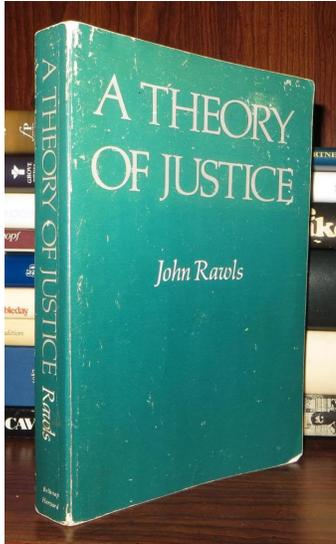
Welcome to the Savage Minds retrospective Panel. I'd like to thank the public for always being there, 24 hours a day, whether any of us want it to be there or not. For those of you new to Savage Minds, I need to tell you that we do have a fairly specific comment policy, which I want to make sure every one understands before we use up all the time this morning with our papers that are too long. Please keep your comments to less than 500 words, and be considerate, stay on topic and assume good will. In order to deal with Spam we require that you first register using a password that includes upper and lower case letters, two symbols from the hidden row on the keyboard and at least two irrational numbers. At that point you will need to be approved by someone else who has previously commented on the panel. Because this process can take a moment, we ask you to fill out a captcha that Kerim will write on this piece of paper here, where we will ask you to identify a smudged quote from Malinowski's diaries, so that we can be sure you are human, unless you are a member of the ontological turn, in which case being non-human will not count against you as long as your comment is inscrutable and begins with the phrase "As Eduardo Viveiros de Castro has skillfully argued." And because we are all really busy, we apologize if we don't get around to approving your comment until tomorrow. Let's get started.

AROUND 1971 A TRULY AMAZING THING was invented. It emerged out of the cold war, and responded to an environment of inflexible calculative bureaucracies. It addressed serious questions concerning how best to survive under the con-

ditions of contemporary global political realities, and what might be the best way of organizing our relations with one another. It was highly technical, but built from simple available parts. It was hard to get it to work, and many people were skeptical that such an ambitious idea could be realized. But it succeeded in a rough and ready way, drawing on a range of innovations from the recent past. It was especially powerful because it allowed people to extend it in new ways, to build on it, and to test out different ideas. As it grew in popularity, generations of people were schooled in its use, even as it changed in its original form and structure. People came to see it as their own, and as an important way of making sense of the world around them. Other competing inventions seemed so utilitarian and corporate by comparison that it seemed to triumph over them by virtue of its extensibility. Eventually it became so common that even those who knew nothing about it seemed to grasp it intuitively and speak easily through it.

I am referring of course, to *The Theory of Justice* by Jown Rawls.

I suspect most anthropologists don't care about Rawls, except when they have to—when for instance they are confronted by the dominance of his ideas in the debates about human rights, secularism, or when a *de facto* Rawlsian conception of welfarism seems to operate either in legal or economic thinking. I don't really care about Rawls either, but I do recognize that he occupies a place in our global intellectual culture that is, strangely, not unlike that of the Internet—a kind ubiquitous slightly noxious sub-



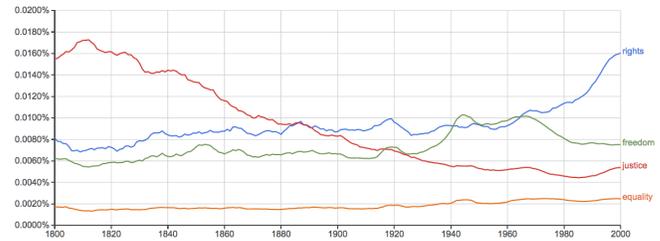
stance which is of immense usefulness, but is often understood imperfectly if at all.

Consider, for instance, what Rawls called “The Original Position.” The Original Position is a monumentally weird invention, and it will forever stand amongst even weirder inventions like the cave, the *cogito*, the social contract, the categorical imperative, the gene and the idea the computers are made of zeros and ones. Which is to say, something that will change our world forever despite not actually existing.

I sort of understand why he created it—Rawls was troubled by certain consequences of utilitarianism—that other weird invention of the last two hundred years which has similarly turned out to be so technically effective. In particular, the idea that something like slavery might be justified if it benefits more people and harms fewer. For those few of us still foolishly committed to reason, this is anathema: slavery *must be wrong*. But for us, this is only an intuition of wrongness. Rawls wanted to make it water-tight.

So he invented the Original Position—What is it?

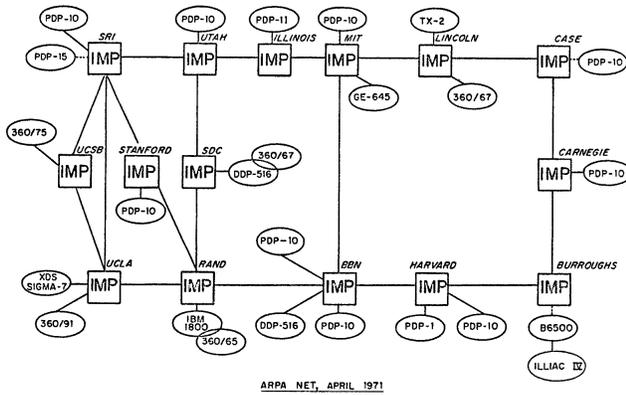
Well I kind of like to think of it as an imaginary meeting of white men wearing thick glasses and skinny ties in an anonymous conference room, not unlike this one, perhaps decorated with bland abstract modernist paintings, somewhere in downtown Ottawa, surrounded by whiteboards filled with ordered lists of basic principles of jus-



tice. These details are irrelevant, though, as Rawls will tell you, because it is an important fact that these guys don’t actually know where or who they are—they famously exist behind a “veil of ignorance” in which they don’t know their place in society, their class position or social status, their genetics, their own abilities or attributes, intelligence or strength, nor do they know what they think is good or what their plan for their own life is, whether they are optimists or pessimists, risk takers or milquetoasts; nor what their own society is like, or even where to get a decent burger in Ottawa. Indeed, they don’t even know what generation they belong to—raising the interesting possibility that they might all be visiting Canada from different temporal dimensions. They don’t find this funny though, because cannot rely on emotion or affect (despite it being a theory of moral sentiments) but only on a highly restrictive form of rationality and they don’t even seem to be human. Nonetheless, they still know how it all works—the principles of law and economics and human psychology for instance, or how society is organized, even though they don’t know where they are in it. But in the end, says Rawls, this meeting in Ottawa is “not to be thought of as a gathering of all actual or possible persons. To conceive of the original position in [this way] is to stretch fantasy too far” (139).

They are gathered there to decide, by weighing the alternatives, on the best of all possible worlds.

What is this fantasy for? Well this is the genius of it: It is an elaborate tool for deciding upon the necessary and sufficient principles for a just society. Not the principles we do have, but the ones we ought to have if everyone could “act with grace and self-command” and achieve “purity of heart.” This unreal situation is valuable



because if we agree on the necessary outcome of this meeting, we can compare what we have today to what these hypothetical creatures ought to have chosen and, if it differs, try to adjust our own society in that direction. It provides a theoretical foundation, but more importantly a kind of “reference implementation” by which proposed legal or economic changes can be tried out and said to be just in a world where justice, just so you know, seems about the second least important thing in existence.

But back to 1971. ARPA.

What I can’t stop thinking about though, is this: what if the original position were real? What if there were a place where people carefully weighed the differences between two principles of justice and a classical utilitarian theory before founding a well ordered society that ought to—no would—govern us? What if they did this, and then they built it, and then it became the Internet? The “Original Position” of the Internet is something that took place amongst just such a meeting of white men in skinny ties. And

it is a meeting that has been repeated in multiple places and times—in fact, meetings to decide what networked technologies will look like happen all the time and are in fact confronted with exactly the criteria that Rawls’ fantasy is meant to explore, namely, “the normal conditions under which human cooperation is both possible and necessary.” (126 sec. 22) Or more precisely: “the circumstances of justice obtain whenever mutually disinterested persons put forward conflicting claims to the division of social advantages under conditions of moderate scarcity.” (12 sec 22)

In the case of networked technologies like the Internet—which is to say, technologies that are collaboratively designed by competing parties to be open and to replicate, channel or supplement “society”—satisfy Rawls’ definition of the original position. Their construction involves mutually disinterested parties—what, for instance, in the language of the Internet’s designers were called “administratively bounded networks” that needed to be “internetted” together; they exist in conditions of moderate scarcity, in particular of shared computing resources, bandwidth and human attention as well as electricity, infrastructure and labor (despite the absurd claims of people to the contrary); and they make conflicting claims to the division of social advantages, which is to say, they are concerned with who will benefit and how from participation in such networked technologies, and how best to ensure equality of position and opportunity (for instance, with respect to intellectual property).

To deal with these constraints, designers propose protocols that are general, universally applicable, public, and ordered in some way— exactly the “formal constraints on the concept of right” that Rawls identified as core to his original position.

This overly burlesque comparison has a point.

I think it is not an accident that the Internet has a similar structure to the Original Position in Rawls, and it is not just because they were both invented in 1971. Rather, it is clear that they both respond, in very different domains, to the same problem, which is, to put it far too crudely, the dominance of a certain utilitarian conception

CERF AND KAHN: PACKET NETWORK INTERCOMMUNICATION

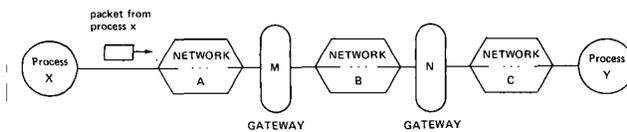


Fig. 2. Three networks interconnected by two GATEWAYS.

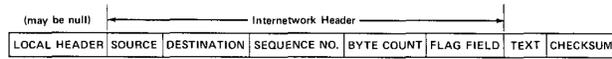


Fig. 3. Internetwork packet format (fields not shown to scale).

of justice which leads to a world where might makes right.

The creators of the Internet, especially those who made it into something universal—and not just a commercial or military creation with particular goals and interests—really did conceive of it this way. It wasn’t just another network, it was an “internetwork” for everyone. It didn’t belong to the government or the military or the corporate world, it belonged to everyone. I am aware that I can’t say this without sounding like I am lionizing the Internet and its designers— but I assure you that’s not what I’m trying to do. Rather, I am trying to characterize its cultural significance.

Which is a way of saying also, that it is my own answer to the question:

What kind of thing is the internet that anthropologists might know it?

At least since Arturo Escobar and Bryan Pfaffenberger first directed anthropological attention to it in the 1990s, there have been a variety of confusions about what kind of object it might be such that it might be known by anthropologists—is it the internet, is it cyberspace, is it “the digital” is it new media, algorithms, infrastructure, etc?

One thing that the Internet is, is a “total social fact”—all things to all people. Sociologists, psychologists, economists, political theorists, journalists, religious experts, security agencies, management and finance professionals, teenagers, trolls, terrorists, murderers, poker players and cats have asked “what is the Internet that we

might know it?”

The last ten years have seen considerable ferment in how we answer this question, and Savage Minds has been both participant and chronicler of these changes. For those of us who were working in this era before 2005, the most common worry we seemed to face was that to know the internet would be a return to “armchair anthropology”—that it was not a real place, that there was nothing culturally authentic about it. It was bound up with the culture wars and post-modernism and cultural studies; guilt by association with things like Mondo 2000, early Wired magazine, John Perry Barlow, and various once fringe things now blithely grouped together as a “California ideology.” This concern implied a very specific assumption about what real anthropology involved—namely, face to face contact, preferably with brown people, in faraway places.

But even by 1999, Michael Fischer offered a compelling corrective in understanding that the internet was more than a new thing, more than itself, and operated in surprising ways. He suggested viewing as a place being “worlded”—a quasi-phenomenological move intended to show how diverse people—lawyers, activists, science fiction writers—were involved in making the Internet into a project. This is an approach continued in a different way by Alex Golub (perhaps also by Thomas Malaby’s work), who has written about the “projects” people take on in their lives, whether it be raiding in WoW or becoming a miner in Porgera, or any other project that is a suitable object for anthropological analysis. It nicely sidesteps the boring discussions of the epistemological or ontological status of the Internet to focus on commonalities across Internet and other fieldsites and projects.

For others the Internet was best known as a *new fieldsite* (Hine, Miller and Slater, Boellstorff) within which pre-existing cultures are refracted in new ways. In part, the projects were figured as Malinowskian challenges in a new place—explicitly experimental and performative in Boellstorff’s version. Knowing the Internet therefore posed a primarily methodological problem: what new kinds of fieldwork were necessary

to get at culture in these new sites. The “virtuality” of cyberspace, online persistent worlds, games and other such spaces of conviviality, competition and consumption have become the focus for many anthropologists simply because of their sheer importance to culture, economy and society generally—and such an approach lends itself to the kinds of familiar comparison and theoretical abstraction in which it is possible for anthropologists to compare the Nuer and the Sepik or the Protestant American and the Turkish Muslim.

For a few, knowing the internet has become a measurement, mapping and mining problem. This tends to be more true of sociologists and comm/media studies people who are living in an extended moment of Durkheimian collective *jouissance*, rediscovering Society over and over again in every twitter feed, facebook timeline, or SnapChat metadata (thank you NSA for making it all possible). But I think for anthropology the more promising work is that which has taken the problem of “the algorithm” to be a way to know the internet: Nick Seaver, Tarleton Gillespie, Natasha Schull, etc.

Knowing the internet has also meant knowing it as a linguistic object—as something that hovers between speech and writing, generates new vernaculars, allows us to see language ideologies in formation, and for some purposes serves as an amazing new corpus. For Johannes Fabian, the capacity to preserve and sustain particular archives has implications for memory and ethnographic observation. The textual affordances of the early internet have given way to newer and more dynamic forms—video and audio, games and social media—which bring the question of the Internet into more specific congress with an anthropology of media [Ginsburg/Larkin perhaps].

Still others anthropologists have decided to know the internet primarily as a set of amazing tools: my emblem for this is Kerim Friedman, who over the course of the last 10 years has profiled all manner of cool tools we use, webhosting problems and solutions, data collecting and data analysis tools, personal productivity stuff, audio, video and social media mashups, and so

on. Trawl through the archives of Savage Minds and just about every innovation with any relevance to anthropology of the last ten years has been given the once-over by Kerim. This is in some ways a very emic approach to the Internet—it’s here, it’s ours, an we might as well learn to inhabit it in the best possible way.

Naturally a central concern of “knowing the Internet” for anthropologists has been seemingly endless push for open access. But what open access points to, if one can get away from the technical discussions and the histrionics, is the public status and circulation of anthropological knowledge and representation. All of us involved in Savage Minds are focused on trying to do more to circulate anthropological knowledge and push for open access. I just want to highlight one way in which the last ten years has been transformative here: In march of 2008, more or less out of the blue, I invited Carole to write something about the protests that were happening in Tibet that year. Carole has since become the beating heart of Savage Minds, and now the number of topics the site keeps focus on daily now far outstrips the time I have in a day to keep up. At the time, I was trying to raise consciousness about the fact that science journalists, or journalists generally, did not cover the bulk of what anthropologists do—or the issues we care the most about. I thought maybe we could affect that by sort of pre-digesting some issues for journalists.

But it’s more than that—it’s not just about a public out there, or some weak sense of communicating to a general public—what Carole and the other authors on the site are doing now changes the very meaning of the *internal* public, the public of anthropologists who pay attention to each other. It radicalizes the idea that we get our research via conferences and departmental colloquia. I’m pretty sure that the elite departments and our senior colleagues remain mostly unaware that this is happening, but it is a major generational shift.

And of course, it’s impossible today to know the Internet other than as a #hashtag. From #Occupy to #ArabSpring to #Ferguson to #BlackLivesMatter, the presence of these collec-

tive representations has now become a key node of tracking culture, meaning, collective action and so on.

Lastly, for many, indeed I think most anthropologists, the Internet is simply not known. It is either too big and messy a thing—like trying to know religion in some abstract sense rather than religions—or way too specific, like trying to know “the human brain” amidst the immense amounts of detailed technical knowledge—or even worse, trying to know something like “number”—the problem the Warren McCulloch of my title faced when he asked “what is a number than man may know it and Man that he may know a number” to which his Quaker mentor at Haverford warned him “Friend, thee will be busy as long as thee lives.”

I for one don’t think the Internet is this big or this mysterious—and more to the point, for me, to know the Internet is to know *the culture of liberalism*—that peculiar and specific culture we inhabit, and which is convinced by virtue of its Big Men like Rawls, of its ability to legislate the general and the universal for everyone. Both political theory and the Internet are peculiar expressions of this culture, and I think it should be the task of anthropology—when it takes the Internet as its object—to make sense of this culture in a way that provincializes it, to be sure, but also opens up a different kind of liberalism—one committed to the essential role of the historical in the constitution of justice; a way of insisting that the Original Position is not in fact weird or hypothetical, but perhaps an all too common an event in need of a much better anthropological and historical analysis.

So let’s return to the original position: to imagine what it would be like if Rawls’ original position were not a fantasy, but a reality that saturates our world with a particular vision of justice, and just an abstract philosophical one, but one that is in the very nerves and muscle of the communicative media we inhabit and resist.

And for those who think my choice of Rawls is arbitrary or boring or wrong or a joke, I have two words for you: net neutrality. Rawls is in the very design principles of the internet, even if

the engineers closest to it don’t necessarily recognize it. It only took a couple of reasonably Rawlsian professors—Timothy Wu and Lawrence Lessig—to identify the deep connection between the so-called end-to-end principle of the design of the Internet, and the particular ordering of values (documented by Internet Engineer David Clark in the early 1980s) for it to become an international political issue that exhibits precisely the questions Rawls was interest in: weighing utilitarianism (classical or modified) against principles of justice that took rights and reason as their foundation. The argument against net neutrality is utilitarian: it benefits the most people most of the time, they argue, through that efficient arbiter, the market; but this offends even moderate liberals who know that markets don’t always do this, and that sometimes markets favor slavery. So the argument FOR net neutrality has to go something like what Rawls imagined, an argument that ultimately concerns justice and the “conditions under which human cooperation is both possible and necessary.”