

Evaluating AnthroCommons and Looking to the Future of Digital Open Access Systems for Professional Conferences

In order to advance the use of digital technologies to promote the creation and dissemination of open content in scholarly disciplines, The Alexandria Archive Institute and ArchaeoCommons have been creating and implementing online conference forums for anthropological and archaeological professional organizations. These initiatives began in the fall of 2004 with the development of AnthroCommons (www.anthrocommons.org), an online forum for the exchange and discussion of conference presentations. AnthroCommons was created to support the 2004 Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) after labor disputes at the conference facility led to the last minute relocation of the meetings.

With the announcement of the move and the subsequent difficulties it caused for meeting participants, AnthroCommons was proposed to the AAA by Michael Ashley, Jeanne Lopiparo, Eric Kansa, and Rosemary Joyce as a way to make the conference accessible and sustainable by providing a forum for the dissemination and discussion of the scholarly program. As a durable, citable, and dynamic resource, AnthroCommons created a way for members to participate in the conference virtually and expanded the audience to anthropologists and the public beyond those who were able to attend the meeting in person. A volunteer effort, all labor, technology, programming, and content development were donated by AAI and ArchaeoCommons in service of this initiative.

The technology and documentation for AnthroCommons was developed in less than a month in response to the organizational crisis. Development focused on ways to salvage the scholarly content of the 2004 meeting and, in the process, to create a whole new resource and communication channel for anthropology. Using free, open-source software tools, we customized a forum tool based on an open source MySQL-PHP database. An easy-to-use, bulletin board format allowed users to: (1) browse and search the schedule and all of the conference abstracts; (2) post full papers and other digital media to their sessions; (3) participate in discussion threads on any topic from the conference; (4) choose from the range of Creative Commons licenses to apply to their posted work. Despite the rapid development required for AnthroCommons, it provided extensive groundwork for future refinements to the structure and technology of online forums, as well as a testing ground for the application and use of such tools. Building on the strong foundation of technology, infrastructure, and lessons learned from AnthroCommons, we have continued to develop and improve these online tools for the annual meetings of the Society for Historical Archaeology and the International Council of Archaeozoology.

The goals of these “virtual conference facilities” are to complement and enhance the exchange of scholarship from conferences by providing access to the broader anthropological community to meeting content and discussion forums. By developing tools for stewardship of ephemeral information and discussions, AnthroCommons and other forums provide structures for documenting authorship and licensing meeting content. They are thus meant to be a safe and voluntary environment for sharing ongoing research and encouraging discussion, collaboration, and commentary. Our broader goals for the creation of virtual conference facilities are to:

- (1) Develop tools for documentation, exchange, and stewardship of the large volume of ephemeral information and discussions generated at conferences
- (2) Enhance scholarly communication by enabling richer discussion and peer evaluation of conference presentations. Forums enables participants to review presentations and engage in discussions, all while circumventing the scheduling constraints of the physical meeting.
- (3) Experiment with open access and open licensing to make it easier to find, reproduce, share, evaluate, critique, and incorporate this research into future scholarly works and educational resources.
- (4) Invite a much broader and more diverse community to explore current anthropological scholarship via the internet. Conference presentations represent a sample of ongoing research programs. Opening access to such presentations can help anthropologists engage with the public and demonstrate the contributions and value of anthropological scholarship.

In November 2005, Jeanne Lopiparo discussed AnthroCommons in the plenary session, "The Health of Scholarly Communication in the Discipline," at the annual meeting of the National Communication Association. AnthroCommons was identified by the NCA as an example of how innovative digital technologies might be utilized to address the publication crisis in academia. Current modes of digital publication in academic disciplines rely on increasingly unsustainable commercial models that do not meet the needs of researchers for the free exchange and discussion of scholarship. They lock down information using for-fee pricing structures that are rapidly outstripping university resources. In alienating the ownership of this information from the scholars that created it, they decrease the accessibility to and discussion of research that are such fundamental benchmarks of scholarly communication.

By creating tools for scholarly interchange that use open, easy-to-use, communication and licensing structures, we hope to reverse this trend of increasing restriction and decreasing accessibility to primary data and research in the social sciences. Conference presentations represent a vast body of "works-in-progress," and this gray literature is the primary means through which the bulk of research is disseminated and discussed before it is published in its final form (often *many* years later, and sometimes not at all). The ethics codes of most professional organizations and funding organizations include guidelines for the rapid and widespread dissemination of research. We are just now beginning to take advantage of new technologies that will facilitate these goals throughout all stages of research.

Because technology development can be overwhelming to non-specialists, we have become beholden to commercial models that often do not meet (and sometimes circumvent) the primary objectives of scholarly communication. But many non-commercial initiatives are building user-friendly tools and frameworks, and social software is becoming more and more pervasive and accessible — from bulletin boards and online course tools, to photo sharing websites, blogs, wikis, etc. By fostering the creation and use of social software tools during the ongoing research process documented at conferences, we hope to contribute to lowering the human and material costs and barriers for these new forms of communication. Realistically, these initiatives are still novel and under development; and they will continue to rely on early adopters and Beta models to move forward. It is our hope that professional organizations will continue to lead the way in strategic planning for the development of technologies that meet the needs of scholarship and education.

AAA Survey

The American Anthropological Association conducted a small survey to learn more about how the AAA membership responded to AnthroCommons. The results of the survey are discussed here: (http://www.aaanet.org/press/an/0905/Lathrop_Bakke.htm). We are also providing a copy of the "raw data" for your review. In our opinion, the survey though offering some useful data, was probably premature. It is difficult to gain a valid assessment of how members would value tools such as AnthroCommons based on this one deployment. AnthroCommons was launched in extraordinary circumstances to support a conference that saw very little participation. Few papers were actually written for this conference (an estimated 10% of conference registrants participated after the controversial move to Atlanta). The site was poorly advertised, and many

members did not even know it existed. Thus, it is very difficult to gauge usage of conference tools by assessing the response to this one very contentious conference.

Nevertheless, the survey offered some interesting results about how members view digital dissemination and open content initiatives. 47% of survey respondents said they would "likely", "very likely", or "definitely" contribute to material for online dissemination. An additional 20% said they are "somewhat likely" to contribute to such online systems. In addition, there is a clear community wide endorsement of the idea of "open content", with 93% of survey respondents valuing open access for at least some anthropological scholarship and 88% responding that AnthroCommons type tools are a good way of providing open access.

Our assessment of this survey and anecdotal communications from various AAA members suggests that services such as AnthroCommons are valued, even if they are slow to gain widespread participation. 62% of the survey respondents found AnthroCommons either "useful", "very useful", or "necessary". In our opinion, these are excellent results for a 1 month volunteer effort to deploy a free, open-source forum. Given the small actual cost of deploying a conference support service such as AnthroCommons, and given that AAA members clearly found it to be a useful service, we see AnthroCommons as a success.

Future Directions:

Obviously, deployment of AnthroCommons and related systems can be improved upon. Encouraging community participation in conference forums such as AnthroCommons requires that they be more tightly integrated in the whole process of conference registration, abstract submittal, paper preparation, and meeting attendance. It would be far easier to attract more use if conference participants and session organizers knew of the service well in advance. Session organizers may use services such as AnthroCommons to collect digital presentations ahead of their session. They may use this service to pre-circulate papers, or to keep their session's presentations on schedule by loading all presentations on one laptop (thereby eliminating delays in setting up projectors) ahead of the meeting. Thus, we see that conference forums can become a cheap and easily implemented accompaniment to professional meetings, and can be more successful if integrated into other aspects of conference organization.