

PUBLIC ANTHROPOLOGY

Reviews

Digital Himalaya and the Collaborative Publishing Experience

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Digital Himalaya, an online repository of ethnographic and scholarly materials focusing on India, Nepal, Bhutan, and the Tibetan Plateau, was partly inspired by an anomaly in anthropological scholarship. Anthropologist and linguist (Yale and Cambridge) Mark Turin describes how in the 1990s he and his colleagues observed that

even though anthropologists [and funders] were becoming ever more concerned about cultural endangerment . . . very few social scientists were working to ensure that anthropological collections from previous generations were maintained, refreshed and made accessible, both to the research community and to the descendants of the people from whom the materials were collected. [Turin 2011a:40]

Turin and his colleagues determined that the answer was to create an outlet that would preserve and make digitally available anthropological materials on the Himalaya so as to enhance the data's social relevance, utility, and collaborative potential.

In so doing, the project navigates ethical dilemmas—the dissemination of potentially sensitive cultural information and the replication of previously published works—that increasingly confront anthropologists as archives move online and our work is made accessible to a much wider audience.

The project began in 2000 when Alan Macfarlane, Sarah Harrison, Sara Shneiderman, and Turin launched Digital Himalaya to expand the reach of the multimedia ethnographic works from the 1930s onward that they had been collecting and to which they had access through university archives and holdings. The website puts into the public domain resources authorized for (re)distribution that otherwise might have been destroyed or relegated to obscurity while at the same time providing an open-source platform for content that can be referenced by the people whose customs, livelihoods, and ancestors are documented. Servers at Yale and Cambridge house the online collection, which received early support from the Anthropologists' Fund for Urgent Anthropological Research, the University of Virginia, Cornell University, and the United States Department of Education.

Digital Himalaya has hosted nearly half a million page visits to date, and it attracts between 150 to 300 visitors per day (Turin 2011a:45). The top five countries from which users hail (in order of frequency) include Nepal, the United States, India, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands. The archival maps are the most often accessed by the website's users, while the journal collections, census information, rare books, ethnographic films, and field notes follow in order of popularity. The website also features news about recent additions, publications that discuss the Digital Himalaya process, and relevant resources. Compared to other websites, however, the interface is somewhat limited. The search function for the site is constrained, and one must often toggle through a long string of links or employ an outside search engine to access specific materials in the collections. Absent, too, are the comment boxes and image-tagging functions that are now common to other online platforms and that would allow users to add relevant information that enriches the archives without the need for intermediaries. The project would need a new grant or endowment to overhaul the interface, but it currently operates with modest donations from website users, scholars, and even the project directors. To offset the costs of maintaining the URL, a multilingual Amazon product search bar is posted on the website that provides a small commission when users make purchases.

Since the project's conception, the core team involved has been highly attentive to the ethics and potential repercussions of disseminating sensitive cultural information. They took precautions to gauge the project's impact early on by sharing a sample of historical documents and films with Himalayan residents before putting the bulk of the information online. To their relief, the people who viewed the materials were delighted to discover, and to have available for their own reference and use, historically rich content about themselves and their ancestors that helped to deepen understandings of their past (Shneiderman 2003; Turin 2011b:456). Now that the materials are online, the project directors receive regular e-mails from website users who write to express thanks, ask for additional resources on particular topics, and volunteer information that enhances the quality

of the associated content. Relatives, for instance, write to share the names and stories of those featured in particular files. Others have pointed out inconsistencies in some of the ethnographic materials, such as the splicing of scenes in a 1962 film by Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf that appears to document coherent events when in fact it juxtaposes divergent cultural practices from distinct locations (Shneiderman 2003). In other instances, the ethnographic films on Digital Himalaya have been used to verify the *longue durée* of practices such as the *gato* ritual among the Gurung that appears to have retained consistency from a 1957 clip to footage shot in 1990.¹



FIGURE 1. *The Carter Holton Film Collection. 1930–1948.* <http://www.digitalhimalaya.com/collections/films/holton/>²



FIGURE 2. *Wanchu Nagas. 1962. Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf* <http://www.digitalhimalaya.com/collections/naga/>

Because of the high volume of people volunteering content and augmenting the information associated with the data, Digital Himalaya has grown from a static portal for the salvaging, archiving, and disseminating of ethnographic collections to a dynamic online platform with some 40GB of archival materials to which people from scholarly backgrounds and “source communities” regularly contribute (Turin 2011a:45). These efforts have transformed

the project into a collaborative digital-publishing endeavor. Archives like Digital Himalaya are now “sites of interaction and energy, connection, and outreach” rather than the musty filing cabinets of old where documents went to die (Turin 2011b:451).

Digital Himalaya follows copyright law by reproducing works that are authorized by their current owners (libraries, publishers, etc.). However, the online dissemination of these materials raises some complicated questions. Authors, for instance, may have released ownership of an article to a journal decades ago with a desire to address a small academic audience. Or they may have donated field notes to an archive with the idea that access would be restricted. Individual scholars who object to having their work widely disseminated have the right to request a retraction or to publish an addendum. Beyond that, Digital Himalaya effectively brings to past academic efforts the same online accessibility and digital permanence to which contemporary scholarship is subject. Although this may prove a point of embarrassment if an author’s stance has changed or if information now exists to discredit earlier works, it is a necessary tradeoff for a public anthropology committed to exchange, engagement, and accountability (McGranahan 2006:255–256).

By making available a range of materials that capture the development of scholarship over time, Digital Himalaya helps to show not only the history of a region and its people but also the inner workings of the ethnographic process, including its lessons and missteps. Its efforts in resource sharing and collaborative publishing serve as a model for future endeavors to keep anthropological materials, from working papers to unedited video clips and field notes, in the public domain.

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NOTES

1. <http://www.digitalhimalaya.com/collections/haimendorf/haimendorffilm02.php>
2. Figures 1 and 2 included as general examples of Digital Himalaya materials available.

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2011b Born Archival: The Ebb and Flow of Digital Documents from the Field. *History and Anthropology* 22(4): 445–460.