

Digital Anthropology

Key text: Miller, D. 2018. Digital Anthropology. In *Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology* (eds) F. Stein, S. Lazar, M. Candea, H. Diemberger, J. Robbins, A. Sanchez and R. Stasch.

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Key Questions

- What does digital anthropology say about anthropological practice itself?
- What does it now mean to be human?
- How should anthropology as a discipline incorporate worlds that were neither preceded nor possible in the past?
- What role does technology play in human lifeways?
- How has technology shaped human relationships?
- What do smartphones, selfies, algorithms, and artificial intelligence mean for humanity?
- Can these technologies help solve detrimental issues such as climate change, health problems etc?

The Rise of Digital Anthropology

- Anthropology of Media fed into and directed the development of digital anthropology.
- Gradual transformation of media into a largely digital form.
- Anthropology of media has shifted in tandem with digital anthropology.
- Similar to Political Anthropology, where we see ‘constant developments that are used to make larger normative and ethical arguments rather than merely observe and account for the consequences of technological change’.
- Academic themes such as: the internet, search engines, the virtual, social media, big data, artificial intelligence, Tinder, the internet of things etc.

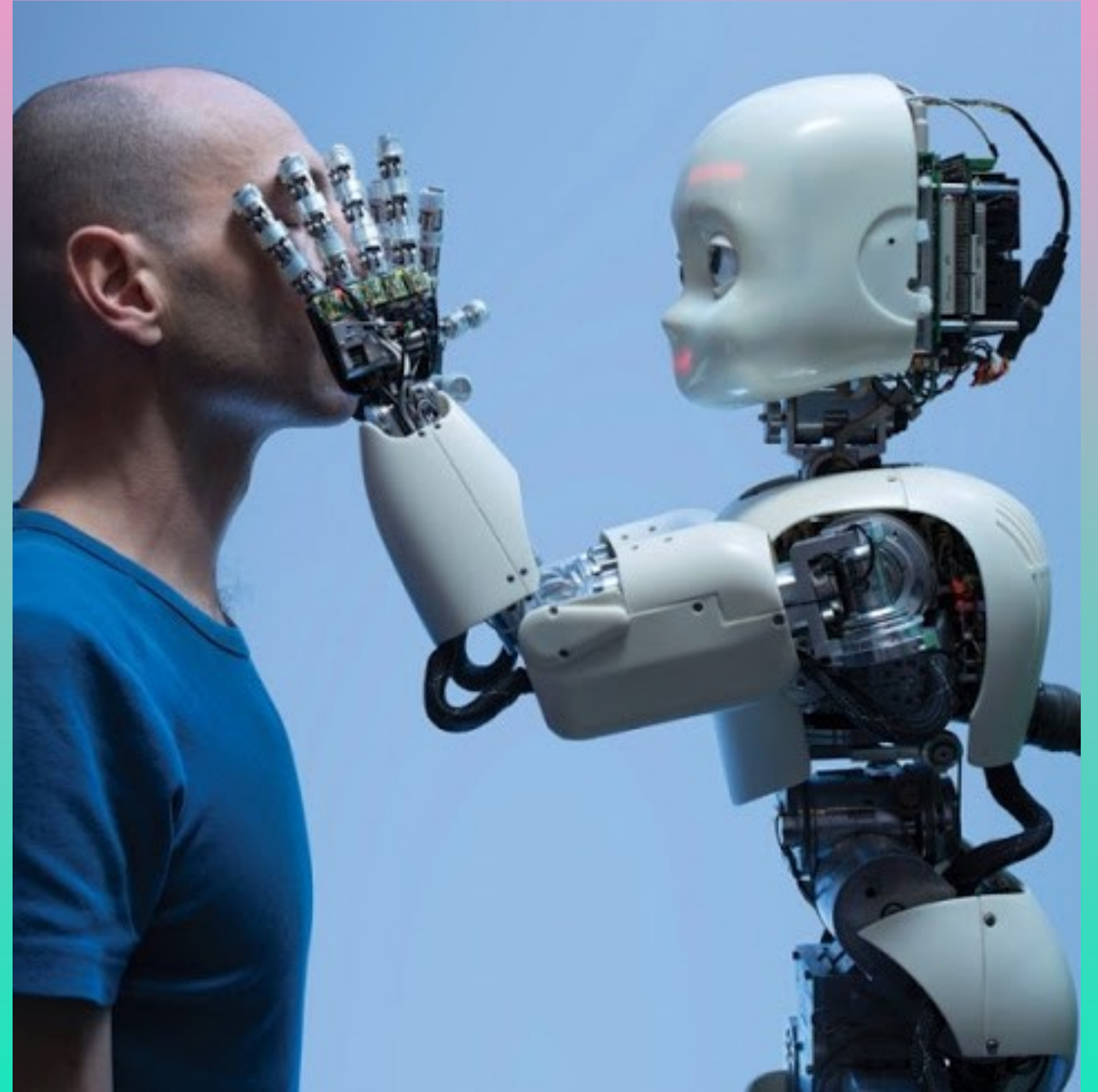
What is the digital?

- There are multiple definitions of the digital.
- ‘The digital’ can be defined as new technologies that are reducible to binary code (Miller and Horst 2012).
- Digital technologies have meant that cultural artefacts have become easier to reproduce and share.



Digital Anthropology

- Digital Anthropology is making an important contribution.
- Anthropology has retained its holistic methodology.
- Digital Anthropology is a key discipline helping to situate new technologies within a much broader/wider social and cultural context.



Ethnography online

- ‘Ethnography can show how digital technologies create the conditions for the commodification of music and other media and the de-commodification of those same media simultaneously’.
- Miller states that ‘The term ‘digital anthropology’ can be used to refer to the consequences of the rise of digital technologies for particular populations, the use of these technologies within anthropological methodology, or the study of specific digital technologies.’

Digital Anthropology and Anthropological practice

- What does digital anthropology say about anthropological practice itself?
- What does it now mean to be human?
- How should anthropology as a discipline incorporate worlds that were neitherprecedented nor possible in the past?

‘Populations’

- Miller uses the word ‘populations’ - all inhabitants of a particular place.
 - The word emerges from late latin *populus* - people
- ‘Formerly material culture studies focused as much upon how things make people as with how people make things - this approach has been translated to digital anthropology’.
- Recommendation: Weiner, A. 1992. *Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Keeping-While-Giving*. University of California Press.

Critical Assessment

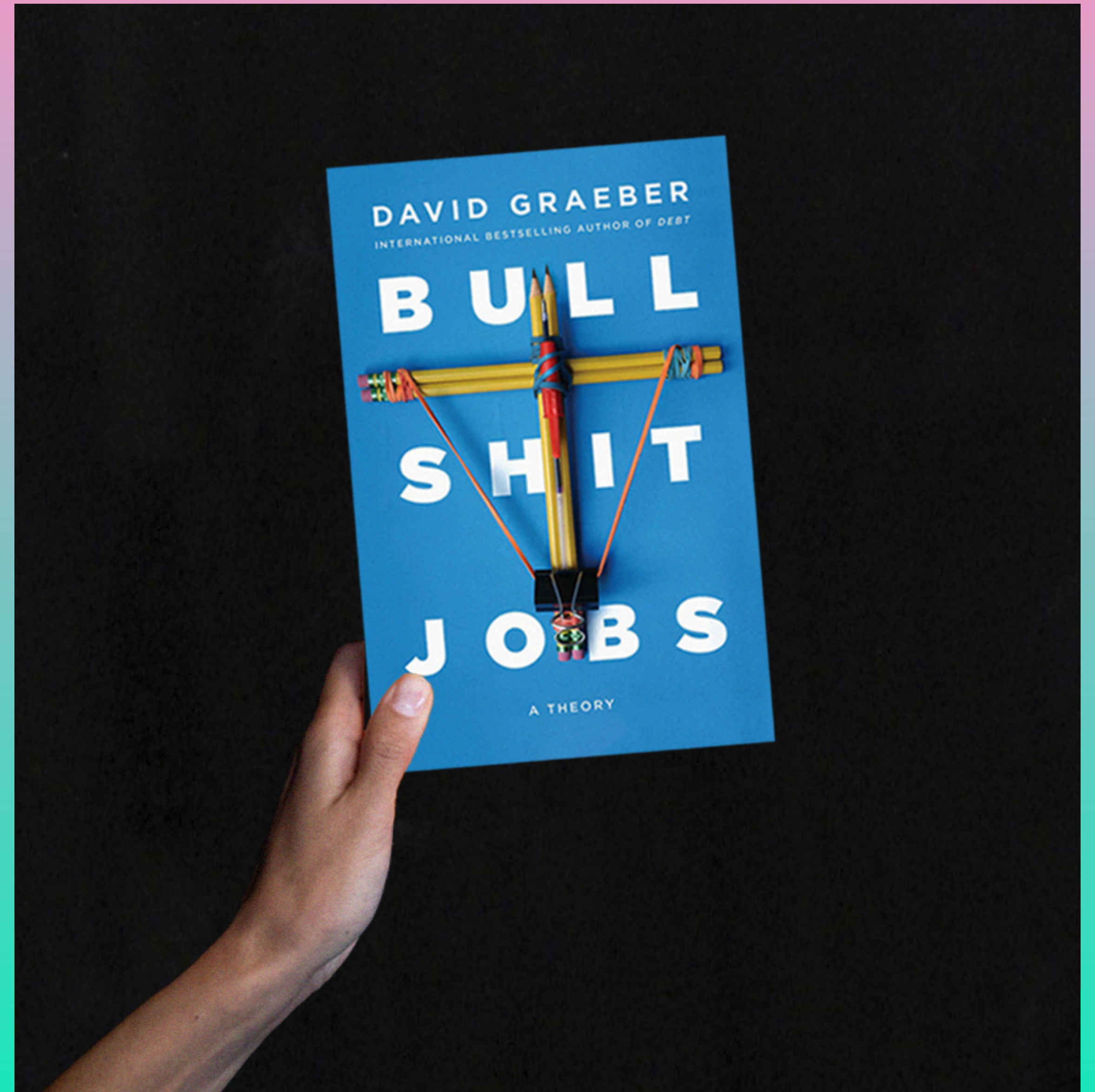
- A critical assessment of digital ethnography is important.
- Other disciplines have embraced ethnography as a means of linking the study of new digital technologies with an assessment of their consequences for populations (Business studies, Marketing etc).
- Digital technologies can enhance anthropologists' involvement in the dissemination of their research results.

Digital Encounters

- The digital produces things that are ‘always encountered in the context of their use and consequences for some particular population, which means they become subject to cultural differentiation’.
- ‘The digital is always approached in context. If biometrics in India seem to provide better access to welfare benefits, or in China to new forms of citizen control, this is because of political choices as to how they will be used. What biometrics as a whole represents is simply the increasing capacities of vast data banks sourced from people that can then be exploited in numerous ways’.

LinkedIn study

- Gershon (2017) examined LinkedIn as a site where workers ‘perform particular appearances and claims in order to obtain work’.
- The example demonstrates how ‘digital platforms can turn neo-liberal political philosophies not just into new forms of work, but also new ways in which we visualise and understand ourselves as individuals as we craft the way we present ourselves to the world within the dictates of this platform’.



Examples of Digital Anthropological Research

- Patricia Lange (2014) explores how young people create material for YouTube.
- Michael Wesch *An Anthropological Introduction to YouTube*.
- Jamie Coates (2017) outlines an anthropological perspective on the phenomenon of images and ideas going 'viral',
- McKay (2016) explores how migrant Filipino workers use new media to retain a sense of Filipino sociality that can mitigate the separation of physical location by creating a more integrated online sphere.

How can Digital Anthropology make a contribution?

- ‘Digital Anthropology should observe and account for the consequences of all these developments upon the everyday lives of ordinary people around the world’.
- Traditional holistic ethnography is relevant - ethnographic methods can be employed to understand how people ‘relate to everything that bears upon their lives’.
- As Miller explains ‘Nobody lives just online, so to understand their involvement with digital technologies we continue to focus on the wider context of their non-digital lives’

Developments in the discourse

- Initially there was interest in the exploration of online communities (Wilson & Peterson 2002).
- Following this, there was a focus on an ethnographic approach to digital media (Coleman 2010).
- Horst & Miller (2012) examined the variety of fields of study.

Reading List

- The Digital and the Human: A Prospectus for Digital Anthropology
 - <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/anthropology/people/academic-and-teaching-staff/daniel-miller/digital-and-human-prospectus-digital-anthropology-1>
- Digital Anthropology
 - <https://www.anthroencyclopedia.com/entry/digital-anthropology>