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THEMED ESSAYS

Scaling Anthropology Through AI: An Entrepreneurial Move

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Abstract

Anthropology has made a defining feature of its work to critique and interpret waves of technological change, most recently social media and digital infrastructures and currently artificial intelligence (AI). Yet, at the same time, it has struggled to harness digital innovation in order to create value for itself. Briefly looking back at the digital turn as a precedent, I suggest that anthropology risks falling into a recurring pattern with AI: Acting as a fundamental insights contributor and perceptive yet peripheral observer of technologies it does not control or commercialize. I argue that AI also offers a unique opportunity. If anthropology embraces its unrecognized and unrealized entrepreneurial mindset – viewed here as a form of cultural production – it can leverage AI to broaden its modes of expression, audiences, and impact. In this essay, I call this "to scale."

Keywords

Artificial intelligence, Scale, Entrepreneurialism, Impact.

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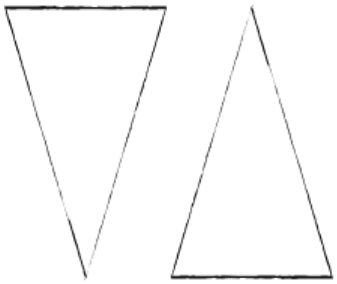

AI, Business Anthropology, and a Repeating Risk

What does it mean to practice business anthropology of, for, and by artificial intelligence (AI)? Matt Artz (2025, 2026) formulates the anthropology *of* AI as "the study of AI as a cultural artifact" and "the work practices that shape and are shaped by AI" (2026: 242); the anthropology *for* AI as applying "anthropological insights to designing and developing AI systems, ensuring they align with human values, needs, and aspirations" (2026: 242); and the anthropology *by* AI, which "leverages AI tools and techniques to enhance traditional anthropological research, expanding the scope and scale of data collection and analysis" (2025: 242). For this collection of themed essays, the editors have turned their focus to expand on these dimensions, examining the gamut from business anthropology to digital business anthropology to AI business anthropology.

In what follows, I examine briefly to what extent the digital anthropological turn and the burgeoning AI anthropological turn in business follow a similar trajectory. I reflect on what the digital turn in anthropology can teach us for this moment of comprehending what AI may mean for business anthropology. Specifically, I reflect on the complicated relationship and near-paradigmatic ostensible distaste that anthropology has with scale – as a spatial,

temporal, and semiotic phenomenon. I suggest that, if anthropologists find a way to overcome or incorporate meaningfully the caveats which come with using AI, the technology poses an unprecedented opportunity to unbound anthropology from its traditional academic domains and to scale it across society through a variety of forms, formats, and products – what I term here "scaling anthropology." This is especially important at a moment when the discipline faces increasing threats from both AI providers unveiling products occupying traditional disciplinary domains, such as Anthropic's interviewer, for example, and from a range of changing policies in anthropology's habitual institutional home, the university.

Thus, my point is that, paradoxically, while anthropologists are poised to make an argument about how they can help AI, they are missing out on how AI and AI-enabled products can help them – and allow the discipline to achieve greater scale and visibility as an interventional field in the world of business and beyond. At a time when the discipline's existential threats are increasing, both of these efforts need to be further championed in parallel. Such a move would enable anthropology to become a field not only of social and cultural interpretation, but of cultural production. I conclude this essay with some suggestions on how embracing anthropology's little acknowledged entrepreneurial spirit (Koycheva 2025) may provide one answer to anthropology's growing AI conundrums in the age of AI.

SCALE: ANTHROPOLOGY'S STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINT

The impulse to examine whether AI deployments "represent a fundamental shift, or not, and whether anthropologists need to revisit foundational concerns regarding organizational culture, consumer behavior, market research, advertising, and design while developing new methodological and ethical frameworks for AI-mediated environments," as called for in this special issue, opens up an important front for both conceptual work and empirical examination across the many domains in which business anthropology has made inroads in the past several decades. Such a call aims to anticipate and envision the inevitable transformations in the field and signposts the trajectory of the work to be done ahead. Yet, to me, the vision far outpaces its requirements and conditions, tethered as they are to the existing paradigm of applying anthropology as it continues to be practiced – that is, paradigmatically embodied

(Csordas 2002; see Roberts 2022 for business context specifically); focused on nuances and thick description (Geertz 1973) and process-oriented; hesitant to assert arguments (Rutherford 2012), normativity-agnostic, and positivism-averse; highly individualistic; and necessarily slow (Cefkin 2016). In other words, our interventions are often artisanal in nature – more art (cf. Wolcott 2005), less mass media. They are slow to produce, necessarily expensive, and not readily comprehendible, pervasively available, or eagerly demanded. Indeed, there is a case to be made about whether business anthropology's strategic positioning should be pursuing ubiquity or rather exclusivity (Koycheva in progress). Given this, there appears to be a lot of work necessary to be done – conceptually, practically, and perhaps even ideologically – in making sure that anthropology begins to operate on a different scale.

What I mean here by scale is not the phenomenon of scale and scaling which anthropology has prolifically and incisively tracked as a key characteristic of globalization, colonialism, neoliberalism, and their effects on societies and contexts far and wide (for instance, Tsing 2005, 2015; Escobar 1995, 2018; see also Ritzer 1983 on "the McDonaldization of Society"). Although echoing partially the preoccupations that gave rise to multi-sited ethnography as part of the method (for instance, Marcus 1995), scale is here meant closer to the ways in which it has been conceptualized and theorized in business literature, even if, in that scholarship, the term itself is highly contested (see Coviello et al. 2024); that is, as a "challenge of how to synchronize […] organizing and growth" (DeSantola and Gulati 2017: 641), as well as "a generative process by which a […] user base increases significantly between two points in time through digital innovation" (Huang et al. 2017: 302). This begs the questions: Today, is anthropology growing, and, given its sustained attention and involvement with digital innovation, is its user base (whether students or clients) increasing? What is the role of digital innovation in this process? The uncomfortable answers in need of confronting are: "no" to the for--er since, in fact, the concern is that it is a "dying discipline" (Santos 2025), and "none" to the latter.

Consider this observation: As of 2025, business anthropologists continue to need to assert the value of anthropology to business, innovation, and emerging technology – and lest this statement ends up ruffling feathers, I hasten to add that one of the latest examples of so doing is by myself and Artz (Artz and Koycheva 2024). This is also a recurrent issue on the pages of the

Journal of Business Anthropology (Vangkilde, Breslin, and Lex 2023, 2024) Such value is not yet self-evident or a business imperative. Having an anthropologist or an ethnographer employed continues to be fairly rare as an operational and human resource requirement in organizations (as opposed to, say, legal, accounting, or, increasingly, data science and AI specialists). Indeed, having an anthropologist employed as an anthropologist (and not as a designer, systems thinker, researcher, user researcher, or any other label) is even rarer. This points uncomfortably to the fact that the value of anthropology to business has not yet scaled to its full potential. Taken alone, this continuous search for scale of business anthropology is not particularly concerning. "Yet" is here a key word, and, in many ways, I remain hopeful and energized about the potential of anthropology to businesses, both in mature organizations and especially in startups (Koycheva 2025; Koycheva in progress). However, when that yet-to-be-reached scale is seen as a precondition for an anthropological influence on AI at the pace and speed comparable to the development and deployment of the technology in society, it becomes a missing requirement.

AI AS ACCELERANT: SPEED, CAPITAL, AND THE SCALE MISMATCH

AI and the portfolio of techniques and infrastructures that underpin and give rise to it are undoubtedly the concept of the hour. From government offices and legislative bodies, startups and corporate innovation arms, university research centers and private R&D labs, all the way to the Vatican, it demands attention and proliferates oft-conflicting definitions, polemical position statements, a flurry of opinions, and an even bigger confusion of what is humanity to do collectively with it – hate it, fear it, embrace it, or simply use it as any other already normalized technology.

Global powers, such as China and the US, appear to be caught in processes of competitive deregulation and financing of AI products, including as a means of geopolitical rivalry. Even on the edge of the maelstrom of the financial-engineering frenzy that we see in these two contexts, which is my admitted vantage point, it is clear that both product shipping and the steroidal capital underpinning it are so fast that it is not be an exaggeration to say that,

by the time I am done developing this essay, another billion will be out the door somewhere, and a number of new agentic features will be rolling out in something. This results in what many anthropologists decry as AI's attendant stereotypical innovation hype (cf. VandenBroek 2022) and the corrosive logic of speculative capital (for instance, Bear 2020; Nuñez 2017). Those are not misguided arguments. Growing evidence suggests that subscription-based AI products incur massive losses for their providers, and a bubble burst is coming (Merchant 2025). Yet, it also results in speed and scale, which poses a challenge for the established anthropological methodological apparatus. It seems that the technology has entered a stage in which it is no longer even SaaS-y in "eating the world" through the speed and scale of its deployment. It is fast *overcoming* the world. As such, AI is not only hyped (LaGrandeur 2024; Floridi 2024) but has already become a hyper object – too distributed in time and space to be localized (Morton 2013).

Anthropology has responded accordingly. The anthropology of AI is proliferating, as evidenced by the gathering pace of contributions (see, for instance, Pink 2025; Koycheva, VandenBroek, and Artz 2026; Demuro and Gurney 2024; Hau and Krause-Jensen 2025). Such work often turns anthropology's characteristically critical gaze onto the failures, hypes, and biases of AI systems, their historical and cultural situatedness and embeddedness. Similarly, anthropologists are promptly beginning to ask questions about how AI technologies can be adapted as part of the methodological repertoire of the discipline (Pink 2025). Recently, Matt Artz, Angela VandenBroek, and I concluded an edited volume on the subject in an editorial forum that surfaced the tensions surrounding the degrees to which AI lives in anthropological thought and practice as an unstable object (Koycheva, Artz, and VandenBroek 2026). In many ways, this aligns both with a major anthropological impetus to put deconstruction at the heart of its intellectual purpose and apparatus of critique and with what Lucy Suchman (2023) has recently cautioned is becoming "the thingness of AI" – "its status as a stable and agential entity" (2023:1).

THE DIGITAL TURN AS PRECEDENT: INTERPRETATION WITHOUT PRODUCTIZATION

Seen from this angle, anthropology appears poised to replicate with AI the intellectual and interventional record it has with digital products and services. As digital technology was proliferating, so did the anthropological literature tracking and unpacking its many manifestations and implications in everyday life. From early ethnographies of cell phones (Horst and Miller 2006) to online selves (Boellstorff 2008), through the careful examinations of online sociality and community making through social media (Miller 2011), tracked selves through wearable devices (Neff and Nafus 2016), algorithmic cultures (Seaver 2022) and platforms (Roitman 2023), anthropology has been as encyclopedic as ever in its efforts to document and theorize.

Adopting digital methods has similarly long been established within the discipline's toolkit and has not been a novelty ever since Christine Hine's (2000) *Virtual Ethnography,* not least spurred on by the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, which forcefully challenged the discipline to innovate or grind to a halt. Anthropology took on that challenge (for instance, Munk and Winthereik 2022; Pedersen 2023; Munk, Olesen, and Jacomy 2022).

Yet, for the plethora of insights we have to offer on digital cultures and infrastructures, we remain their interpreters, never their originators. The question that begs attention here is this: Why are we not productizing them ourselves (Artz 2023; Artz 2025)? We are ethnographers of platforms, but why are we not building and offering platforms ourselves – not in the sense of a digital gathering ground of intellectual allies sharing broader intellectual concerns and a professional vocabulary, such as the widely popular and beloved online platform Allegra Lab, but in the sense of an ecosystem of technologically-enabled and market-oriented elements which allow multiple user groups to build and create value, including monetary, on top of them? We are observers of digital media formats, but we rarely productize them. Consider podcasts: The moment they appear on our collective radar (such as *This Anthro Life*, *Business Anthropology Podcast*, and similar), we also promptly critique them as a new form of anthropological method (Cook 2025). Who consumes anthropological work, in what format, and through what channels, and how anthropology – as a field and an institutional arrangement – benefits from

this in the present age of digital innovation and advanced technologies such as AI should be of collective interest – and effort – here.

The ostensible (and, to me, uncomfortable) paradox of our engagement in both commercial and digital enterprises is this: We deliver the right insights and consult on the strategic nuances that make a difference in organizations, yet the successes are neither explicitly recognized or credited as contingent upon the genius of the anthropological ghosts in these proverbial machines, nor are we later particularly happy with the result (if one is to take seriously the barrage of critique we have for the resulting digital products) – from cell phones to social networks, from platforms to wearable devices. This is not a failure of honest and incisive anthropological work, both in scholarly and in consulting capacity, from within the organization and externally. This is a failure of scaling our epistemic apparatus and in productizing our ethical commitments to the world in ways that have far greater currency than they have now, and that circulate and influence phenomena far more than they do now. It is not a failure of commitment. It is a failure of ownership and power.

When Anthropology Cannot Scale in Business

I will illustrate here with a brief example from my own work, collaborating with a robotics startup in the European sphere during their problem discovery phase and problem validation. The startup founders took to heart the famous dictum attributed to Margaret Mead that "what people say, what people do, and what people say they do are three different things." Since developing this particular kind of hardware was extremely costly and labor-intensive at the time, they wanted to be certain that they were developing the right technological features for real-life problems. So, they proceeded to validate their problem space and product through as many real-life interactions as possible, knowing that labs are poor models for the complexity of lived reality in everyday contexts. Through this process, they were able to uncover extremely valuable surprises in their tests with their target users. One of the key insights was that an imperfect robot, normally a deal breaker for robotic products but a necessity of any learning system, can not only work in a caretaker context, but is even an advantage because it triggers the users to interact more with it. That insight will not surprise anthropologists. Indeed, precisely such "aha!" moments are a hallmark of an ethnography well done, one working through

unexpected paradoxes towards understanding. Sadly, however, the startup reported that this key insight is one of the most undermining points during their fundraising. Investors simply did not believe it and saw it as an excuse and as a tainting of fantastic ideals portrayed by movies and comparable systems' glossy (and unrealistic) PR campaigns. In many ways, the subtle genius of anthropological logic underpinning such product validation, data insights, and interpretation has not scaled and is not understandable to the financial class. Frustrated, one of the founders remarked that, "in its inherent focus on thick data and detail, it [anthropology] dislikes scale by necessity," and told me, with unsparing clarity, "I can imagine that anthropologists are jealously hating everyone going mainstream."

Do we hate being in the mainstream – the very mainstream which we so carefully and paradigmatically study as scholars and help navigate in a consulting capacity? This is an observation that I often return to in my thinking about my practice and scholarship precisely because it offers a kind of uncomfortable impetus to examine what it means to practice as a business anthropologist in a moment increasingly dominated by data science and advanced computing – fields that have very different operational requirements and horizons and, perhaps most crucially, a different relationship with the capitalist logic of speed (for example, Tsing 2015; Ho 2009). Can we begin to imagine a world – and an anthropology – in which the discipline is in the mainstream? What shape or form would it take, and what tradeoffs would we, as practitioners, have to make? More importantly, how would it play out in the current moment in which anthropology finds itself, sandwiched, on one side, by politically-motivated institutional attacks and, on the other, by an ostensibly rival knowledge system?

Embracing Entrepreneurship *as* Anthropology: The Role of GenAI in Scaling the Discipline

One suggestion that I have to offer as a possible answer (among others which I hope that colleagues will offer) is an *anthropology by AI*, extending Artz's (2026) formulation to include not only research methods, as Artz does in his original framing, but also to include the form and formats which anthropology can now take, thanks to the ways in which generative AI (GenAI) specifically

has changed the access, costs, and opportunity to become a cultural producer rather than simply a cultural interpreter.

Recently, I argued in this journal that entrepreneurship and anthropology are very similar in practice (Koycheva 2025), particularly in how both navigate uncertainty, failure, and pivoting. My main objective was to show how these shared characteristics suggest that anthropology can make a substantive contribution to venture creation and entrepreneurial practice, not just study it from the outside. Rather than remaining confined to analyzing entrepreneurship as an economic or social phenomenon, I proposed that anthropological methods and ways of knowing could be integrated into the practice of entrepreneurship itself. By extension, anthropology itself is especially well-positioned and equipped for offering new products and services (the definition of entrepreneurship). Yet, anthropology-founded ventures are few and far between.

There are many possible and plausible explanations as to why that is – from an ethical stance resisting the capitalist logics of the way modern-day entrepreneurship is practiced to the ways in which anthropology's traditional institutional arrangements offer more constraints than enablers in exploring business creation as a form of knowledge generation (Koycheva in progress). Most immediately and more practically, however, are money and skills. Venture creation requires a number of skills that are admittedly difficult for a single person to master, especially on a low budget, as is the case with most ventures, even when digital products are concerned. From creating a business plan and translating it into condensed visually impactful design formats such as decks, to using various design and code-based tools to prototype features and embed in larger digital infrastructures, overcoming that threshold means either having the proverbial "one of each specialisms" entrepreneurial team or to have enough starting capital to pay for external help in creating this crucial for a startup kit of artefacts.

The advent of GenAI products, however, with their ability to generate content across formats, has significantly lowered a number of previous barriers to creating a minimum viable venture on a low budget, alone or in a team of two. Anthropological knowledge and ideas can now be carried away to a variety of publics a lot faster than previously; for example, through the creation of media formats, novel knowledge-disseminating platforms, or even gamification. Such a move would be entrepreneurial in that it would allow

anthropology to productize a lot faster than it has currently done, and which has largely stayed in the realm of offering research services. It would allow anthropology to be visible and present at multiple scales, through various formats, and to a variety of publics simultaneously.

CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have suggested that while anthropology has been quick to critique and interpret successive technological turns – from digital platforms to AI – it has been far less successful at scaling its own epistemic and ethical contributions in ways that match the speed, capital, and reach of these transformations. By revisiting the digital turn as a precedent, I have suggested that anthropology risks repeating a familiar pattern with AI: Remaining an insightful but marginal interpreter of technologies it neither owns nor productizes. At the same time, AI presents an unprecedented opportunity. By embracing an entrepreneurial orientation – understood as a mode of cultural production – anthropology can use AI to expand its formats, publics, and scales of intervention. In doing so, anthropology may move beyond influencing technologies towards owning the technologies and, thus, participate more directly in shaping the infrastructures, products, and imaginaries through which social life is increasingly organized.

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