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Reclaiming Relevance: A New Agenda for Business Anthropology in the Age of AI

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Abstract

Anthropology faces a dual challenge in the age of artificial intelligence (AI): integrating computation while maintaining disciplinary rigor and distinctness, as well as reclaiming public relevance. To situate these challenges, we trace a relevance gap driven by retreat from public storytelling and the rise of AI-enabled mimicry. We argue that business anthropology offers a key for disciplinary adaptation and a blueprint for public impact. Drawing on documented experiments primarily from the context of the United States such as computational scaffolding, agile ethnography, interpretive "data friction," and provenance-tracked AI-ethnographer collaboration, we demonstrate how anthropologists can scale insight while preserving meaning, accountability, and context. We contend that maintaining competency and relevance in increasingly AI-mediated societies requires not only methodological reallocation, but also accessible public storytelling that make anthropological insights legible to non-experts.

Keywords

Public anthropology, Artificial intelligence, Computational ethnography, Narrative, Positionality.

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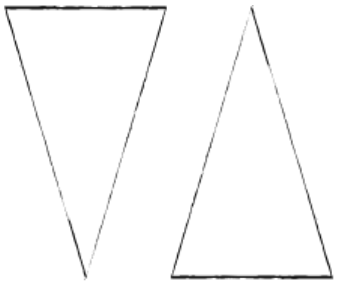

A 2025 infographic on United States labor market trends places anthropology and sociology alongside computer science and physics as majors with notable unemployment rates (Federal Reserve Bank of New York 2025; Visual Capitalist 2025). While such rankings simplify complex career trajectories, the juxtaposition is significant. Software engineers, the architects of the systems thought to automate human labor, appear with anthropologists, the students of technology and culture, on lists of professions framed as most vulnerable to technological change. That both the architects and the students of these systems are viewed as vulnerable to their effects marks a pivot point – most of all for anthropology.

Culture, technology, and organizational life are recurring concerns of American public and private sector discourse. The rise of generative artificial intelligence has sharpened attention to questions of algorithmic bias, workplace automation, and organizational culture, which now circulate between specialist tech publications to mainstream media (Gutiérrez-Caneda, Lindén, and Vázquez-Herrero 2024; Artz 2023). This shifting landscape invites the kind of deep analysis that anthropology is theoretically positioned to provide. Yet, a long tradition of scholarship on management fashion has documented how consultants, gurus, and mass media operate as a "fashion-setting community" that supplies mass audiences with ideas about organizational life

(Abrahamson and Fairchild 1999; Clark 2004; Fincham 1999), while a parallel literature traces how Silicon Valley elites and business journalists have come to occupy similar interpretive roles in shaping public understandings of culture, work, and the future (Tambini 2010; Höllerer, Jancsary, and Meyer 2018; Cheney-Lippold 2025; Brockmann, Drews, and Torpey 2021; Creech and Maddox 2024). Consequently, business leaders are more likely to encounter theories of corporate culture from a tech executive (for instance, Amodei 2024) than from anthropological research.

In this essay, we argue that artificial intelligence (AI) is not merely an object for analysis, but a catalyst forcing a confrontation between longstanding tensions – between rigor and accessibility; data, theory, and public narrative; and business engagement and public advocacy. Changes in the digital and computational infrastructures expose and accelerate the interconnections between business anthropology as practice within organizations and public anthropology realized through engagement with broader societal discourse.

Following Matt Artz's (2023) characterization of the "digital turn" in business anthropology as a cumulative layering of prior shifts in the field rather than a discrete rupture, this essay treats AI as a phase of that turn in which the consequences of digitalization become visible at the level of disciplinary identity and public authority. Artz shows that business anthropologists must integrate digital anthropology and AI-enabled methods into their discourses and practices to remain competent in digitalized organizations and to seize new entrepreneurial opportunities.

Building on this, we argue that these same competencies, while necessary, risk isolation within technical silos unless they are coupled with renewed public storytelling that reconnects digital expertise to anthropology's historic role in shaping public debates about technology, work, and culture. Where Artz situates the digital turn primarily within professional and organizational contexts, we contend that AI simultaneously forces a parallel turn in public anthropology. The same AI infrastructures that enable automated digital ethnography also flood public arenas with synthetic interpretations of culture. Business anthropology's digital competencies, therefore, cannot remain confined to private client work without eroding the discipline's public authority.

Here, it should be noted that our argument draws primarily on Anglo-American business anthropology and the institutional contexts in which it has consolidated: US-based consultancies, the Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference (EPIC), and the discourse environment shaped by US tech industry and business media. We do not claim that the relevance gap we diagnose, or the public-facing remedies we propose, generalize uniformly to other regions. Business anthropology in Europe, Latin America, and Asia operates within different institutional histories, labor markets, and public discourses, and the contours of AI-mediated cultural authority vary accordingly. Where our diagnosis travels, we expect it to do so unevenly, and we offer it here as a starting point for comparative engagement rather than a universal claim.

First, we diagnose the widening relevance gap; that is, the distancing of anthropological expertise from public conversations about work, technology, and society. Second, we show how business anthropology's evolution within industry demonstrates a capacity for methodological and conceptual adaptation, although often out of public view. Third, we argue that business and public anthropology depend on each other, and that AI makes it necessary to expand this work beyond industry and into the public sphere.

THE RELEVANCE GAP: DIAGNOSING ANTHROPOLOGY'S RETREAT FROM PUBLIC DISCOURSE

To understand anthropology's current challenges with AI, we must examine the discipline's shifting relationship with public engagement and industry. Historically, particularly within the United States, anthropology maintained a prominent public presence. Mid-century figures like Margaret Mead (1928; Lutkehaus 2008) and Ruth Benedict (1946) exemplified an ideal where anthropological knowledge actively informed public discourse and policy. Following Franz Boas' (1928) principle that cultural analysis should be legible to broad audiences, these anthropologists leveraged emerging media of their time to shape societal conversations (Borofsky 2000, 2011). However, as the discipline matured methodologically in the late 20th century, it prioritized rigorous academic scholarship, often at the expense of accessible public storytelling (Lamphere 2004; Scheper-Hughes 2009; Pink and Horst 2017; Center for a Public Anthropology 2020).

Parallel to this academic inward turn, a growing number of anthropologists moved into the corporate sector. From the 1990s through the 2010s, practitioners became trusted, behind-the-scenes advisors in management consultancies, user experience teams, and corporate labs (Sunderland and Denny 2007; Morais and Malefyt 2010). This shift is reflected in the 2005 founding of the Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference (EPIC) and a broader integration of digital anthropology into business practices (Artz 2023). However, cementing organizational influence and demonstrating the value of ethnographic methods in business also meant effectively trading public authority for backstage corporate presence. The discipline's most culturally impactful work was frequently hidden behind non-disclosure agreements and proprietary walls (Cefkin 2009; Jordan 2013).

As anthropologists retreated as public storytellers of culture, journalists, Silicon Valley elites, and popularizers took the mantle. Operating without the constraints of peer review or ethnographic rigor, thought leaders like Malcolm Gladwell (2000) and David Brooks (2011) filled the public intellectual role that anthropologists once occupied. Gladwell captured the public imagination with compelling storytelling and easy-to-remember heuristics such as the "Rule of 150" in *The Tipping Point* and the "10,000 Hour Rule" in *Outliers* (Gladwell 2000, 2008). This shift reflected a media landscape where compelling storytelling overshadowed the kind of rigorous, fieldwork-grounded analysis that anthropology had historically provided.

Today, post-COVID economic shifts and the rapid proliferation of generative AI have accelerated this dynamic into anthropology's dual crisis of relevance and methodology (Tacheva, Appedu, and Wright 2025; InformationWeek 2025). Harry Collins and Robert Evans (2007) distinguish two forms of expertise that help clarify the contours of the crisis: Contributory expertise entails generating new knowledge through rigorous inquiry; interactional expertise emerges from speaking fluently about a domain without producing knowledge within it. The interactions between a large language model (LLM) and its training data – the artifacts of human discourse – provides the basis for a possible analogy to interactional expertise. It is tempting to view LLMs as possessing a synthetic form of interactional expertise. However, they are trained on the content created by human discourse rather than the research processes or the tacit, social knowledge that produces them. As a result, LLMs do not approximate interactional expertise itself, but can still

approximate its outputs. They reproduce the surface form of expert analysis – an elaborate mimicry of fluency – without the underlying socialization or inquiry. The practical effect is significant: AI systems generate plausible-sounding cultural analyses whose fluency does not rest on fieldwork, positionality, or accountability (Bélisle-Pipon 2024; Farquhar et al. 2024; Feher and Demeter 2025).

While this distinction matters to anthropologists, plausible-sounding synthesis may be enough to busy business leaders and decision makers, as well as a public who already has little idea of how anthropology works. When anthropologists and human science peers fail to occupy the public stage with accessible narratives, LLMs' scalable expertise mimicry fills the void (Polak and Anshari 2024). Flattened explanations that elide ethics and mistake correlation for causation become normalized, frequently exacerbating tensions between academic standards and organizational pragmatics (Govia 2020; Lorenzini et al. 2024; Welker, Partridge, and Hardin 2011).

Concurrently, the adaptive, rigorous practices developed by business anthropologists to navigate these very technological shifts remain structurally invisible, often locked behind non-disclosure agreements and commercial imperatives (Sapignoli 2021). Anthropology's authority declines not because others speak, but because the discipline rarely demonstrates – regularly and accessibly – how grounded, contributory expertise fundamentally alters the analysis of our AI-mediated present.

Business Anthropology as Laboratory for Adaptation

AI's emergence does not require anthropology to become something new. It requires recognizing that business anthropologists have long operated in contexts demanding rapid adaptation of methods, frameworks, and approaches to meet technological change and organizational constraints. This is not to claim that business anthropology has uniformly or systematically adapted to AI. As Maria Sapignoli (2021) points out, non-disclosure agreements and commercial imperatives significantly constrain ethnographic access and dictate which processes can be rendered publicly legible. Private firms make comprehensive documentation politically and methodologically challenging.

What we can trace, however, are emerging public conversations and experiments published in venues such as EPIC, developed by consultancies, or created by practitioners navigating entrepreneurship. While these experiments do not yet represent a universal standard of practice, they demonstrate critical capacity building. They reveal how business anthropologists are deploying computational fluency, evolving methods, and maintaining interpretive depth under constraints that would be untenable in traditional academic fieldwork.

For instance, Bob Evans (2016) developed Paco, an open mobile research platform designed to scale qualitative research through computational techniques. The core challenge was scaling qualitative studies without surrendering interpretive control or misrepresenting phenomenological nuance. To achieve this, Paco deployed remote instruments that combined surveys, diary prompts, contextual triggers, and sensor logging without requiring programming expertise. In this model, computation is treated purely as infrastructure. Paco predates modern LLMs, but it establishes a durable principle: Machines can handle logistics and scale, while humans retain responsibility for meaning making, scope, and ethics.

Addressing the compression of research timelines, Carrie Yury (2016) documented how BeyondCurious adapted ethnographic research to two-week Agile ethnography sprints. Facing the reality that mobile development moves incredibly fast, researchers needed to participate in Agile sprints without producing shallow insights. They achieved this by decomposing inquiries into "minimum viable findings" – targeted insights embedded in cross-functional rituals that inform immediate product decisions. Rigor in this context is achieved through paced iteration and decision-relevant artifacts, demonstrating a methodological redesign that complements computational scaling by keeping ethnography consequential in fast-moving environments.

Taking a counterintuitive approach to computational acceleration, Anders K. Madsen, Anders K. Munk, and Johan I. Søltoft (2023) deploy machine learning and natural language processing to create "data friction." Rather than using algorithms to simply speed up analysis and risk premature conclusions, they use computational methods to confront held beliefs with emergent data patterns. By applying clustering and topic modeling in structured workshops, algorithms function as "friction machines" guided by anthropological theory. This makes contradictions analytically generative and

models a reflexive human-machine division of labor that resists speed-only outcomes, thereby preserving contributory expertise.

Exploring how to maintain rigor while analyzing massive qualitative inputs, Suzanne Walsh and Jaroslava Pallas-Brink (2025) examine Remesh, an AI-enabled platform that scales group discourse with interpretive accountability. The platform combines open-ended prompts with structured participant voting and preference-inference machine learning methods to estimate resonance across up to 5,000 asynchronous participants. Crucially, ethnographers remain responsible for making analytic claims. The researchers explicitly model socio-technical role boundaries: Engineers interact with algorithms, while researchers interpret patterns, bound claims, and make governance choices – such as omitting voting on sensitive topics. This provides a concrete pattern for AI-assisted work where algorithms provide prioritization signals, but ethnographers provide interpretation and accountability.

Finally, our own software tools and platforms, Ferret and Cotheorist, operationalize provenance and a reflexive AI-human division of labor. A core problem with AI is that it often decouples claims from sources, co-opting human expertise through synthetic authority. Ferret anchored AI-assisted answers in vetted expert datasets and surfaced responses with full citations to preserve evidentiary chains. Building on this, Cotheorist ingests and classifies research, generates candidate insights, and routes them to human editing and review for validation and assembly into shareable collections. By codifying task boundaries – machines handle mechanical ingestion while humans handle context and theory – these tools ensure that outputs remain traceable, distinguishing contributory practice from AI-enabled mimicry.

Collectively, these experiments – separated by years and contexts – demonstrate that computational fluency is achievable without compromising disciplinary principles. They show anthropologists engaging computational methods strategically: Paco uses computation for scaling, Agile ethnography compresses timelines through responsive decomposition, data friction uses algorithms as provocations, and Remesh and Cotheorist use AI for preprocessing and provenance tracking. In each case, machines handle scale and pattern detection, while anthropologists manage situated meaning and ethical judgment.

Crucially, these adaptations require methodological innovation, not just tool adoption. Traditional academic anthropology has often relied on perceived oppositions: treating rigor and speed as mutually exclusive, pitting qualitative depth against quantitative scale, or viewing computational tools as inadequate, if not hostile, to interpretive nuance. Collectively, these experiments challenge those binaries. By creating explicit frameworks that define exactly what tasks require human judgment and what can be computationally scaffolded, anthropologists can engage larger, faster-moving phenomena, scale their inquiries, and track provenance without abandoning interpretive depth. However, what remains unresolved is whether these adaptive capabilities can be scaled beyond proprietary contexts to shape public discourse and impact.

Scaling Anthropological Competency in Public

Contemporary social complexity is simultaneously local and global, digital and material, human and algorithmic. Consumer behavior is shaped by recommendation systems processing billions of interactions, while organizational cultures emerge from hybrid work mediated by software platforms (Keegan and Meijerink 2025). To understand these dynamics competently requires tools and methods capable of engaging with this complexity at scale. As AI-mediated workflows, norms, and algorithmic curation fundamentally and unequally shape society, anthropologists must understand these forces as key elements of cultural environments.

The tools and approaches documented in the previous section demonstrate that integrating technical and cultural expertise is possible. Business anthropologists are demonstrating computational fluency, scaling qualitative inquiries, adapting to accelerated timeframes without sacrificing depth, and maintaining interpretive rigor while leveraging algorithms as collaborative provocations. Yet, because the majority of these adaptations remain largely invisible – fragmented across proprietary corporate work, specialized conferences, and isolated experiments – the gap between the discipline's demonstrated capacity and its public visibility sustains a crisis of legitimacy.

Scaling these capabilities publicly, we assert, is not optional, but necessary, driven by three converging imperatives. First, public discourse shapes

how anthropological work is valued. As we argued in the introduction, the interpretive role that anthropologists once held in public conversations about culture and organizational life is now distributed across consultants, business journalists, and Silicon Valley elites. Their accounts often flatten human complexity into compelling storytelling, trading situated analysis for narrative reach (Höllerer, Jancsary, and Meyer 2018). The consequences are not merely reputational for anthropology. These accounts harden into frameworks that shape real decisions about team structure, culture programs, and human behavior at work. When anthropologists are absent from these conversations, their perspectives lose ground not only in public but inside the very organizations where business anthropologists work. Interpretive work, no matter how sophisticated, will be undervalued as long as it stays confined to proprietary settings.

Second, amid AI's mimicry of expertise, public visibility is what lets anthropology reassert its authority as a source of genuine cultural knowledge. As we argued earlier, AI systems can reproduce the outputs of expert analysis – fluent cultural commentary – without the fieldwork, positionality, or accountability that produce it (Collins and Evans 2007). That mimicry thrives precisely when genuine expertise withdraws from public view. As AI-generated commentary proliferates, audiences, including trained experts, increasingly struggle to distinguish grounded research from synthetic fluency (Casal and Kessler 2023; Fleckenstein et al. 2024; Feher and Demeter 2025). This practical collapse of audiences' ability to distinguish real from mimicked expertise – even as the distinction itself remains conceptually intact – is precisely what places anthropology's authority at stake. The task is not to defend an eroded category, but to supply the diagnostic signal that has gone missing. Public contributions that explicitly demonstrate the difference between automated mimicry and anthropologically-informed interpretation are how the discipline reestablishes its authority as a source of genuine cultural knowledge – not one fluent voice among many.

Third, we believe that AI's societal impacts are fundamentally public concerns. Labor reconfiguration, shifting meaning-making practices, and the algorithmic mediation of identity formation require public anthropological engagement. Treating these as purely business concerns while studying their societal effects from an academic distance means that anthropologists will merely understand transformations they chose not to shape.

The infrastructure for this kind of public anthropological engagement already exists. Initiatives like the *This Anthro Life* podcast (Gamwell 2025) demonstrate how practitioners can build accessible thought leadership while maintaining anthropological standards. Science communication training programs such as *Anthropologists on the Public Stage* (Gamwell et al. 2023; Briody et al. 2023) provide concrete frameworks for translating research into public communication. Together, these initiatives illustrate a principle which we have stressed throughout this essay: Public engagement and disciplinary rigor reinforce rather than undermine one another. Visibility is not a dilution of expertise; it is the condition under which expertise becomes available for the cultural conversations that shape how AI is understood and deployed.

Naturally, public engagement carries real risks that must be managed. Oversimplification pressures exist, and algorithms prioritize emotional, reactive content. Co-optation looms when organizations seek anthropological legitimacy for predetermined conclusions. These risks can be mitigated through clear practices: maintaining provenance standards, explicitly stating uncertainty, avoiding overgeneralization, and modeling the accountability that distinguishes research from speculation. However, the greater risk is inaction. If anthropologists do not engage AI proactively, the discipline risks more permanent marginalization.

Conclusion: Demonstrating Value in an Age of Mimicry

This essay opened with anthropologists and software engineers appearing together on lists of professions most threatened by AI. This convergence clarifies a shared question: What is human expertise when machines can convincingly mimic its outputs? Anthropology's answer lies in methodological innovation in service of cultural understanding – a tradition from Mead's television appearances (Lutkehaus 2008) to Robert Borofsky's (2000, 2011) public anthropology advocacy. The experiments documented in this essay provide visible evidence of how business anthropology is already innovating methods in service of cultural understanding in a changing sociotechnical landscape. But they also reveal a capacity for adaptation that is currently fragmented across hidden corporate contexts and obscured by academic jargon. This frag-

mentation compromises the discipline's impact at the precise moment when it is needed most – when leaders and the general public are making critical decisions using AI-generated insights that are often indistinguishable from actual human knowledge grounded in research.

The uneven integration of AI into society forces the choice between relevance and irrelevance into sharp focus. Choosing relevance requires a fundamental shift away from proprietary silos toward greater collaboration, open-source experimentation, and shared outcomes. The cycle is straightforward: Thoughtful integration of human expertise and AI unlocks new configurations between data, theory, and narrative. Translating these private capabilities into intentional public storytelling rebuilds disciplinary visibility and provides the empirical evidence that distinguishes grounded expertise from plausible-sounding prose. Visibility demonstrates value, and demonstrated value attracts partnerships, funding, and influence. Anthropologists can watch from the sidelines and publish after the fact, or they can step inside as advisors, critics, and storytellers to shape how society understands culture, work, and meaning in an automated age. That choice is a difference between potentially entrenching public irrelevance and claiming intellectual authority in public. The terrain has changed. It is time for anthropologists to chart the path publicly.

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