

CaMP Anthropology

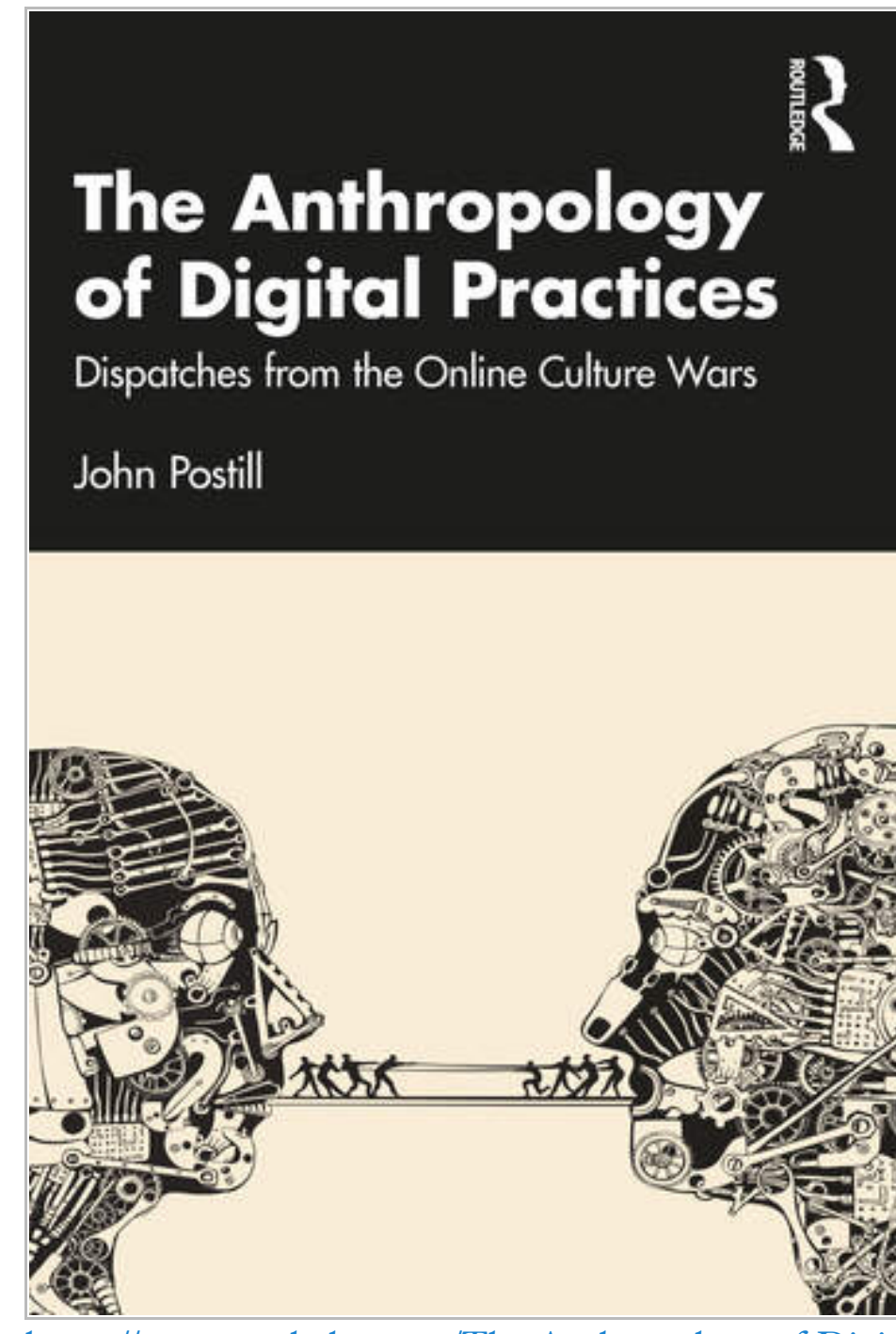


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John Postill on his book, *The Anthropology of Digital Practices*

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Katrien Pype: In this book you not only aim to describe the online culture wars from what might be called an anti-woke perspective. You also want to tackle causality, and especially media effects. You argue that anthropologists eschew this question because it seems too linear. To that end you formulate a plural paradigm whereby one can identify multiple causes for a particular effect. How does a scholar identify the relevant interactions among multiple causes? In other words, how does one know that it is the combination of a particular set of, say, events, texts, voices, and experiences that co-produces worlds? And how can lurking from afar allow us to study these causal constellations?

John Postill: When Routledge asked me to write a media/digital anthropology book I faced a dilemma, as I had two very different ideas in mind. The first idea was a book about the social effects of media practices based on a [previous essay](#) I had written. The second was a study of the online culture wars in the Anglosphere, more precisely of colourful anti-woke figures like Jordan Peterson, Joe Rogan, and Tucker Carlson. A friend of mine, the digital culture scholar Edgardo Gómez Cruz, suggested I combine the two ideas, and that's what I did. In the book I invite media researchers, including media anthropologists, to overcome their aversion to media effects, with the anti-woke world as my case study. So the reader is getting two books for the price of one!

As soon as I started drafting the first meaty chapter (Chapter 5) I realised that I couldn't write only about media practices and their worldmaking effects. I also had to consider the effects of other media things, for instance, media events, dramas, and texts – what I call 'the causal life of things.' So I shifted from a media practice paradigm to a plural (media) paradigm. In Chapter 4, I examine a 2017 protest against Bret Weinstein, an evolutionary biologist accused of racism at Evergreen State College, in Washington. I found that emailing was the most causally significant media practice during the early stages of this 'Turnerian drama', while social media and TV practices had a greater impact later. How did I know this? Because the participants themselves focused on these practices, and this was corroborated by other materials I collected. Reconstructing the protests allowed me to identify the unique sets of media practices, actions, and texts that shaped their evolution at each stage of the social drama.

Studying this American recent event from Australia was not very different, I imagine, from doing social historical research. Rather than a conventional ethnographic study based on participant observation, this book comes from an open-source investigation that relied on online archival materials of recent events. It is still ethnographic, I would argue, because it is driven by participants' own priorities and schemas rather than my own.

Katrien Pype: How did you decide on the four major events you studied in the book, namely Trump's electoral victory, the Covid-19 pandemic, the George Floyd protests, and the war in Ukraine?

John Postill: When I looked back the other day at my book proposal, which I submitted more than two years ago, I was shocked to find that of the five events I said I would cover I ended up covering only one, the just mentioned Evergreen protests (linked to Trump's shock 2016 election). The rest emerged in the process of drafting the book. I decided I needed four or five formative events to tell the short story of the anti-woke resistance. Eventually I dropped the Capitol attack of January 2021 because I didn't have much on it.

Most of my research and writing decisions are intuitive. I don't have any set criteria other than doing whatever feels right based on the materials to hand and whether I think they might shed light on problem X – here, the mediated making of the anti-woke world. In short, I chose those events because they mattered to my research subjects and because I had rich empirical materials on them.

The events are arranged chronologically, but analytically they work best in two discontinuous pairings (Evergreen and Floyd; Covid and Ukraine). Thus, in the anti-woke imaginary the Evergreen protests presaged the Floyd riots, while the schism between Covid conspiracists v consensus presagers was reinforced by the Ukraine war. In other words, those anti-woke who favoured the scientific consensus on the pandemic also favoured the West's consensus on the need to support Ukraine.

Katrien Pype: You write about culture wars. Can you explain where, as a social anthropologist with a training in the UK, where the focus is on the social, you have come to study culture, and what is culture here? One could argue that we are dealing with culturalism – then the question is: is the culture concept itself used by your interlocutors? Do you think the digital produces its own culture(s)?

John Postill: Unlike my previous offline or hybrid research in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Spain, I see this work as a form of parasocial anthropology in that I followed my research subjects online, without interacting with them. That said, I was keenly interested in the anti-woke social field and how leading anti-woke related to one another as well as to their fans and foes, so the social is still very much in the mix.

In the book I don't go into whether these are *actually* wars about culture. My focus is rather on leading culture warriors – I use this as a folk notion – and three of the key issues (racism, Covid and Ukraine) they have fought over in recent years. I haven't tracked the use of the term culture by my research subjects but if someone did, they would probably find it in the ubiquitous term *cancel culture* as well as in connection to their perceived need to protect Western culture/civilisation from so-called woke multiculturalism. In the book I make the point that the culture wars are language wars (over preferred pronouns, hate speech, the word woman, and so on) but I don't relate this to a broader discussion about culture or culturalism. More research needed!

Does the digital realm produce its own culture(s)? Well, in the anti-woke case, digital practices like tweeting, YouTube, or podcasting, alongside other digital things, certainly helped to create an anti-woke subculture led by prominent personalities like Peterson and company. But we can never assume digital purity – the analogical is always present, too – nor should we neglect older media like radio or television rooted in the pre-digital age.

Katrien Pype: You regularly mention that influential voices do not remain within an online filter bubble, but that their texts/opinions/theories circulate 'right across the hybrid media system' (p. 69). This leads to two interrelated sets of sub-questions: (a) How can we see the boundaries between the woke and anti-woke movements online? What are these boundaries? What kind of boundary making is performed? (b) Is this because they are constantly looking for confrontations (and thus transgressing the boundaries)? And/or are these people constantly associating online (à la Latour) with their opponents?

John Postill: Content creators are world creators. I didn't look at boundary maintenance, but the key strategy seems to be mutual avoidance. It is rare for social justice advocates (aka 'woke') and their enemies to interact in public. Instead, they both engage with *content*, especially videos or texts in which their foes appear to embarrass themselves. There are no clear boundaries, but in the culture wars most commentators fall into one or another camp. It is not hard to tell which camp because the images and tropes are so familiar by now. In this sense, they each inhabit their own bubble, yet these bubbles rely for their maintenance on a regular supply of enemy content.

The key point is that we all live in what Andrew Chadwick calls hybrid media systems – even culture warriors whose main outlets are, say, podcasting and Twitter (aka X). By this term, Chadwick means systems in with old and new media interact in complex, non-teological ways. To reiterate, we can't disregard radio, television, or printed books. Indeed, some of the most formative moments in the anti-woke collective memory were precisely rare public clashes on television with woke figures, for instance, Jordan Peterson's [famous interview](#) with Cathy Newman on Britain's Channel 4 which became the subject of countless memes mocking the journalist.

Katrien Pype: You describe how the online wars can lead to meltdowns and to forced reorientations in careers, and other symptoms of cancel culture. What is your own positionality related to this split? Obviously, as your research consisted mostly of remote ethnography and lurking ethnography, your interlocutors didn't force you to take a stance, as often ethnographers who are and is there any risk of this book being dragged into the conflict?

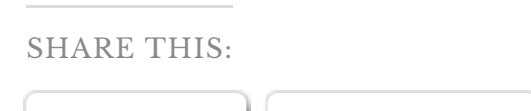
John Postill: I hope most readers will position me as a serious scholar with a keen interest in the anti-woke scene who is trying to convey this enthusiasm in writing while sticking to the evidence. I also hope they will see me as someone who wants to further the ethnographic study of causality.

Of course, authors have no control over what people make of their books. There is the chance that someone could try to drag this book into the culture wars – and me with it. That would be unfortunate, as I have no desire to become a culture warrior. Besides, I wouldn't be any good at it. I may grumble about neoliberal academia (don't we all), but I'm still happy to be a scholar.

Acknowledgements

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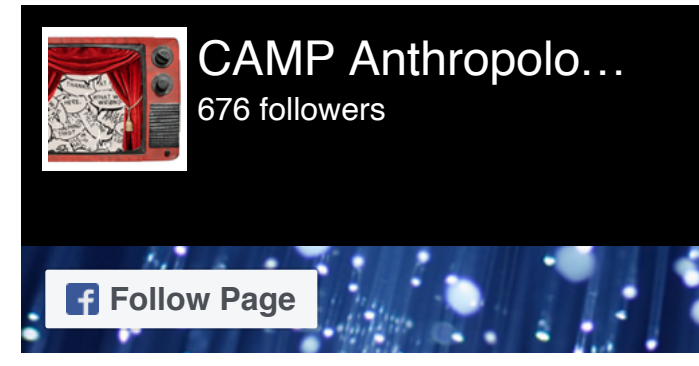
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