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Office culture

By Gillian Tett

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“So how do you feel about e-mail?” asks Simon Roberts, a social anthropologist. “How has it changed your workload?” This is not what social anthropologists are usually expected to ask: they observe courtship rituals, try to interpret ancient chants, analyse gift-giving or tribal cosmology. Simon Roberts, however, is searching for meanings in the daily life of Peter Quest, a senior auditor, who works for the global accountants PricewaterhouseCoopers, in a featureless tower block in central London. Quest, who has spent 32 years at the firm, manifests unease. “I call my e-mails the triffids,” he says, referring to the killer plants in John Wyndham’s 1950s novel. “You can spend all day killing them, then you turn your back for a second and those red things, those triffids, have taken over your screen again! It eats up your day. When I started my career we used to spend lots of time talking to clients and colleagues. Now it’s harder.”

Roberts is patient. “But I have noticed that people here don’t seem to classify e-mail as ‘real’ work. They sit at their desk doing e-mails and then say, ‘Right, now let’s do some work’ - but e-mail is taking up work time. Perhaps that is the problem?”

Quest looks surprised: he hadn’t thought about how he thought about e-mail before. Indeed, like any long-time resident in a secure habitat, he hadn’t reflected extensively on his daily habits. That is why PwC has taken the unusual - and commendably imaginative - step of bringing in an anthropologist, in an effort to address the issue of workplace culture. “Everyone at an accountancy firm tends to be the same kind of person,” says Quest. “That is why it’s useful getting an outsider view.”

PwC is not alone. Practitioners of social anthropology - the branch of social science dedicated to the study of human culture - have traditionally flocked to exotic spots: examining the sexual mores of Polynesian islanders; studying disappearing tribal cultures in the Amazon jungle; wandering with Nuer herders in Sudan. But in the past few years, some have headed off to places such as accountancy firms and technology companies, partly because there are fewer unspoilt “native” cultures left to study. But the shift also reflects the growing complexity of public and private sector workplaces and the realisation by companies and governments that they must operate in a global environment. In America, anthropologists have been hired by technology groups including Intel, Microsoft, Apple and Xerox. In the UK, the “people watchers” can be found not just pacing the corridors of blue-chip companies, but also the Ministry of Defence, Immigration Services, National Health Service and Foreign Office, as well as non-governmental aid agencies.

But some academics are uneasy about the trend. Is it valid for anthropologists to use their

skills to serve giant corporations and governments? And can a discipline better known for examining the culture of exotic tribes really have anything relevant to say about the modern world of companies such as PwC?

Defining what anthropology really is has never been easy: I received my PhD in anthropology 10 years ago, and for years I struggled to explain exactly what I had been up to. “It’s the study of other cultures - it’s telling people about other people,” was my stock answer. Adding to the difficulty is the way this practice of analysing other people has turned into a moral minefield.

That wasn’t the case when anthropology first emerged as a separate discipline. In the latter part of the Victorian era, intellectual life was convulsed by Charles Darwin’s theories of evolution. And this scientific theory - coupled with the might of the British Empire - gave the first generation of anthropologists a supreme moral confidence. Specifically, they were primarily concerned with collecting information about “natives” around the world, in order to rank them on an evolutionary scale of progress. British culture was naturally considered the end point on this scale and the research was based on the accounts of missionaries, travellers and colonial officers. Indeed, when James Frazer - the leading light of Victorian anthropology - was asked whether he had actually visited the “savages” he loved to analyse, he is said to have retorted: “Heaven forbid!”

But in the 20th century, western anthropology rejected this evolutionist approach. One reason for the shift was that anthropologists started to actually live with the “savages” they studied. As a result, many decided that it was wrong to assume that a “primitive” tribe was always morally and culturally inferior to western culture. Instead, the argument went, each society had its own internal balance - and beauty. It was up to the anthropologist, through first-hand research, to analyse all the interlinked parts of a culture.

This approach set the tone for anthropology in subsequent decades. When I started my PhD at Cambridge in the late 1980s, I decided to study how Tajikistan’s ethnic and religious identity had survived under Soviet rule. I dispatched myself to a tiny, mountainous Tajik village and spent a year taking part in everyday life (a cycle of cooking, cleaning, baby-sitting and goat-herding, punctuated by the odd wedding ritual or communist parade). It was utterly fascinating, but as I scurried around “my” village in 1990, filling dirty notebooks with endless observations, I was sometimes troubled by doubts, which reflected the bigger tensions stalking the discipline of anthropology.

In the early decades of the 20th century, anthropologists had approached their subjects like scientists peering down a microscope: they assumed that other cultures were neatly bound entities and that the objects of their study wouldn’t try to answer back. As the 20th century wore on, these concepts looked increasingly outdated. Globalisation was bringing radio, chewing gum and disease to the most remote people (in my case, Tajik villagers were watching Brazilian soap opera on Russian TV). Some of the people being studied were reading the research written about them, and that created an interaction and moral dilemma that had never troubled the Victorians. By the 1980s, some developing countries

were curbing research visas, on the ground that anthropology was a patronising legacy of colonial imperialism.

I eventually overcame my qualms and completed my PhD, and have tried to incorporate what I learnt about “people watching” into financial journalism. Other anthropologists reacted differently. Some have become so obsessed with the moral interaction between the “observer” and “observed” that their research seems more akin to introspective travel writing. Others have tried to give the discipline a harder scientific edge by moving into realms similar to psychology or linguistics. And a few seem to commit intellectual suicide, by writing essays that essentially declare there is little moral justification to studying other “cultures” at all.

But many anthropologists are turning their gaze to western society instead. For the real value of anthropology lies not in its ability to gather data, but in its ability to look at everyday life with fresh, neutral eyes and to spot cultural patterns. The insights produced by that process in western cultures can be as interesting as any exotic jungle-tribe study.

Simon Roberts, the anthropologist at PwC, did his PhD in the 1990s at Edinburgh University, and decided to work in the Indian city of Varanasi, a sacred Hindu site. An earlier generation of anthropologist would have responded to the location by focusing on Hindu cremation rituals, but Roberts had other ideas - he investigated the impact of satellite TV. “Almost overnight, Indian families had gone from having two TV channels to having dozens, from all over the world. I wanted to know how that affected households and how they looked on the world.”

For a year, Roberts watched Indian families watch TV. When he returned to the UK and completed his doctorate, he discovered his experience was in demand. The BBC commissioned a research project, and other work soon followed, which led him to set up his consultancy, Ideas Bazaar. By anthropology standards, this was a controversial move. As a species, British academics are often wary of the world of commerce, and guilty historical memories have made anthropologists particularly wary of working for the government. Back in the time of the empire, colonial administrators tried to use anthropologists to work out how to control the natives - a practice that most anthropologists later came to see as a shameful betrayal of their academic endeavour.

Roberts vehemently denies that he is doing anything wrong by offering his insights elsewhere. “As a discipline, anthropology suffers from being far too introspective... it has to get involved in the outside world if it is to have an impact.” His consultancy employs several anthropologists, who have worked in sectors ranging from the media to mental health services in the NHS.

The study at PwC emerged because senior managers realised that staff felt overwhelmed by the volume of mundane bureaucratic tasks. They suspected the problem was partly due to cost cutting and moving too much back-office work to the front office. However, in a company as large as PwC, it was hard for managers at the top to understand grassroots working practices. So they called in Roberts. “Studying PwC is like looking at a town -

you try to see how the bits all interact, and you are looking for patterns,” he says. “What we try to do is describe what is happening, but we don’t present solutions. We let the company decide that.”

The biggest boost to applied anthropology in the corporate world has come from a surprising source - US technology companies. At first glance, that might seem counter-intuitive: modern technology often appears to transcend cultural barriers with ease - the internet, for example, can be found in homes from Japan to Jordan to Java. Yet that very universality has created a new emphasis on cultural differences, and some companies have realised they need to adjust their western mindset if they want to reach customers or clients. “Many companies assume that if they want to have a global website, say, all they have to do is translate it into different languages,” explains Martin Ortlieb, an anthropologist who now works at a global software group. “But that isn’t true - what works in German can’t just be translated into Japanese with the same effect.”

Intel, the US technology giant, is a case in point. Before the mid-1990s its designers operated with a distinctly American view. “People here used to talk about ‘the US’ and ‘the rest of the world’,” laughs Ken Anderson, an anthropologist at Intel. In 1996, the company created a “People and Practices” group of researchers, such as Anderson, who spend their time trying to understand the cultural context in which technology is used around the globe. The timing of this move was no accident: in the late 1990s, the sector was flush with cash to spend on non-core activities. Despite the tech bubble bursting, Intel has expanded its team of anthropologists and other large technology companies have followed its lead. This suggests the research is proving useful. “I’m not sure that people at Intel always understand what we do... but they have come to understand that we have an intimate relationship with customers that can translate into value for the company,” says Anderson.

Intel anthropologists spend much of their time “out in the field”, living at close quarters in households around the world to analyse the way they use technology. Perhaps the most eye-catching project has been a three-year study of how technology is used by Asia’s fast-growing middle class. The anthropologists found Chinese families who take their mobile phones to temples to be blessed or burn paper cell-phones in funeral rituals, and Muslim devotees who use the GPS on their phone to locate Mecca for prayers. “In America, people might use their cell-phone to get stock information, but we now realise that people elsewhere have other priorities,” says Intel spokesman Kevin Teixeira.

Most anthropology academics expect a greater focus on modern, western societies in the future. Many also perceive the growth of “applied anthropology” as inevitable. In Britain, for example, the government is calling on universities to explain how they are preparing PhD students for “real” jobs - and making an actual contribution to society. “In the past, people would think that academic research was a valid pursuit in itself... but in the current climate that is not always enough,” says David Mills of the University of Birmingham. In response, Mills and other anthropologists conducted a study into what those with anthropology doctorates actually end up doing, and they found that less than half were in academic careers. The others were working in private sector jobs such as

consultancies or the public and non-governmental aid sector, particularly in immigration, health and development.

Anne Kirah, an effervescent American with a neat elfin face, defines the trend. She started her career as an anthropologist in a seemingly classic manner, working with Tibetan families and then refugees in Norway. However, she was later hired by Boeing to study passenger behaviour on flights, and is now the senior design anthropologist at Microsoft, roaming the world to see how families use technology such as Windows. "I am like a trend-hunter. I go into people's homes and watch them from dawn to dusk to understand patterns," says Kirah. "I think of myself as an advocate for the consumer, helping to get products they want designed."

It is not always a particularly glamorous occupation. On a drizzly Friday afternoon a few weeks ago, for example, Kirah could be found in the sitting room of a suburban family home in Chislehurst, Kent. In one corner of this room stood a bubbly middle-aged woman called Brenda, who was busy doing her family's ironing while singing along to Whitney Houston. Behind her, Ken, her retired husband, was vacuuming the house's acres of pastel carpet with meticulous care. Kirah, meanwhile, was casually sitting and chatting in the corner, in an effort to understand what makes the world of Brenda and Ken tick.

"So, that is quite a routine you have going there with the ironing - do you always do it that way?" asks Kirah. Carefully, Brenda runs through the mundane minutiae of her daily life: how her three sons like her to iron their T-shirts and tracksuits, but hate it when she gets them mixed up - so she has created a labelling system to tell the identical, perfectly pressed T-shirts apart.

Kirah does not ask much about technology per se - let alone about how people such as Brenda and Ken might use computers. But that is the whole point - and part of the defining nature of anthropology. A normal marketing person might approach a family with a barrage of highly directed questions about computers. But that way, Kirah argues, they are likely to just get the answers they expect to hear - and will only offer the consumers products that the software designers have already created. The anthropologist starts by observing everyday life, with all its odd little patterns, and then tries to work out how computers might eventually fit into that. Microsoft's hope is that this will inspire entirely new applications for technology.

In the case of Brenda and Ken, for example, Kirah concludes that these are people who are highly cost-conscious, very well organised, with a strong sense of community and family. At the moment, they don't use computers or e-mail much. Indeed, they seem rather scared of it. But Kirah is convinced that Brenda and Ken might potentially be very interested in products such as instant messaging to keep in touch with their friends and family when they go travelling. Kirah also notes the fact that the most computer-literate person in their family is the grandmother - contrary to the usual stereotypes - partly because she has more time to spare.

”One of the things we need to let people [at Microsoft] know is that there is life after 30,” chuckles Kirah after the meeting. “Most product designers are young - in their twenties, say - and so they don’t always think about how technology might be used by older people or children. We have to look much more at that.”

It is crucial, Kirah believes, to understand how technology is being used inside family groups as tools to assert power, negotiate relationships, mark rites of passage or in social bonding. “These days you get kids who take their mobile phones to bed like we used to take our teddy bears,” observes Kirah. “Then you get parents who use top-up mobile phones as a negotiating tool with their children... or people who use instant messaging as a form of gift exchange.”

This has practical applications. After Kirah analysed the way people send each other so-called “emoticons” - images that express emotion - via e-mail as a type of “gift exchange”, Microsoft came up with the idea of creating images that winked and blew kisses. “That came out of some of the work that Anne is doing,” says Neil Holloway, chief operating officer for Microsoft in Europe. “This is all about trying to understand what consumers want. Product developers are like artists - they create things. But then we need to go out into the community and see how people might actually use things as well... to personalise the technology.”

But does this mean that anthropologists are simply helping to exploit consumers? After all, from a purist academic perspective, furthering the interests of a global corporation such as Microsoft or Intel might not seem so morally different to helping support the British Empire. And, even now, some academics are wary about anthropologists helping companies. “When I was at grad school my supervisor did not want me to do anything applied - that was not considered the right track,” admits Anderson, the anthropologist at Intel. Yet Anderson, for his part, insists that he remains comfortable with his work. “The key point to realise is that a consumer can always say no to anything that a corporation comes up with, so what we are doing is not like colonialism.”

Kirah echoes this. “Yes, there have been periods in history when anthropologists have been abused by governments... but as long as I believe that I am helping the voice of the consumer to be heard, I am happy to do my job at Microsoft.”