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Varieties of openness and types of digital anthropology

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COMMENT

Varieties of openness and types of digital anthropology

Avoiding confusion in discussing Danny Miller

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<http://www.dur.ac.uk/anthropologyjournal/vol18/iss2/zeitlyn-lyon2012.pdf>

We find Danny Miller's recent article in *Hau* interesting and provocative (as ever in Miller's work) but it confuses several issues which are best considered separately. Miller advocates a model of openness in publication which sees a move away from commercial, profit driven organisations being in control of academic publishing. He argues that openness should not mean an abandonment of the peer review process. The issue of open publication is, however, far from simple. The ideal model espoused by Miller and roundly endorsed by most of the commentators to his discussion piece is one with which, in principle we suspect, few academics would care to disagree. Who would not welcome a world in which rigorously vetted, credible knowledge was made freely available to everyone? There are however real constraints on the model proposed by Miller, not least of which is the fact that open publication means a number of different things and Miller only touches on a small part of the problem. Open publication can indeed refer to publications which are free from charge to the reader at the point of use. It might also refer to publication which is free of peer review. This is excluded by Miller as undesirable. Open may also refer to the status of

documents for re-use. Miller's paper also raises the issue of language hegemony in which large parts of the world are excluded from the highest ranked academic journals because they are not able to write in English to a sufficiently high standard. Online publication, while not automatically 'open' and certainly not necessarily free at the point of use, is offered as an important part of the solution to the problem of the evils of closed access, commercially driven publishing interests.

Open Publication can mean any of the following. Publication which is

- Free of money / subscription at point of use
- Free of peer review
- Free of editorial input/intervention
- Free for reuse – licenses and copyright
- Freely available online

Often suggested or criticised in combination, for clarity the topics are best discussed separately. In the following we shall briefly summarise the key issues under each heading, then add further comments on extraneous topics (language hegemony, open software and digital anthropology) which Miller and his commentators added to the discussion.

Commerce

Publishing has costs – maintaining websites, or old fashioned printing, maintaining lists of subscribers even if they are not paying subscribers, all takes time so needs people rich enough to be able to volunteer if they are not to be paid. Someone (often some institution) has to pay electricity bills and maintain the hardware.

There are real costs associated with academic publishing. Maintaining websites or old fashioned printing services are not cost free. Maintaining lists of subscribers costs someone's time even if they are not paying subscribers. Copy editing and proof reading are

often unacknowledged, but are an important part of the process of silently and invisibly helping readers. We have been associated with a number of big publishers over the years and the difference between 'full service' publishers and the 'DIY' model is clear. The *Anthropological Index Online (AIO)* operates on a shareware model of publication. We receive funding directly from our heavy institutional users which subsidises the costs associated with indexing of the journals. Much of the website development and maintenance is done by our colleague, Janet Bagg, at the University of Kent. The vast majority of her time is volunteered. As the former and current Honorary Editors of the AIO, DZ and SL receive no subsidy for their involvement in the project, yet, the role incurs costs especially in time. As the Editor in Chief of the *Durham Anthropology Journal*, SL had either to do all the copy editing, proof reading and web rendering himself or persuade unpaid postgraduate students that this was an important training opportunity which would look good on their CV. Even when he was able to find suitably qualified postgraduate students there was always a considerable amount of nuts and bolts training required. Earlier, when SL was a postgraduate student at the University of Kent working with DZ on a web based dissemination project, he received such training and provided a mix of voluntary and paid service to prepare content for the project websites. When these instances are compared with SL's experiences with *History and Anthropology*, a Routledge published journal, it is clear that there is a very different level of service provided. Routledge, and other major publishers, charge what appear at first to be staggering sums of money for institutional journal subscriptions. When broken down by individual user, these sums are not so extraordinarily high, but that is somewhat irrelevant. The real issue is about the costs of publishing and the amounts of money generated. Elsevier, Taylor and Francis, Wiley-Blackwell and others do not make 'obscene' profits from Social Sciences and Arts and Humanities publishing. The real profits seem to come from the hard sciences where the economics seem to be quite different. There seem to be different rules based on the amounts of money at play.

Moreover, we are still in need of old fashioned occupations such as copy editing and proof reading which are often unacknowledged but which silently invisibly help readers. If publishers are to be abolished (not what Miller is advocating) then many of their functions will have to be reinvented. Miller will be the first to point out that as University Presses have become more commercial in outlook one of the casualties has been copy editing. We share the concern but do not see how a move to open publication addresses the point.

It should also be pointed out that commerce and open publication are not necessarily incompatible. One of the models being explored in hard sciences and elsewhere is the ‘author-pays’ model where rather than the reader or their institution paying the author pays the publisher for the work in preparing the work for distribution. One of the commercial publishers who are using this model in the social sciences is Bentham, the publishers of the *Open Anthropology Journal* (<http://www.benthamscience.com/open/toanthj/>) who currently (July 2012) charge authors \$800 per article, thus erecting a different barrier preventing our colleagues in developing world countries from publishing. The ‘Author Pays’ model also allows the possibility of different levels of payment for different types of access within the same journal. So a single issue of a journal (possibly published by a large commercial publisher) could have some articles freely available and others hidden behind a paywall (actually examples of this already exist). This is a real world type of hybridity that confuses the neatness of some of purist arguments for openness.

Other models: There are other hybrid models available which deserve much more discussion in anthropology. For example, the free (open) online journal *Sociological Research Online* is free for private individuals and yet it charges institutions annual subscriptions to cover the production costs. The RAI’s online bibliographic publication the *Anthropological Index Online* has a similar model inspired by shareware licenses for software: access is free to those in developing world countries and for academic institutions making only light use, but commercial or heavy academic use requires a subscription. Reports from Research

Information Network et al. (2010 and 2011) discuss the wider picture (as do Kelty et al. 2008).

As we understand it, Elsevier etc don't make their 'obscene' profits from Social Sciences and Arts and Humanities publishing but from the Hard Sciences where the economics seem quite different. Different rules apply where there are big bucks in play.

Consider the three main anthropology publications, *Current Anthropology* (CA), *American Anthropologist* (AA) and the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (JRAI)¹, are all subsidised in different ways. JRAI by the Royal Anthropological Institute and AA by the American Anthropological Association. The RAI and the AAA, as learned societies, are not profit making organisations like Elsevier although they have chosen in recent years to publish their journals in association with Wiley-Blackwell, another commercial publisher. The AAA, with more than 10,000 dues paying members, is in a position to subsidise its flagship journal, but even within the AAA the costs of publishing are placing considerable strain on the organisation. A recent AAA survey was clearly testing the mood of the membership for increased membership dues as a possible route towards greater access at point of use. The message was explicit-- 'free' at point of use does *not* mean the costs associated with publishing go away.

Finally in this section it is worth reporting that there are several initiatives to make the contents of academic journal articles available to those in institutions who cannot afford them. Initiatives such as the JSTOR [Developing Nations Access Initiative](http://about.jstor.org/libraries/developing-nations-access-initiative),² Hinari and Inasp have made much of the work published in academic journals available without cost to academics with internet connections (an increasing number) in developing world countries. The admitted irony is that at the same time many citizens in north America and

¹ This list is, of course, open to argument.

² <http://about.jstor.org/libraries/developing-nations-access-initiative>

Europe do not have access to them without the bother of visiting a public library and possibly paying an interlibrary loan fee.

‘Information wants to be free’³

The slogan has been used by those in the so-called ‘open data movement’ to which Miller does not refer. Moreover, in the hard sciences as well as calling for open publication, the activists are calling for open data so that, in principle, people can inspect the data which their taxes paid for and on which publication X is based. The nearest equivalent in anthropology has been moves to promote the archiving of fieldnotes so (probably long after the material has been collected) others can see *some* of the material on the basis on which published work has been produced. By and large such these attempts in anthropology have been resounding failures. Anthropologists are incredibly possessive about their field material even up to the grave (see Zeitlyn 2012). We are not clear where Miller stands on this.

Freedom from the Tyranny of Peer Review

This is absolutely not what Miller advocates but is another type of open publication. Allegedly, peer review slows publication down to a crawl because academics are too busy writing and researching to respond to requests for peer review. More than that peer review stifles radical new thinking by inhibiting innovation. The results is a type of ‘reversion to the bland’ in which authors parrot currently fashionable jargon in order to enter the mainstream and overcome the barrier of peer review. (Allegedly similar problems afflict funding decisions.) Miller is all for scholarly rigour (who wouldn’t be? An answer from another discipline would be Paul Feyerabend). There are ways of addressing scholarly rigour without the choking effects of old-style peer review. One is Open Peer Review. On this model an article once submitted to a journal is placed on the Peer Review part of the

³ See <http://www.rogerclarke.com/II/IWtbE.html> for discussion of source of the quote.

journal website for a limited period (perhaps 3 or 6 months?). During this time any reader can submit a review. At the completion of the review period the editor considers the reviews submitted and decides whether to publish or not (just as currently happens). If no reviews are submitted the editors may decide to accept anyway or leave the article pending until reviews are received.

Another model is Post Publication Open Peer Review: similar to the above but a journal has a peer reviewed and a non peer reviewed section. The editors vet submissions for minimal quality standards which, if passed, enable an article to be placed in the unreviewed section. After a year (say) the article may be promoted to the peer reviewed section if enough positive reviews are received. Note we have been deliberately ambiguous about whether the reviews themselves should be made accessible to other readers. One of the intriguing things about post publication peer review is that it provides a route where a form of ‘Current Anthropology Comment’ could be generated and generalised. For a year or six months following publication readers could post comments on an article. After that the author can reply and the article with comments and reply packaged together. All of this could be done within the framework of an online journal with the editors ensuring that comments are relevant and polite etc.

Free of editorial input/intervention – this is really the point about copy-editing already made above. Some authors may feel their prose is so good it cannot be improved. However, as readers, we are often exasperated by the self indulgence and lack of clarity of writers whose prose has not been challenged by their editors.

Free for reuse – licenses and copyright.

Oddly questions of copyright loom little in anthropology partly, we suggest, because there is so little money at stake. (And because most employed anthropologists such as Miller conspire with their employers to overlook that in strict legal terms they do not own their

own writings). In software development there are millions (occasionally billions) to be made, so Stallman's 'hack' of copyright which was (contentiously) the origin of the open licenses now widely used is less radical than it has been in computing. We note an interesting tension between promoting non-commercial Creative Commons licenses which encourages distribution and reuse (taken up by some anthropologists) with movements to recognise indigenous IPR in creative creations and traditional knowledge (particularly pharmaceutical) which have been taken up by other anthropologists and WIPO (see discussion of a non-pharmaceutical case-in-point in Noble 2007). The latter assumes the possibility that knowledge can be owned which those inspired by Stallman must repudiate.

Freely available online journals

The development of the internet and in particular the explosion of the World Wide Web means that relatively low cost electronic only publication has been possible for almost twenty years (at the time of writing). There is a considerable history of online publication relevant to anthropology which goes back long before the open publication movement got started (and long before the Savage Minds blog started). As editors of AIO (previous and current) we have been monitoring this for a long time.⁴

Overall it seems that most attempts at online publications become moribund very quickly. One such which DZ was involved in, CSACSLA, is sadly a case in point. But there's nothing special about online publication in this: conventional paper-based journals also become moribund and cease publication. Within UK anthropology consider Hau's elder sister 'Cambridge Anthropology' which has just emerged from several years of morbidity as a subscription-only journal with a commercial publisher. In Oxford, the departmental journal, JASO, had become moribund until it was revived as a free online publication in

⁴ AIO Editorial board first discussed indexing online journals in 2002 and kept returning to the subject until in 2010 it finally agreed as a matter of principle to consider including electronic online journals (in summary treating them in exactly the same way as other candidates for inclusion).

2009.⁵ *Hau* is an interesting experiment since it has addressed status issues from the start and has heavily promoted the symbolic capital inherent in its editorial board.

Among the successful precedents for Miller to consider are two online journals publishing in closely related fields with considerable overlap with social anthropology: *SRO Sociological Research Online* (www.socresonline.org.uk/) was launched in March 1996 with an editorial board chaired by Professor Nigel Gilbert at the University of Surrey. Based in Berlin is *FQS - Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research* (ISSN 1438-5627) <http://www.qualitative-research.net/> a peer-reviewed multilingual online journal for qualitative research established in 1999. It publishes articles in English, German and Spanish. Miller's article and the discussants to it raise three other topics which are strictly quite separate from those to do with open publication.

Language hegemony

The issue applies to publishing generally, particularly academic publishing whether or not it is commercial subsidised or open. That said online publication can be used to address or mitigate some of the issues since it is possible/ economic to publish multiple versions online – so the internet presents a viable response to the concerns of non-English speakers (see *FQS* mentioned above for a working example of this approach). Turning to specifics: *Hau* can make a gesture: at the very least it can insist in multilingual abstracts for all its articles (and if a linguistically challenged anglophone cannot speak the required languages then perhaps the author should pay the translation costs to remind them that there are many hidden costs in publication.) If this suggestion is adopted we do wonder which are the appropriate languages to choose? English, Chinese, Spanish, Arabic? Sadly for Fausto we suspect not Portuguese. Hindi perhaps. Turning to Africa, the plethora of choice

⁵ See <http://www.isca.ox.ac.uk/publications/JASO/>. Note on licenses: when JASO went online we copied all the copyright statements across so copyright is held by the Anthropological Society of Oxford. However, should an author request it there would be no objection to publishing under a Creative Common License such as is used by *Hau*.

available reveals the problems implicit in choosing any small set of languages. Tempting though it is for DZ to write in Mambila: *ma mì nyare le ʃu Ba, bɔ̀ nùàr kuku ɲwe ɲgwó.*

We don't think any of the commentators are seriously advocating a return to Latin (once the universal language of academe) or a switch to Esperanto – so everyone is at an equal disadvantage. It is one thing to complain that CA, AA, JRAI discriminate against people writing in their 2nd or 3rd language (readers should note that CA is very clear that they will review articles written in languages other than English) but this doesn't really work when we think about scholarship in the seriously small languages. Not the metropolitan languages of Europe (and its erstwhile colonial diasporas) with speaker communities (and readerships) in the millions but those with less than a few hundred thousand speakers.

Hidden Economics in Open Software: why it is a bad model for anthropology

One of the issues that Kely does not discuss in *Two Bits* (2008) is the money! The question 'Who's paying for all this?' is all the more interesting for the disavowals of its importance made by the key players. Richard Stallman has a MacArthur Genius fellowship so can afford not to care, he has been 'free' to develop GNU (which provided much of the software surrounding the Linux kernel) without having to worry about board, lodging and electricity bills. It is clear that repositories such as SourceForge have resource implications. Who pays for these? Such repositories are subsidised by the very commercial interests that the hardcore Free and Open Source Software (FOSS) people object to, principally Sun and IBM. There are of course countless volunteers who provide code freely. No doubt their motivation for such contributions are diverse, but must include abstracted notions of the Maussian gift, though exactly who the recipient of these *prestations* may be remains somewhat unclear (see Kastrinou and Lyon forthcoming and earlier discussions by e.g. Kely 2002 and Zeitlyn 2003). The volunteer army of FOSS coders are not evenly distributed around the planet. The distribution of programmers wealthy enough to have the time and resources to contribute differs dramatically in different parts of the world.

Trinidad, for example, may be home to avid mobile phone users, but there is little evidence to suggest that any residents of Trinidad are significant contributors the Stallman's revolutionary software design model. There aren't enough Trinidadian programmers interested enough *and* rich enough (both are needed) to be able to afford to contribute. This is an economic explanation of why so few programmers from developing world countries are significant contributors to open software development. In our view this reflects very basic economic hegemony.

Within anthropology neither Keith Hart nor Fran Barone are paid to keep the Open Anthropology Cooperative website going. Fran Barone's main technical work on OAC was while she was completing her PhD. Such sacrifice is noble and to be commended, but it should not disguise the fact that publishing, even online, incurs costs, especially labour costs. (Editorial note: this paragraph revised on 29 March 2013).

Digital Anthropology

There is no necessary connection between open and digital anthropology: strictly each is independent of the other, (although the open software movement has been studied by anthropologists such as Kely (2008). In the context we find Miller's promotion of the collection that he and Horst have edited to be ironic since it is not available to us (or Hau's commentators) and will be published by a commercial publisher under an old style commercial license like all Miller's other publications to date. A cynical reader might even be inclined to see the timing of this piece as an exploitation of open source publication in order to promote the commercial publication of an edited collection by Horst and Miller (slated for publication on 1 Oct 2012 so early readers of the Hau piece cannot know what they have said). One wonders why, if they are so keen on Open Source publication, they have chosen to disseminate their work via a commercial publisher? If so keen on it why not at the very least publish with Sean Kingston, since Miller spends so much of the piece praising his initiative? Although it should be pointed out that Sean Kingston Books is a

commercial *print-on-demand* publisher which is not the same as an open access publisher. None of the SKB books are available full-text online and all appear to be published with a conventional copyright license.

Leaving this aside we would like to take the opportunity to reflect briefly on digital anthropology. It has a profound ambiguity similar to that in the phrase ‘visual anthropology’. Does digital anthropology mean 1. the study of people who use digital technology or 2. the use of digital technology to assist anthropological research? (Combinations of the two, of course, are possible). This parallels VA’s ambiguity between the use of visual methods to do anthropology and the anthropological study of visual material.

To make the point clearer it is conceptually possible to study and publish the results of, for example, an online community of role playing gamers in which ‘the data’ have been recorded in paper based fieldnotes and the publications are entirely conventional. Indeed Chris Kelty’s work (both his doctoral study of the development and introduction of digital X-rays in US Hospitals (1999) and his more recent study of the open source software movement (2008) are conventional anthropology in the best possible sense. We suspect that his main data types are observation and discussion recorded in fieldnotes complemented by correspondence (aka email and chat).

This is quite different from the use of digital technologies by anthropologists to study ‘conventional’ anthropological topics such as kinship and then to disseminate the results. Software packages such as Puck, Silkin, Kinoath and Kinship editor⁶ provide tools to assist anthropologists to record and analyse the complex types of data that have been challenging

⁶ <http://code.google.com/p/silkin/>, <http://sourceforge.net/projects/simpa-puck/>, <http://www.lat-mpi.eu/tools/tools/kinoath> and <http://sourceforge.net/projects/kinshipeditor/>

anthropology since Morgan in the nineteenth century. In other fields, social network analysis (not to be confused with actor network theory) was pioneered by social anthropologists and now has many digital tools available to help collate and analyse networks. The same or similar tools also provide means to disseminate, share and collaborate. In the UK the University of Kent's CSAC pioneered using the internet to disseminate the results of conventional anthropological research and promoted the use of new (then) digital technologies in doing anthropology (see lucy.kent.ac.uk and era.anthropology.ac.uk). As an early participant in this Steve Lyon was able (with some difficulty) to make versions of his fieldnotes available⁷ as the doctoral fieldwork progressed (1998-1999), several years before the term blog had been popularised.

We hope that the editors of *Hau* and of other online publications (whether or not using open publication models) will consider some of the practical suggestions we have made about promoting wider access and freer discussion, independent of some of the more polemical issues which surround the politics of academic publication.

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