

## AAA GOES DIGITAL

# With a Business Model Like This, Who Needs Enemies?

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**L**ike all academics, we anthropologists are in the process of transitioning away from paper-based journals to digital ones. This raises the exciting possibility to make our work freely available online for all to read and benefit from—a scholarly ideal known as “open access.” Advocates of open access argue that we can reduce the production costs of journals by up to two orders of magnitude by using free open source software to edit them, and using small-run print-on-demand solutions. These cost savings could then be used to free journals from having to charge readers to view their content.

Enthusiasm for the ideal of open access is widespread in anthropology. But perhaps even more widespread is skepticism about the practicality of these new publishing models. Those who pride themselves on practicality and tough-mindedness ask: “How are we supposed to find the money to publish our journals if we don’t make our readers pay for access to our articles?”

## COMMENTARY

### A False Dilemma

When phrased in this way, the problem boils down to a simple choice: the utopian idea of open access versus the proven alternative of the reader-pays subscription model that we currently have. Now, there are many things wrong with phrasing things in this way. For one, open access is a scholarly ideal, not a business model, and open access-inspired business models seek to release content only as much as is possible and practical. This could mean lowering subscription costs, charging only for new issues, charging only for access to the archives, or anything and everything in between. No one who supports open access is advocating financial suicide.

But this piece is not about the way the “unworkable open access

vs workable reader-pays” model misrepresents how open access works. On the contrary—framing the dilemma in this way misrepresents the success and workability of the reader-pays business model. If you think that making money by giving away content is a bad idea, you should see what happens when the AAA tries to make money selling it. To put it kindly, our reader-pays model has never worked very well. Getting over our misconceptions about open access requires getting over misconceptions of the success of our existing publishing program. The choice we are facing is not that of an unworkable ideal versus a working system. It is the choice between a future system which may work and an existing system which we know does not.

In fact, reader-pays models don’t seem so hard-headed and practical when viewed in light of the history of our publishing program. Like most scholarly societies in the social sciences and humanities, our association has always struggled to produce scholarly publications that recoup their costs. The economics of publishing paper journals, the specialized nature of our work, and our small audience have all traditionally meant that associations like ours have always struggled to stay in the black. Although terms like “sustainable business model” are new, they merely name in contemporary language the endless struggle that all scholarly publications have faced: keeping their head above water.

So in fact far from being a safe alternative to the uncertainties of open access, reader-pays scholarly publishing has always been “in crisis.” This means that the current so-called “crisis in scholarly communication” begun by the transition to digital publishing has only made things worse. The AAA’s solution to digital publishing, AnthroSource, has thus far been no more successful at turning a profit than our pre-digital publication program.

On paper, AnthroSource only narrowly misses its projected earnings. These figures, however, conceal

deeper problems with the subscription-based portal to AAA published scholarly materials. Last spring, for instance, the deficit between projected and actual earnings in the association’s publishing budget was narrowed simply by revising projected earnings from AnthroSource downward. Additionally, AnthroSource’s budget consists in part of money paid to it by the sections whose journals it hosts. Theoretically, this results in “cost sharing” between AnthroSource and the sections. In reality, this means that AnthroSource’s losses are passed

fact that the AAA as an institution lacks what is needed to make the transition to digital publishing.

The current institutional structure of the AAA, on the one hand, has traded agility for stability, and capacity for integrity, on the other. Faced with complex internal politics and a precarious budget, this emphasis on stability makes sense. And of course, democratic organizations need time to make up their minds, and the quickest decision is not always the one most wisely made. Nevertheless, what we need now and today is an organization that is willing to innovate, has considerable technical capacity, can make decisions quickly, and moves to implement them efficiently.



## POINT

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on to the sections. The result is that the existence of some sectional publications is threatened, while others have already stopped publication.

In sum, far from being a tough-minded and practical alternative to the supposed idealism of open access, the pay-for-content model has never been particularly successful as a business strategy. The AAA’s only exacerbates the problem by applying a business model that was only marginally successful in the paper space to the new world of digital publishing, where it works even worse. The result is a “weapons of mass destruction” business model: continuing faith that the profits are out there somewhere, even though there is no evidence for their existence, combined with “stay the course” mentality that insists we will find them. . . someday.

### Institutional Challenges Within AAA

These failures of the AAA’s digital business model are not the result of the cupidity or incompetence of any particular person or set of people. Rather, it is a result of the

Like many communities, the AAA is “an argument in search of a topic”: a series of tenuous compromises between the various factions which comprise it. Consensus is hard-won and making decisions—indeed, even making the decision to make a decision—may lead to revisiting and destabilizing a hard-won status quo. The tension between AAA sections and the executive board reflects this tension between the need for centralization and the centripetal pull to organize groups around areas of scholarly specialty.

The relationship between the elected leadership and staff is also problematic. Elected leadership have little time to oversee staff activities and rotate in and out of office relatively quickly while some staff hold their positions as sinecures. The result is similar to the British sitcom “Yes, Prime Minister”—staff make decisions unregulated by the leadership to whom they supposedly answer, and the line between making policy and implementing it is blurred. Unpopular decisions made by staff are justified post-facto by appeal to “business factors too complex for

membership to understand" or by personalistic "one-on-one" communication which decreases transparency and accountability. The danger here is that the tail will start wagging the dog—if it hasn't already.

The AAA also has little capacity to implement the changes on which it does decide. For instance, at a meeting in May 2006, staff informed the AnthroSource Steering Committee that the AAA website would be redesigned in time for the San José meetings in November 2006. It is now February 2007 and the website has still not been redesigned. If we can not redesign our website in a timely manner, how are we to reinvent our publishing program in a electronic age?

### The Devil Is in the Details

The AAA can develop a publishing program that can run in the black, but in order to do so it must take on board the central insight of the open access movement—that journals become more affordable (and open access becomes a more realistic option) when you lower production costs. Recognizing this should not in itself be a difficult task—we know how to work smarter and not harder and how to make do with limited resources but lots of resourcefulness. After all we write our articles, edit them, and peer review them for free. And of course our "product" is very "competitive": our members produce the finest anthropology in the world.

In order for us to develop less costly and more open publishing, we need to question some of our assumptions about how our publishing program works and how successful it has been. This means talking with each other about the effect that AnthroSource and the outsourcing of our production processes has had on our membership. It means demanding accountability and transparency from our staff. It means asking our leaders to lead. It means rolling up our sleeves and having a public discussion about the economics of publishing in the AAA which asks hard questions and is not satisfied with easy answers. And above all, it means moving beyond the idea that our current reader-pays model is somehow more "realistic" than open access alternatives. ■

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## Friends, Why Are We Sinking?

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I agree with Alex Golub that we need to question some of our assumptions about how the AAA's publishing program works and how successful it has been. Yet, as we continue to develop our electronic publishing and communications initiatives, such as AnthroSource, I think we also need to carefully examine assumptions about open access alternatives to more commercial business models.

Like Alex, I am very much motivated by the scholarly ideal of academic freedom that he conflates with "open access." Indeed, for over 100 years part of the associ-

almost equally to the print copies of *Anthropology News* and *American Anthropologist* as member benefits. In my informal discussions of even print-on-demand alternatives to member-wide distribution of print copies of *AN* or an edited volume, many appear still wary of such alternatives. Many anthropologists on a publish-or-perish tenure track still believe that the gold standard is publishing a print, peer-reviewed monograph or book through an established, respected university press.

Furthermore, our reading and use of digital media is quite different from reading and using print. AnthroSource and institutional repositories are extremely powerful research tools since they allow

costs savings of up to two orders of magnitude differs from publishing electronic versions of printed journals. Such advocates usually only account for peer review and editing production costs, which some have pointed out is faulty for a large publishing program.

An electronic publishing program must also budget for the development and maintenance of its electronic infrastructure: including the local networks and systems, Internet hosting and connections, servers, databases, vendors and partners, and website development, design, programming, testing, installation, quality control, evaluation and the labor to do all this. These costs are not cheap: they can be more than a million dollars.

Beyond that, an electronic publishing program should account for costs to market its electronic journals, for training users to use the new means of production, and for responding to users' questions, problems and needs.

Many who have adopted open-access alternatives, such as those published by the Public Library of Science (PLOS), use an author-pays model to finance their publishing programs. As *The Scientist* reported last June, PLOS raised its publication fee for the first time since its inception in 2003, hiking rates by up to two-thirds the original cost. Beginning last July author fees set to offset production costs increased from \$1,500 for PLOS's flagship journals (*PLoS Biology* and *PLoS Medicine*) to \$2,500, and to \$2,000 for its other journals. So one question we must ask: Is there enough funding for anthropology—both federal and from foundations like Wenner-Gren—to support author-pays models?

### A Neoliberal World

Alex is right that the AAA has for most of its history struggled to achieve and maintain a sustainable publishing program, primarily through subscriptions, sales and member subsidy of its publications. Reading through old AAA Bulletins, Newsletters and Reports, a reader quickly discovers that at times when the AAA has reached bumpy finances, decisions were made by the executive board to assure publications are sustainable.

See *Why Are We Sinking?* on page 8

### COUNTER POINT



[E]lectronic publishing and communications require an electronic infrastructure that can support the creation, distribution and preservation of quality digital publications and contents, as well as the continued development of active social networks.

ation's mission has been to "further the professional interests of American anthropologists; including the dissemination of anthropological knowledge and its use to solve human problems."

Today, members of AAA continue to try to expand the reach of anthropology and its methods in understanding questions related to globalization, warfare and national security, health and environmental issues, among many, many others. At the same time, many are crossing national, cultural, social and disciplinary boundaries in their efforts to do so.

### Exploring Alternatives

Yet, in my own cautious explorations of open access possibilities, I have encountered some unanticipated challenges. First, the idea of a transition from print to digital suggests that the digital will ultimately replace the print. Yet, should we necessarily assume this?

Respondents to the last AAA membersurveyratedAnthroSource

a user to quickly and efficiently search through decades of scholarship to discover new data, analyses and ideas. Yet, we are finding most individuals still print out an article they wish to read.

As many readers say of *AN*, they like discovering articles while skimming its bound pages on the subway or in the dentist's office—articles they wouldn't normally have searched for or downloaded on the Internet. Some fear that access might unintentionally be constricted if print distribution is reduced or made optional. If the news or information doesn't arrive at your door, if it isn't passed on by a friend, colleague or teacher, if it isn't easy to pick up and skim, what will spur readers to widely browse and read diverse, not normally marketed contents?

Yet, suppose financial realities were to demand a more aggressive digital solution. First, it is important to understand that open access advocates' argument that electronic publishing leads to a