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Savage Minds Interview: Tom Boellstorff

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I had the chance to conduct an email-based interview with Tom Boellstorff during this past month to explore some of his views about Open Access (hereafter OA) publishing in anthropology.

Ryan Anderson: First of all, thanks for taking the time to do this interview, Tom. Here at Savage Minds we write about Open Access (OA) a lot, and many of our contributors seem to be in agreement about the need to look into alternative publishing options. But not everyone knows about OA or is in agreement with the push to head in that direction, and this includes many people who are well established in anthropology. So, what's your opinion about OA? Is this an issue that should matter for anthropologists who are already successful within the current publishing regime, for example?

Tom Boellstorff: I think there's an urgent need to build on the advocacy work a number of people have been doing within and outside the AAA to reach the goal of "gold" OA (meaning that articles are freely available to download online). In my September 2012 "From the Editor" piece in *American Anthropologist* I try to set out my current thinking in regard to this issue. If I can quote from that piece:

"There are three primary reasons why this transition to gold open access is imperative, reasons that are simultaneously ethical, political, and intellectual. First, there is a fundamental contradiction between the often-repeated goal of making anthropology more public and relevant on the one hand, and the lack of open access on the other hand. Second, there is an incompatibility between the broad interest in transnationalizing anthropology and the lack of open access. Third, it is wrong for any academic journal to be based on a model where the unremunerated labor of scholars supports corporate profits. I see no way that the current subscription-based model can be modified so as to adequately address these concerns."

In terms of people not being in agreement to head in that direction, which as you say "includes many people who are well established in anthropology," I think we need to reach out and work with those folks. The reality is that running a journal well takes money, particularly a larger journal, and I don't think we want a future where publishing relies on unpaid graduate student labor, farmed-out copy editing, and so on. For me, the issue is that (1) regardless, we need to find a way toward gold OA, and (2) I just refuse to believe that so many smart people can't find a way to do it.

It may take sacrifice. For instance, I'm not one of those people who hates the AAA meetings. I love them and I think you need to understand the genre. It's not a small conference where you get to have a focused discussion, but a space of excess where you get to sample cool emerging work, network, meet friends old and new, check out the book exhibit, etc. But what if (and this is just a thought experiment; I haven't run the numbers) we held the AAAs only every other year, and used that savings to make all AAA journals gold OA? That would be a real sacrifice for me, but it's one I personally would support. Then in the "off" years, every other year when there wasn't a AAA meeting, we could schedule all of the section meetings like the AES meetings and the SCA meetings. They would probably get higher attendance that way, so it might benefit the sections too. Once again: I'm not saying this is a solution, because I haven't run the numbers. What I'm saying is that it might be that kind of real change, real sacrifice, that would be needed to make gold OA financially viable, and I would argue strongly in favor of this particular sacrifice.

We need to have a lot of brainstorming to think about other possible models. What has been less helpful I think is that we've seen some AAA surveys and such that ask "if you had to pay $250 more in annual fees for gold OA, would you support that?" (I can't remember the exact phrasing; that's just my reconstruction.) If you phrase it that way, of course lots of people will pause and say "no." The better way to phrase the question is: "how much would you be willing to pay per year to have AAA journals be gold OA?" And then work backwards from there. But also ask other kinds of questions, like "Would you support having the AAA meetings only every other year if this meant that all AAA journals could be gold OA?"

RA: And here's a related question: What about upcoming anthropologists who are just getting in on the publishing game? Should they be concerned with these debates about OA? I'm thinking especially of graduate students and new PhD's who are under tremendous pressure to publish in order to "make it" in anthropology. Where's the time to *even think* about things like OA?

TB: You raise several really great points here, which I'll address in reverse order.

First, a huge issue with regard to OA debates is that anthropologists are usually too busy to keep up with the debates or even think clearly about the issues. Certainly in my own case, until I became Editor-in-Chief of *American Anthropologist* I had no real engagement with these issues—not because I didn't care on an abstract level, but because there was just no time. I don't have a magic answer to this problem of no time, but it is important to try and educate ourselves and build on the great advocacy work our colleagues have done. The publishers think about these things on a more sustained basis, whereas we do it in the nooks and crannies of time we can find, but just coming together every year at the AAA meetings and saying "we should all stay in touch about this" clearly isn't enough.

Second, in regard to your questions about "upcoming anthropologists who are just getting in on the publishing game." As you know this is an issue that has been very important to me and I've published multiple pieces on "how to get published" and such during my tenure as *American Anthropologist* editor (with more coming out this December (2012), which will be the last issue of *American Anthropologist* appearing under my name). As you note, for graduate students and new Ph.D.s there is "tremendous pressure to publish in order to 'make it' in anthropology." But I do think publishing is very important in many ways and isn't just a game as such. Whether we end up with employment in academia, nonprofits, government, industry, or other venues (and sometimes movement between them), those who hire people have to have a way to calibrate talent and decide who to hire. This is not just a feature of a hard job market or myths of meritocracy narrowly conceived: we always have to make these decisions. Competitive journals are one way of showing that you are seen as a valuable member of your research community. Another is citation patterns: you can have work published in a major venue that isn't cited much, and work published in venues seen as of a lower status, but that gets cited much more and shapes conversations much more, and that can be taken into account.

Another issue is that for me, publishing is a form of community-building, particularly when conducted through peer review. One reason why the editorship was so exhausting but also gratifying for me was that I spent just as long on my letters of rejection as my letters of acceptance—often they were 15–20 pages long, in many cases longer than the manuscript itself. I once had an article rejected from *American Anthropologist* but based on the helpful comments, got it published in another good venue (*Journal for Linguistic Anthropology*). So it is a process and a conversation. That's one reason I always recommend junior scholars get a manuscript or two under review as quickly as possible after completing the dissertation or even while finishing the dissertation, because this process takes time and you want to get things going.

So graduate students and new Ph.D.s should think about publishing for sure, not just because of the job market but because you can't just tell people "my work is really great"—if the work is not put into circulation then it can't contribute to the conversation. It is important for graduate students and new Ph.D.s to learn as much as they can about OA issues, but we really need more senior scholars to take a leadership role because they have the job security and status to do so (even if not as much time as they wish they had!). I became Editor-in-Chief of *American Anthropologist* at 38 and a full Professor at 40, so I've moved comparatively swiftly in my career: at the ripe old age of 43 I still have trouble thinking of myself as "senior," but careerwise I am and that's one reason I'm trying as best I can to keep up with these issues and contribute in any way possible.

RA: I think you make a great point about the importance of "contributing to the conversation." I want to go back to where you mentioned competitive journals and citation patterns as tools for evaluating the value of a member of a research community—for hiring

practices and so on. That's pretty much the dominant model from what I understand. Where do you think academic repositories—such as something like the Social Science Research Network (SSRN)—could fit into this scheme?

TB: Hmm. That's a really great question for which I sadly don't have an easy answer. Put yourself for a moment in the shoes of someone who is writing a recommendation letter for someone coming up for tenure. So if anyone can get their work uploaded onto the SSRN, what I can say in such a letter? I can evaluate the content of the work of course and advocate for the person on that basis. But it's also very helpful in some cases to say "this person has published an article in a very selective journal," etc. Repositories like the SSRN are important to scholarly dissemination, curation, and so on, but a repository isn't the same thing as an edited journal.

What I think sometimes gets missed in these debates is that no matter what model you use, there has to be some way to evaluate people. Sadly, it's not a world where 100 people apply for a job as an Assistant Professor of Anthropology, and all 100 get jobs as an Assistant Professor of Anthropology. The reality is 100 people will apply for such a job, and 20 or 10 or 5 will get that kind of job. Or a staff job at a nonprofit (my first job was Regional Coordinator at the Institute for Community Health Outreach, a nonprofit based in San Francisco that trained Community Health Outreach Workers in HIV/AIDS prevention, and that was a competitive job to get). Or a job in industry, or at a museum, or whatever. No matter what the venue, there has to be a means of evaluation, and selective publication venues are one way of showing one is a leader in one's field. Repositories are very important, but by their design they aren't so effective in this regard.

RA: So, in your view, what is the potential role of the American Anthropological Association when it comes to OA publishing? Is the AAA amenable to OA publishing?

TB: Absolutely. First, let me note that Wiley-Blackwell, our corporate publishing partner, is quite friendly to OA in a limited sense; they have gold OA journals and a "green OA" setup for the AAA journal portfolio that allows authors to circulate "post-prints" of their manuscripts (the final version before it goes into production). Articles more than 35 years old are also gold OA already. So even W-B is quite open, but within the horizon of a corporate model that as I noted above, I don't see as ultimately viable as it's currently structured.

Now, in terms of the AAA: AAA staff and leadership in my experience have no problem with OA publishing. They are usually better educated about these issues than the membership. Here is the problem. First, AAA staff and leadership have the responsibility to keep the journals running, and that's a big burden. The journals were in financial trouble before the move to W-B, and things have been stabilized in a budgetary sense in the wake of that move. We have to understand the pressures AAA staff and leadership face to keep the lights on so to speak, and the reality that the W-B is working very well in that regard—but

once again "working well" within the horizon of a model that I and many others do not see as either viable in the long term, or ethical in a fundamental sense.

One key issue is that sometimes AAA staff and leadership think not of anthropology writ large, but just of the AAA. I don't mean to homogenize; this isn't true across the board or in every instance, but it can happen. It is understandable because that is, once again, their responsibility. So when at least some of these folks think about these issues, what they are thinking about is the health and flourishing of the AAA. That is understandable, completely. That is why Bill Davis, the Executive Director of the AAA, could state to Congress on January 12, 2012 that "We know of no research that demonstrates a problem with the existing system for making the content of scholarly journals available to those who might benefit from it." (See my September 2012 "From the Editor" for citations and more discussion.)

The problem here is that we need to be concerned not just about the AAA, but anthropology in the broadest sense. "Those who might benefit" from anthropological research are emphatically not just those persons who are AAA members, or who work at institutions that can afford an Anthrosource subscription. The people we study around the world deserve access to what we write. There is no reason we need to have a discipline of anthropology in the world. It is not inevitable. I for one do not have any particular investments in something called "anthropology" for its own sake. Like basically any academic I ask about this nowadays, my approaches are deeply interdisciplinary (after all, my first degree is in music!). But anthropology has so much to offer—we produce incredibly insightful and creative work—and the more that work circulates, the more we justify our existence and contribute positively to the world. I want anthropological work to be read and cited as widely as possible and read by the most diverse audiences possible. I've been very lucky in that regard in my own career, to see my work read and debated, misread and misconstrued, literally remixed and transformed and translated. We want that for everyone.

That doesn't mean that we always have to write in a manner that is accessible to the general public—genres are a good thing, and the academic article with theoretical "jargon" is very useful for certain purposes. We want to be able to write in multiple voices and genres, and we want all of that work to be available to the widest audiences possible. Ideally, the AAA should play a leadership role in advocating for this kind of OA future. The problem is that we are all so busy and overworked, and we have to find models that are financially realistic. I sometimes joke that I want our model to be "less like HBO and more like CBS," where income is based not on subscription but some other modality. Of course, we don't have the benefit of car or soap companies wanting to advertise on our pages! This is the impasse—but also the point of opportunity—at which we currently reside: the point of seeking a path forward that meets our goals but is also realistic. If I had an easy solution to that impasse I would certainly share it with you! But I continue to be optimistic that a path forward can be found, if we all work together and build on our incredible reservoir of talent.

RA: Last question. I want to conclude by talking about the future of publishing and communication in anthropology. Imagine how things are going to look 20 years down the road. Ideally, what would you like to see happen with OA, the AAA, and publishing in the discipline of anthropology? What kinds of things need to happen to make this a reality?

TB: Oh my! I'm not good at these kinds of questions. As I've said elsewhere, for an ethnographer like me, the problem with the future is that there is no way to study it. So such future imaginings really are just speculation and say much more about the anxieties of the present. But with that in mind, my ideal future is one where we find production models that support editors and journals in a sufficient manner, but under a gold OA model where our content is freely available and our place on the national and international stage continues to grow. I don't have an easy way to get there, because my ideal future is one where editors are paid for their work. I emphasize this not just because labor should be remunerated, but because many talented potential editors work in institutions where they can get only minimal support for being an editor. If they had support to buy themselves out of teaching, for instance, this would open the world of editing to a greater presence of those outside major research universities.

I feel bad that I don't have easy answers or perfect solutions to the problem of how we can successfully shift to a gold OA model. But what I'd like to leave people with is, first, a sense of the fact that some great people have been working for OA for years now, and we should continue to listen to them, learn from them, support them. Second, I set forth the hypothesis that the reason we have not been able to successfully move to a gold OA model is not that it is unworkable, but that we just have not been able to have sufficient conversations and advocacy to discover that viable path forward. I dearly hope that hypothesis is correct!

RA: Ok, I lied. I have one more question, and it's a lot more grounded than the last one: What's the next step we need to take to keep moving these conversations forward?

TB: There is a new AAA interest group around OA, the Digital Anthropology Group. We should support this group and get the most diverse set of voices possible involved in it. And we should keep having these kinds of conversations, and above all be gentle with each other. With our fellow anthropologists, with W-B and AAA staff. I have less and less patience for the quick comfort of donning a white hat and placing the black hat on others. If there was an easy answer we would have found it by now. But that does not mean that no answer is out there, not by a long shot.

RA: I definitely agree with you there! I think that's a good place to leave things for now. Thanks, Tom, for taking the time to do this interview!