

11-2012

# Publishing without Perishing: Sharing Ideas & Challenging the Closed System of Academic Anthropology

Ryan B. Anderson

*Santa Clara University*, [rbanderson@scu.edu](mailto:rbanderson@scu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/anthro\\_fac\\_pubs](https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/anthro_fac_pubs)



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Anderson, R. (2012). Publishing without Perishing: Sharing Ideas and Challenging the Closed System of Academic Anthropology. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, San Francisco, November 13–18.

This Presentation is brought to you for free and open access by the Anthropology at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [rscroggin@scu.edu](mailto:rscroggin@scu.edu).

# Publishing without Perishing: Sharing Ideas & Challenging the Closed System of Academic Anthropology

Ryan Anderson  
Department of Anthropology  
University of Kentucky

**Paper Abstract:** Why do we publish anthropology? Do we publish to communicate our ideas, or to move up the ranks of academia? We all know the basic narrative: In order to land a job and move up the socio-economic ladder of academic anthropology, we all need to publish. As the saying goes: publish or perish. So everyone—from graduate students onward—joins in and perpetuates this particular academic habitus. But is the current system working? We may all be publishing (or working toward it), but that does not mean that we have really avoided the “perish” part of the equation. The problem, as Harry Wolcott pointed out almost two decades ago, is that we are stuck in an insular, closed system. Our current publication regime is primarily geared toward internal conversations and our own political economies. We are, in essence, talking to ourselves. We keep our conversations separated from wider audiences through habit, and also via a slew of self-imposed barriers (journal articles closed off through pay walls, writing style, overall use of media). This paper is about rethinking not only why we publish, but also how we publish. The goal is not to dismiss the importance of traditional venues for publication (books, journal articles, edited volumes), but instead to explore how we can start opening up and sharing our anthropological conversations with wider audiences through the creative use of a range of media-based tools and platforms.

I am really excited about sharing this paper with all of you. But first, I need to share a message from my publisher: Don't expect a free ride here. That's right freeloaders: my publisher has decided to institute the first pay wall at conferences, since there's no reason why you should get away with hearing any of my not necessarily earth-shattering thoughts without reaching deep into your pockets. Knowledge is not free, after all, and at some point I would like to drive a Porsche rather than a filthy 2003 Jeep with squeaky brakes. Seriously, I got bills to pay, folks. Fortunately for you, my publisher has agreed to lower the fee for this presentation to a one-time special offer of only \$19.99, which is a competitive, fair price when compared with rates you pay for access to ten page articles held under the purview of Wiley-Blackwell, Elsevier, and the rest. So you're getting a deal here, people. Feel lucky. It's not as if I owe you anything. You gotta pay to play, and all that wonderful neoliberal free-market sort of crap.

If you can't pay this fee, then you will have to go sit behind the pay wall, which is conveniently located outside of this room. Thanks for your cooperation. For those of you willing to pay, please have your credit cards ready. We accept Visa, Mastercard, and even the lowly Discover card. We also accept cold, hard cash--as long as it comes from a country that is not currently experiencing a major economic meltdown. A representative will come around shortly to pass the proverbial hat. Exact change only. Thank you.

[Wait a few moments]

Yes, of course this is a joke. Come on, who do you think I am...?

Ok, enough of that. Now it's time to talk about publishing. Look. I haven't published a single thing in a peer-reviewed academic journal. Not one. I will, of course, if I want to swim in the big wonderful lake that we call academia. Nobody wants to drown. But for now, I am on the outside looking in. I am peeking over the wall like some annoying neighbor on a 1980s sitcom. But I have to tell you: I don't really like what I'm seeing.

Ya, I know the drill. I have been told by advisers, colleagues, friends, and pretty much anyone and everyone who knows anything about the "publish or perish" sand-trap we are stuck in. We all need to publish--and the sooner the better. These days, there is more and more pressure for graduate students to publish publish publish before they are even done with graduate school. If you don't have some publications under your belt before you enter the job market, you're in trouble and likely to end up asking people whether or not they want cheese on this or that sandwich for a few more years. It's a competitive market, and we all need to adjust to the times. That's the dominant narrative that we are all playing along with. Soon, of course, we will be expecting undergrads to have several publications in *American Anthropologist* before we even think about letting them take an intro to anthropology course.

Seriously though, as a graduate student I know what I am expected to do. I am supposed to follow the lead, accept the "way things are", publish as much as I can, write grants, get my PhD, publish some more, and then jump in line behind thousands of other freshly minted junior anthropologists and compete for a temporary job that pays less than what I made as a bartender when I was 22 years old. Correct me if I am wrong.

But maybe, just maybe, at some point we all need to stop and wonder WHY we are doing all of these things. What's the purpose of all this? To what end do we all put ourselves in this academic cattle run on the way toward oblivion? Do we seriously have no other choices here? People often refer to our system as publish or perish...but you know what? I see a lot of people who are stuck, who are in over their heads, who are publishing and STILL PERISHING.

Maybe it's time to rethink some things. Let's start at the beginning. Why do we publish? Of course, one of the main reasons why we publish is because we have an ethical obligation to get our work out there. That's one common argument, and it's a good one. The question, however, is this: Is our work really "getting out there"? Something to think about. Moving on, however, I argue that the primary reason why we publish is because we have to have some way to assess academic work. We need to produce articles, books, and edited volumes as a way to measure and rank academic value. This allows each academic to build up their credentials within the field based upon easily documented, dated, archived material items. It makes sense. And we use publications as a way to rank the relative quality of each individual. This is helpful for all kinds of reasons: for grants, hiring, promotion, awards, and so on. The system has value, no doubt about it. And it not only works, it makes sense.

There is a problem, however, when we focus everything on that part of the equation. There is also a problem when this type of publishing and communication is the only thing that really "counts" when it comes to assessing academic value. More about that later. Our publishing system has become extremely insular, focused only on satisfying the needs of our own political economies. We have reached a point where we have simply secluded ourselves within our own little world--and I think there are others out there who might agree. Harry Wolcott pointed this out years ago in a passage in his book *The Art of Fieldwork*. He wrote:

"As publisher Mitch Allen has observed in a telling comment, 'The writers of qualitative research are also the buyers of qualitative research. It is a closed system'" [Wolcott 1995:134].

We are in a closed system indeed. We are swimming alone in our academic waters, and we find many ways to keep others out. We are actively closing ourselves off from wider conversations. Make no mistake about this: it's no accident. I am going to talk about three ways we do this.

One, of course, is by allowing all of our work to be hidden behind ridiculous pay walls. I don't know about any of you, but I am usually not willing to pay upwards of 30 dollars to download a single 12-15 page article. Never mind the fact that none of the people I know outside of academia--and I am talking about people who might actually be interested in reading about contemporary anthropology--would even

THINK about paying that amount of money for one article. That's more than the cost of many books! Paywalls. That's one reason why we are basically swimming alone in our private little pool.

The second way we close ourselves off? Language. You know, I suppose it's perfectly fine to write in academic-ese for internal conversations. I know that some folks make this argument, and I am willing to accept it up to a point. Sure, there are times when we all have to write in ways that just aren't going to be interesting, understandable, or accessible to outside audiences. Maybe because of technical terms, or theoretical references, or what have you. Fine. At the same time, I don't agree with the argument put forth by scholars like Gayatri Spivak, who often defend nearly unreadable texts with the response that there is no other way to communicate complex ideas. I disagree. I think it is indeed possible to communicate complexity in a clear--and even interesting--manner. George Orwell made that point quite well more than 50 years ago. The point is this: the writing styles we choose aren't doing us any favors when it comes to communicating our ideas. And I think this is true in regards to our internal conversations *and* when we are trying to reach non-anthropologists among the general public. We may complain about folks like Jared Diamond, Charles Mann, and David Brooks, but we could certainly learn a thing or two from them.

And finally, the third way in which we manage to close ourselves off from the rest of the world: our use of media. Personally, I think that contemporary anthropology has no shortage of allure for the general public. On various levels, the kind of work we do is actually quite appealing, interesting, and relevant to all kinds of people outside of the discipline. I have learned this in several introductory anthropology classes, where students get excited about everything from the Australopithecines to cultural anthropologists who work with NASCAR drivers. I have had many, many conversations with friends and other people I meet who tell me that the field I am in is "fascinating". The work we do is anything but boring. But we are incredibly gifted at making our work boring to the point of tears because of our incredibly staid use of media. We produce articles. And academic monographs. They satisfy our internal political economic needs, and we can use them in classes. Yawn. Time to rethink some things.

Since I talked about three problems, I need to be a responsible anthropological citizen and at least offer up three solutions. Here goes:

1. We need to ditch the pay walls and work toward a sustainable open access system. This doesn't mean that everything is going to be free. Peter Suber and others will tell you that open access does not mean that magical fairies come down and remove all costs. But we need to go open access, people. Because keeping all of our ideas locked behind paywalls is not only economically prohibitive, it's also completely unnecessary. Things don't have to be this way. We can find a way to share our ideas. We can do something else. There are options--we just have to stop giving into the "it's impossible to change the current system" kind of thinking. I mean, seriously, didn't we at least pretend to read what Gramsci was talking about with the whole hegemony thing? The good news is that there are people who are working on the open access front. Go seek out folks from *Savage Minds*, or Jason Jackson, or Tom Boellstorff. If we are really serious about sharing our ideas, then we need to push the OA conversation forward. Like yesterday.

2. We need to rethink how we write. This is the language problem. We need to stop speaking solely in our own internal dialects. What this means, to me, is that we need to make writing, communication, and the production of media a more central part of our methods and training. I think all too often we assume that people somehow magically learn how to write along the way through undergraduate and graduate programs. Well, that doesn't always happen. I was lucky to have a community college teacher who looked at my second-rate Jack Kerouac-inspired verbal ramblings and said: "Ok, you need to stop that now." She made me learn to write concise three page papers and we worked our way up from there. It's a process. I have a lot work ahead of me. Keep in mind the fact that Kerouac wrote tirelessly in the style of Thomas Wolfe before he started pushing literary boundaries. He also wrote--a lot. After years and

years of work, he definitely knew what he was doing when he sat down at his old Underwood typewriter with a blank sheet of paper.

The point is this: writing and communication take time to learn. And since the final product of most anthropological research ends up in written form, why not focus on writing as a key anthropological skill and method, as opposed to some THING we just happen to pick up along the way? At present, folks like David Brooks, Jared Diamond, and Tom Friedman are running the show in public conversations about topics that could seriously benefit from some anthropological participation. This happens, in part, because of certain limitations in how we write and publish. Love them or hate them, but Brooks and company are able to communicate their ideas effectively and consistently to wide audiences. We are letting a lot of people do our work for us when it comes to public discourse. But there's no reason why we things can't change. It's all on us.

3. The last point is about media. It's about time to rethink how we use and produce media. I am not talking about ditching books and articles and doing Pink Floyd style light shows at Chichen Itza. I am talking about placing great emphasis on how we present our ideas. There is really no reason why an article or book has to be boring--and all of them certainly are not boring. There are plenty of anthropologists who are trying to push the boundaries with the kinds of books they are publishing--*Righteous Dopefiend* by Philippe Bourgois being a recent example. And we need more of this. But we also need to think beyond the books and articles, and maybe embrace a renewed conversation with the visual anthropology crowd, for starters. They have lots of ideas. We can also get a little inspiration from folks like Keith Hart, Jason Antrosio, Daniel Lende, Kristina Killgrove, Barbara King, Alex Golub, Kerim Friedman, Colleen Morgan and others who are pushing anthropology online. We need more of that too--and could take a few tips from other examples, like the sociologists who run Contexts and sites like Sociological Images. They have a pretty nice online presence. And if we are serious about sharing anthropology, then we need to rethink what we are doing with our online presence as well.

It's about time for a conclusion, so here it is: After the passing of anthropologist Michel Rolf Trouillot, Jason Antrosio wrote a poignant post on his site *Living Anthropology*. His basic point was this: When it comes to all of the important social and political issues that make the headlines every day, where are the voices of anthropologists? Why are anthropological voices not right in there with those of Brooks, Friedman, Krugman, and so many others? What's with the silence? Why, he asks, isn't anthropology stepping out, speaking out, and taking part in these crucial conversations?

Jason argues--and I agree--that things do not have to be this way. He implores us to "seize anthropology's faith in human possibility, creativity, and hope, making this the time when anthropology changed everything." He's right. The potential is there, and we just have to be willing to break open the closed system that we have accepted for far too long. We have effectively been on radio silence, by and large, since the days when the general public actually knew a thing or two about anthropologists like Margaret Mead, even Franz Boas. Now is the time. And the first step toward making this happen is this: we need to make this kind of public dialog and engagement count. What this means is that we cannot measure our value solely based upon the metrics of closed-off, insular, internally-focused communication and publishing regimes. If we want to share anthropology and truly open it up to wider audiences, then sharing has to count, and it has to be valued.

Look around this room. I'll bet that 99 percent of the audience is composed of anthropologists. So that means this is another one of our internal conversations. Let me be clear: there's nothing wrong with this. We need to have these conversations among ourselves. They are valuable and productive and meaningful. They matter. But we also need to push these conversations outside of ourselves, beyond our closed publications and conferences. We need to open things up, to share the research, ideas, and insights we have to offer. Because what we do matters. And people need to hear about it. Thank you.

## References

Antrosio, Jason. 2012. The Headline I Wish We Were Reading: Anthropology Changed Everything. Living Anthropologically. < <http://www.livinganthropologically.com/2012/07/08/should-be-reading-anthropology-changed-everything/> >

Bougois, Philippe. 2009. Righteous Dopefiend. University of California Press.

Wolcott, Harry. 1995. The Art of Fieldwork. Altamira Press.