Open Access and Academic Publishing: An interview with Colleen Morgan

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Savage Minds Interview with Colleen Morgan.

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Open Access and Academic Publishing: An interview with Colleen Morgan

The following is from an email-based interview with Colleen Morgan, who runs the blog Middle Savagery. These days I have a lot of questions about the direction(s) of anthropology, especially when it comes to the publication and dissemination of the information that anthropologists produce.

Originally published on November 22, 2009.

Ryan Anderson: What do you think about the current model for academic publishing?

Colleen Morgan: I think that we are currently seeing academic publishing in flux—in academic disciplines such as physics, you see a wide engagement with open access publication, but in anthropology and archaeology we are still struggling with the complexities involved with our unique disciplines. In archaeology we have several different forms of data that we collect and there is not a robust, viable methodology for integrating these data in traditional publication or online. I think that there is still a lot of resistance to open access publication, and while there are some very valid reasons for this resistance such as revealing sacred indigenous knowledge or depicting sacred objects or human remains, the current "closed," paper-based publication model is not viable in the long term. That said, it is a dangerous prospect for graduate students who are trying to publish and establish their research--hiring and tenure are still based solely on peer-reviewed articles in traditional journals.

RA: In your opinion, how well do anthropologists and archaeologists engage with wider audiences?

CM: I think I have a skewed perspective on outreach within the anthropological and archaeological community. In my program at UC Berkeley, we are encouraged to do large amounts of outreach and we are given academic credit for this work. I am sure that this is not the case at other academic institutions and I do not know how much people do on their own. I think that archaeologists in particular do pretty well with outreach in a person-to-person scenario where people come to the site and we explain what we are doing as we work. In other respects we could do more with online outreach, and even more involvement in community-based research.

RA: Should anthropologists/archaeologists try to reach a more public audience?

CM: It is symptomatic of the current mode of the information age that archaeologists are attempting to make our data more available to the public. How much of this information will be lost in the ever increasing digital noise is the question. Fundamentally I show my roots in contract archaeology when I say that of course we should try to reach a wider audience--our funding structure and preservation of sites depends on it.
Ultimately the tension is between our interpretations of the past that show doubt, complexity, and conflict and a public that wants clarity, narrative, and resolution. Can we and should we cater to these impulses when they conflict with our "messy" interpretations? Obviously not, but it takes a good deal of skill to maintain a balance--I am not the Carl Sagan of anthropology, by any means.

RA: What are the benefits of attempting to reach wider audiences? And what about the drawbacks?

CM: Well, as I stated above, the benefits include getting more funding and perhaps saving sites from being completely looted. I will be utterly selfish though, in saying that one of the main benefits to reaching a wider audience is that moment of understanding and interest on a person's face as I describe an artifact or a site to them and they find a personal connection to a place and a way of life that was once far removed from their personal sphere. There are also benefits to learning how adaptable we are as a species and how our social relationships have been very different in the past--different in ways that make our current controversies over sex and religion seem rather minor.

The drawbacks have become even more pronounced for me in my more recent work in the Middle East with the highly politicized views of the past, especially in regard to the Bible and Islam. I am just beginning to negotiate these territories, but I still feel that it is important for us to share our finds, and be the major source of information about these finds. It is important in these cases to be comfortable in one's role as the interpreter of this information and to be available to rebut outrageous or inflammatory reuse of our data.

RA: How do you think information will be published and disseminated in the near future? What changes do you imagine (or hope) will take place, if any? If you could change anything about the current model, what would it be?

CM: In stark contrast with my interest in digital archaeology, I would dearly love some of the old modes of visual communication back, such as medium format photography and Victorian-grade site artists for illustrations. As I grow more comfortable with photography and 3D reconstructions, I get a greater appreciation for the interpretive potential of these older technologies. I hope that in the future there is room (and funding!) for all of these representations. The dream is obviously to have the uber-database with all archaeological materials and sites cataloged in a geo-located, cross-referenced, folksonomic structure, but finding the time, money, and legion of monkeys at typewriters to do all of the data entry is problematic, to put it mildly.

In the short term, I don't see much of a change in publishing and dissemination, sadly. I think that we will see a greater availability of traditionally published articles and books, but big innovations will be slow to come because they are not rewarded financially or academically. There is also not an established peer review system for digital materials and there are only a handful of archaeologists trained in digital methodologies to critically evaluate these works. A lot of my work is at a very foundational level, coming up with citational strategies and showing the relevance of a particular technological application to theoretical and interpretive archaeological work.
One relatively small change that I would like to see in the digital publication world is a move toward Creative Commons licensing for all archaeological photography. There really is no reason to keep the rights for images locked up and not many people respect these copyrights anyway.