

## Chipping into the debate on Open Access

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As the incoming co-editor of the Journal of Material Culture, as well as one of the editors here at Material World Blog, I have been involved in many conversations regarding the politics, economics, and materiality of Open Access.

It is clear that there is great concern about open access in many arena from policy (see for instance, the UK's Finch Report "[Accessibility, sustainability, excellence: how to expand access to research publications](#)"), within academia (see the [discussion](#) on Open Access in the new online only journal, Hau and [this](#) interview with Tim Ingold) and in the world of cyber-(h)activism (a good [summary](#) of the Aaron Schwartz case is actually presented on JSTOR's website).

It's hard to find a place in which all the issues in fact coalesce: some people are concerned about democratizing accessibility to research (particularly across national borders, and to people without the support of privileged universities). Others are concerned about who should pay for, and who should profit, from academic publications. Yet others are interested in the implications of Gold open access (where authors pay or fundraise for their individual articles to be made publicly available) or Green (where final versions of peer-reviewed articles are placed within institutional repositories) on the form of journals as the need for issues is replaced by an emphasis on individual articles. Many of us are wondering about the implications current policy requirements have for open access on the fate of academic monographs and are also following with interest the move in the sciences towards "open data" (which naturalizes many assumptions about data versus research, and raises problems for past informed consent and research ethical clearances). Finally, lies the overarching question of value: how is research valuable and for whom, who should profit and how. For instance, I was intrigued to have the value of peer review laid out as "in kind donations" by a representative of Taylor and Francis.

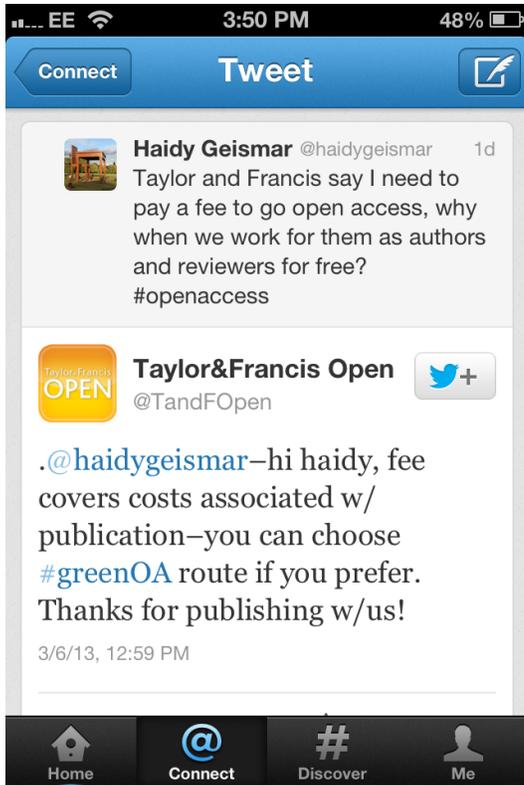
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Below, is an editorial upcoming in the Journal of Material Culture, laying out our current concerns and thinking about Open Access. The journal is undertaking a [survey](#) of readers. If you are a reader of the JMC please take some time to fill it out. If you aren't a reader, you can still take the survey, skipping the couple of questions specific to the journal. The link is [here](#).

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### On Open Access and journal futures

All academics are, by now, aware of the on-going discussions and key policy directives concerning “open access”. Philosophically, open access publishing has the potential to circulate scholarship more broadly and democratically, to more diverse audiences, allowing for potentially greater impact of, and engagement with, research. Logistically, thinking about how to achieve open access also provokes us to rethink how we evaluate the labour that goes into academic publishing, who should be entitled to profit from academic research, and who research is really for. Pragmatically, many important questions are currently being raised about the allocation of resources for the

dissemination of academic researchers and the sustainability of academic publishing.

In the United Kingdom, where the editorial board of the journal of Material culture is based, the National Research Councils, the primary organs of British academic funding, have stipulated that in future their audits will only accept Open Access publications, which will make research funded by taxpayer money available to all readers without subscription. The UK Government commissioned a working group, chaired by the sociologist Dame Janet Finch, to evaluate the best methods to achieve Open Access. Their report, "*Accessibility, Sustainability, Excellence: how to expand access to research publications*" (2012) identifies two principle routes to open access. The Gold route involves direct payments by the author (or their research grant or university) to the publishers to cover the costs of publication and distribution. The Green route, which is supported by most publishers, permits authors to make available the final accepted, but unbranded or copyedited, version of the article through their institutional repository, usually after a specified period of embargo. Details such as fees or periods of embargo vary considerably from press to press.

Members of the *Journal of Material Culture's* editorial board have been discussing these issues for some time. One of our founding editors was recently part of a broader debate in the new online journal *Hau* ([www.haujournal.org](http://www.haujournal.org)). In his piece, Daniel Miller (2012) argued that anthropologists in particular have an obligation to ensure that the people they work with should have access to research and that we have a moral responsibility to make our work as accessible as possible. Since then, we have been considering the different models available and discussing with great seriousness the future of the journal, entering into conversation with Sage, our publisher, and with UCL's Library and Repository services. Our discussions have highlighted that the issues are in fact more complex than those presented in the Finch report. The wider contexts include the ethics of accessibility; the shift from print to digital publishing (with potential for additional visual and other materials); and the shift from print to online consumption. It also raises hard questions about how "profits" are defined and who should benefit from research outputs.

### **The problem with Gold**

The Finch report is generally concerned with the UK situation, and is responding to concerns by both national publishers and funding bodies. Since 2007, the share of submissions to the JMC from within the UK has fallen nearly year on year, and now stands at roughly 20%. We currently receive about as many submissions from North America and Continental Europe. The Finch report also does not concern itself with unfunded research. In this journal, funded research comprises about one third of published articles in the past 5 years and its share shows a falling trend, accounting for only 10% in 2012 and 5% in 2013: and just 20-30% of submissions between 2011 and 2013. Whilst the Gold route makes open access the decision of individual authors, from the perspective of the journal we cannot think of open access solely in the narrow and exclusive terms of work produced by UK funded researchers.

In turn, publishing houses are notoriously opaque in quantifying the price of journal publication,

especially article by article. If the burden of financial support is being passed onto individual authors, do they not have a right to know how the money is spent, what percentage is profit for the shareholders of the company, and what is not included in the business model? Editors and reviewers are perhaps the most essential part of a journal's "value", yet their work is considered to be a "time/expertise donated4free" (@Taylor&Francis Open 2013). In fact, commercial publishers are also concerned about the Gold model, which shifts the burden of paying for future articles onto authors but still maintains a subscription model for back issues and articles not paid for by authors to be open access, a phenomenon that has come to be called "double dipping".

For all of these reasons, as academic editors we do not favor the principles of the Gold model. We do not think that shifting the decision to go open access onto individual authors is good for the integrity of journals as a whole and we challenge the economic rationale behind the pricing of the Gold route.

### **The problem with Green**

Whilst making an important leap towards accessibility, the Green model also raises significant problems from the standpoint of both journals and authors. Like the Gold route, the Green route transforms journals from curated intellectual conversations into a more ad-hoc presentation of individual research. Green open access requires the additional support of an institutional repository and an institutional investment into a digital infrastructure that will by no means be consistent from institution to institution, or from country to country. It also potentially compromises our scholarly integrity: putting the accepted but not final version online means that there is the potential for multiple versions of articles to circulate with multiple forms of citation, different paginations and so forth. Fundamentally, the Green route places the burden of archiving and maintenance onto the individual repository and also undermines the intellectual support and framing that a journal itself is supposed to provide. We are exploring the possibilities of creating a parallel Green archive for the JMC, but we also wonder how the Green route will ultimately effect the future of journal publication. Both Green and Gold dismantle the structure of journals in favour of the dissemination of individual articles and it is important to evaluate the impact of this on the editorial policies and intellectual framing of journals.

### **What do we mean by "Free"?**

Both Gold and Green routes demonstrate that open access may ensure an opening up of readers, but that there are still significant costs. The recent success of the new online only, open access anthropology publication *Hau*, demonstrates that open access journals can work well, but also demonstrates that they depend upon significant financial support from Higher Education (or equivalent) Institutions as well as a significant amount of freely donated labour. In the longer term is this a model that can be applied to the entire realm of academic publishing? This journal certainly requires a robust institutional framework that ensures the income and the labour required for its production. It is important to carefully assess what kinds of support journals need to be successful,

ethical, *and* sustainable.

Alongside the supportive environments of some universities and learned societies, organizations such as JSTOR have been established to consolidate and archive scholarly material, made available by subscription, but on a non-profit basis. Whilst it is not without its detractors, as the Aaron Schwartz case made clear, JSTOR makes its content available for free or at low cost to high schools and to other institutions in more than 69 countries. The cost of its subscription has not gone up since 1997 (source: <http://about.jstor.org/10things>). In turn, it does not claim copyright on any of the material it archives which means that that material may freely (or at cost) circulate elsewhere as well. Perhaps the non-profit model of economic costing and institutional infrastructure instantiated by JSTOR, and some University Presses, alongside the critical regime of the creative commons license, will create a publishing ecology that is both ethical and liberal, allowing authors to make strategic choices within a strong framework of accountability.

We also wonder if the possibilities of electronic publishing have been realized within academic journals as they transition to online. At present online journals generally maintain the form (largely text based), the structure (set numbers of issues per year, set word limits for articles) and the coherence (themed issues, centralized editorial staff) of print publications. Yet we now have the capacity to present other kinds of data hyperlinked and internally cross-referenced. We can present articles simultaneously in multiple languages, amongst many other possibilities. What are the implications of electronic media for the form of the journal essay – a tightly written textual argument, limited to a set number of words or pages? These developments are attractive, especially for a journal such as ours, but may require further costs and skill-sets that cannot be taken for granted amongst most academics involved in editing journals.

The climate of open access has therefore provided an opportunity to rethink the intellectual framework, as well as the economy, of scholarly publications. Accessibility means more than electronic circulation – it requires us to think about the politics of language, of inclusion at every level, to understand our current and possible constituencies, and how we may best engage with them. The current shift of publishing practice must make us reflect on the intellectual frameworks and aspirations of academic journals, as well as on their place in the world. Conceptualizing open access as the reduction of each article to a single payment makes what should be a collective and on-going conversation and responsibility into a one-time individual decision.

We are currently debating all of these issues at the JMC so that we can make a considered decision about the future of the journal, in terms of its form, content and its model of distribution. Before any decisions are made, we would very much like to solicit the views of our readers. So please take some time to answer the short survey below by following its link. Our readership is the most important part of our community and we would like to hear from you.

Survey Link: <http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/WK73QPM>

Haidy Geismar and Susanne Kuchler, Editors, Journal of Material Culture

(with thanks to Daniel Miller, UCL Anthropology and Martin Moyle, UCL Libraries)

## References

Miller, Daniel 2012 Open Access, Scholarship and Digital Anthropology, *Hau* 2 385-411

@Taylor&FrancisOpen, Twitter exchange with @haidygeismar July 3, 2013.

And

Our editor at Sage, very kindly provided us with a series of links about OA publishing from their perspective, focused around a conference they convened in association with the Academy for Social Sciences and the British Academy.

\* View conference presentations that Sage organized at LSE to discuss Open Access [here](#) and [here](#)

\* Watch the recording of the event [here](#)

\* View the twitter [conversations](#), and [here](#), and [here](#)