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MAT response to current concerns around OA & anthropology

— Eileen Moyer, Vinh-Kim Nguyen

18 Jun 2018

At *MAT* we have been following closely the discussion around HAU particularly as it has unfolded since David Graeber's public apology on 11 June. As coeditors, Eileen and I would like to respond on behalf of the *MAT* community.

1. We believe open access is not only important but indeed the future of academic publishing. OA is vital for ensuring that scientific knowledge is available to those who otherwise do not have access, particularly in the global South. While many journals strive to improve access in the global South, in our experience this is in practice difficult. *MAT* is completely open and free for its readers. We designed the website so its content is available for immediate perusal as HTML, rather than being limited to downloading PDFs which creates an obstacle where bandwidth is low. It is important to not lose sight of the broader political project of which OA is the expression. We believe that OA is not only a viable but a vital model for the future of a more open and accessible anthropology, and that current difficulties experienced by one journal do not in any way call into question this broader vision.

2. An explicit reason *MAT* was founded was to counter what we worried was increasing inequality in academic medical anthropology, namely, the growing divide between largely self-referential and hermetic debates in elite US anthropological journals and the rest of the world. Our concern was that theoretical debates in medical anthropology – and by extension the conceptual tools we use around the world to investigate questions relating to power, subjectivity, and the body – were increasingly dominated by those in a handful of American universities. In this view, intellectual labour is done in the centre while application is done in the periphery, shaping the field in problematic ways that merit discussion (as has been begun here). Relatedly, we believe that the concept of open access encompasses issues of language and legibility, and we strongly emphasize the use of plain language rather than jargon, and the building of theory from actual front-line medical-anthropological practice.

3. *MAT* is a collective of volunteers who are broadly representative of academia: PhD students, postdocs, professors, researchers. We meet face to face in our respective institutions and regularly by Skype for those afar. Our core values, which reflect those of OA, are of collegiality, generosity, respect, and trust. We therefore believe that the social relations that allow us to produce shared value need not be inevitably viewed in terms of wage labour and commodity; to do so in fact reproduces a neoliberal vision of scholarly activity as piece-work to be remunerated in a gig economy. As a result we do not believe volunteer labour is inherently exploitative, but we are keenly aware of the potential for it to be, particularly in light of our fieldwork in various global health projects in Africa and the Middle East (there volunteer labour is often obtained on the implicit or explicit promise of future employment in global health efforts: see Ruth Prince and Hannah Brown, *Volunteer Economies: The Politics and Ethics of Voluntary Labour in Africa*, Boydell and Brewer, 2016). Intellectual labour, such as that performed by our section editors, interns, and reviewers, can be done in the service of intellectual community and for professional development. As editors, we feel it is part of our responsibility to ensure that volunteers are not burdened by their work for *MAT*, and we work with individuals to create publishing goals and timelines that we all agree are reasonable and doable. We do not require that our volunteers already be salaried employees but most are.

4. *MAT* has an advisory board that meets yearly to discuss and provide input on the management of the journal, including publication output, staffing, special issues, finances, and long-term viability. Discussions at these meetings have generated creative developments, such as the new ‘Interventions’ section and our use of an open review process for submissions to that section. Financial accountability rests with the two institutions (the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva and the University of Amsterdam) through which the journal receives support and pays its expenses. We are beginning discussions with the Board to identify our successors, as we had always planned to renew *MAT*’s leadership after five years at the helm.

5. In 2013–14, *MAT* did indeed engage with the only other English-language open-access journal in anthropology at the time: *HAU*. We had a series of discussions and met with Mr Da Col in the spirit of solidarity and to explore possibilities for collaboration. We decided against pursuing any relationship with him due to the substance and tenor of those discussions.

6. While we have had friendly discussions with one academic publisher who wished to integrate *MAT* into their portfolio of journals, we decided not to pursue it as we felt that the potential disadvantages in terms of pursuing our vision outweighed the relatively minor financial benefit.

7. As a nonprofit undertaking, we have been exploring different strategies to make the journal sustainable, and our business model is evolving as we grow and learn. Our basic operating expenses include the design and maintenance of our website, fees for Crossref and archiving, one part-time managing editor, one part-time editorial assistant, and freelance proofreading support. For the past five years, *MAT*’s relatively small budget was funded through grants from the European Research Council, the Graduate Institute, and the University of Amsterdam. As we have become more established, we have begun to charge modest amounts for special issues corresponding to the costs of the additional editing labour entailed, and we reduce or waive those fees for authors from the global South who do not have recourse to institutional or grant-based support. Over the long term, we expect the journal will be funded through a mix of institutional support shared across universities and contributions from authors’ grants for the publication of research. It is worth noting that a growing number of funders require the research they be funded by published in OA journals and this be appropriately budgeted for.

8. In terms of content and process, we continue to tinker, invent, and explore new avenues to support intellectual creativity and experimentation, as we hope you will find in our Think Pieces and Interventions sections, our Photo Essays, and soon in our relaunched Nightstand section. Since mid-2017 we have been trialling an open peer review process in our Interventions and Think Piece sections, and we continue to strive to introduce a more interactive format. Our vision is that *MAT* serves as a platform for truly global and inclusive conversations on issues addressing the politics of health, illness, and biomedicine around the world.

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