

The First 50 Years

How Editing *Current Anthropology* Set My Goals as Wenner-Gren President

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The measure of an academic journal for me is not how many years it has existed but how well it has fulfilled its mission over that period. *Current Anthropology* from its very beginning set out to break away from academic orthodoxy and to ignore disciplinary status hierarchies—the “CA☆ Treatment” and the CA community of scholars that Sol Tax introduced set the journal on a progressive course 50 years ago. *Current Anthropology* was to honor the most forward-looking anthropology, and it was to create a world community of scholars (see Bennett 1996; Fox 1996). I suppose only in our day, when the commodification of academic research is commonplace, do we have to add that the journal was meant to defend the integrity of scholarship against anything that threatened to subvert and cheapen it or to put a price tag on intellectual publication.

I am very happy that I had a hand in furthering this mission and bringing the journal forward toward its fiftieth anniversary. Actually, I had two hands in it—first as Editor of *Current Anthropology* (1992–2000) and then as President of the Wenner-Gren Foundation (2000–2005). My duties as editor and as president were quite different and my relationship with the journal naturally altered. Nevertheless, I feel my time at CA led me to recognize that the goals Sol Tax had set for the journal ought to be the same ones pursued by the Foundation.

My unique experience was to have become the president of the Foundation in 2000 while I was still serving as editor of the journal, and the overlap continued for about six months. By the summer of 2000, I had very fortunately replaced myself with Ben Orlove, who proved an exceptionally good editor. When Ben took over, I ceded all editorial decisions to him; Wenner-Gren practice was that the president should give the editor discretion over the journal’s contents. As president, however, I became responsible for overseeing the journal’s finances, distribution, and marketing and any production issues related to them.

As editor, I made some changes in format, some of which continue in the journal today. I introduced the forums on anthropology in public and on theory in anthropology and the special issues devoted to a single topic, often published as an additional issue or supplement (and which has now

been formalized into a sixth annual issue). I am glad that the Foundation accepted my recommendation to introduce a reduced subscription rate for the unemployed and underemployed, and I also gratefully acknowledge my two editorial assistants: Rose Passalacqua, who set up the CA office and managed it for five years with efficiency, intelligence, and a wry spirit (there is even more reason for me now to celebrate Rose’s fine work: she passed away on September 29, 2009); and Rebecca Taylor, whose three-year stint included dealing with me as an absentee editor and handling the transition when Ben took over, both of which she managed with aplomb and an endearing goodwill.

I believe the most enduring legacy of my editorship was putting the journal online, or, as we said then, creating an “electronic edition.” *Current Anthropology* was the first major journal in anthropology to appear in print and also electronically. What better way in the 1990s to further the goals that Sol Tax had set for the journal than putting it online? That’s the way I felt as editor about taking CA “electronic.” Later, as Foundation president, I came to feel that CA online was Wenner-Gren’s most successful program overall for fulfilling the Foundation’s mission to create and spread anthropological knowledge.

The decision to produce an electronic edition was reached fairly rapidly in the mid-1990s, but the implementation took some time, and the first online journal issue appeared only in December 1999. The first issue with “enhancements” online (see the next paragraph) appeared in February 2000, just after I had become president of the Foundation but before I had turned over the editorship. Robert Shirrell, then the head of the University of Chicago Journals Division, encouraged me to think of an electronic edition, and Sydel Silverman, then the Foundation president, supported us. Bob even then anticipated the revolution in academic publication brought about by the Internet, and he strongly urged us to grab the initiative rather than be laggard. He had already successfully launched some science journals online, and in that process, UC Press had built up the staff and technical knowledge that we would need to put *Current Anthropology* online.

Our online edition was not to be simply a facsimile of the print journal, however. Glenn Stone, my colleague in anthropology at Washington University in St. Louis, educated me about the great potential of electronic publication to incorporate material not possible to include in print versions. For example, sound files could greatly enhance articles about language, linguistics, or ethnomusicology, and graphic files could provide the maps and diagrams for archaeology articles. There could be hyperlinks in an article’s citations to take readers to the original source or to link them with discussion groups that carried debate over the article beyond the print version and its commentaries. Many of these “enhancements” to the print version, as we came to call them, are commonplace today, but in the mid-1990s it took the vision of Glenn and Bob to incorporate them—or anyway, their possibility—

into the planning for the electronic edition of *Current Anthropology*.

The Press had to gain the technical capacity to include such enhancements in online publication—the science journals had not required anything comparable. At the journal, we had to alert anthropologists—both readers and scholars submitting manuscripts—to the potential for enhancements and to change their view about the very nature of an academic publication, so that it now incorporated the expanded possibilities opened up by the Internet. It turned out that we were not very successful in doing so. Most anthropologists seemed content with the conventions of print publication, and the Internet's potential for enhancements has yet to be fully realized (see my subsequent discussion of JSTOR).

When I became president of Wenner-Gren, I reworded the Foundation's mission statement to emphasize the goals that I had learned to value from editing "Sol's journal" (as I like to think of *CA*). Underwriting new anthropological knowledge and strengthening a world community of scholars were my major concerns, and *CA* was naturally to continue as a major means toward these goals. But now, as president, I had to deal with other issues facing the journal. The consequences of electronic publication—on editing, finances, and scholarly publication in general—were becoming more apparent. There was also a burgeoning academic backlash against scholarly journals, given the speed, freedom, and cost savings offered by direct online publication.

One issue with major consequences was technical, relating to the editing of the journal and the preparation of copy for publication. The University of Chicago Press used a system that produced the print and the electronic version from the same computer file. Codes embedded in such files generated the various headings, fonts, and other formats found in an article. Standard operating procedure was to be that the UC Press staff added these codes to the computer files sent by authors, at the same time that the staff (in effect, lightly) copyedited the texts.

That standard operating procedure would not do for *Current Anthropology* because it made no allowance for Barbara Metzger, our trusted copy editor, to continue preparing the journal for publication. Barbara Metzger was, I believe, the most important asset *Current Anthropology* had—and it was the journal's astounding good fortune to have had her dedication and fine efforts for almost all of its existence. Her insightful editing had benefited numerous anthropologists, both those who wrote major articles and the many more who wrote the commentaries composing the *CA*☆ Treatment. Her regard among anthropologists, especially those who were not native English writers, no doubt exceeded that accorded any editor, and probably for good reason.

Academic journals were under increasing attack at this time by scholars who wished to go around the journals and "publish" directly on the Internet, as had now become possible. They saw journals as pricey, slow, and resistant to innovative ideas, and they placed little value on the "lite" copyediting

that many journals had begun to provide. *Current Anthropology*, however, could point to the commentaries that accompanied major articles and to Barbara Metzger's substantial copyediting as "adding value" in a way that direct electronic publication did not. In the event, we worked out a system by which Barbara continued to do her splendid work for the journal, but the Press could work up her copy for generating both print and electronic versions. No doubt it was not the most efficient system or the most cost effective, but it was the only one that I felt safeguarded Sol's goals.

Another issue of quality I had to deal with as president related to the bibliographic service JSTOR. Most journals indexed on JSTOR maintain a "moving wall" by which there is a gap of two or three years before a volume of the journal gets entered into the archive. Such a moving wall would have been my preference, except that JSTOR did not then have the technical capacity (and evidently still does not) to incorporate the enhancements that *CA*'s electronic edition contained. Since the electronic version is the edition of record, JSTOR's inability to include the enhancements meant that volumes after 1999 (when enhancements first appeared) have never been archived and are not available to scholars through JSTOR. My hope is that JSTOR and other such services will soon catch up with the online enhancements that *CA* innovated and Wenner-Gren supported in furthering Sol's goals.

The biggest—and most enduring—consequence of electronic publication was its effects on subscription rates and revenue from the journal. By subscribing to the journal, universities gained not only a print copy but also a site license for the electronic edition. Any student or faculty member at that institution therefore could access the online edition, and we expected the journal to be more widely read and used in classes as a consequence.

We also expected that subscriptions by individuals would fall precipitously as they gained access through a campuswide site license. Because *Current Anthropology* was not supported by a membership organization, as the *American Anthropologist* or *American Ethnologist* were, the loss of subscription revenue through electronic access was a very real and significant issue for the president. The Foundation could underwrite only so much loss at *Current Anthropology* before other Wenner-Gren programs were endangered. With the help of Maugha Kenny, the Foundation's chief financial officer, and Bob Shirrell, I began to consider other pricing structures—for example, allowing print-only or electronic-only subscriptions, creating a fee structure for access to single articles, and the like. Our goal was to continue *CA* as a relatively inexpensive journal, for both institutions and individuals, and as a journal that recognized global economic inequality (by charging institutions and individuals in so-called A countries more than those in B countries—a distinction started by Sol). These issues necessarily remained "under construction" when I retired in 2005.

In retrospect, I think the period from the mid-1990s until the mid-2000s was transitional for the journal, as it and the

Foundation coped with the scholarly, distributional, and financial changes brought about by the way computers, e-mail, and the Internet changed academe. The goals of the journal remained stable, however, and furthermore, they were translated to a new venue, as an editor happened to become a president.

References Cited

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