

The First 50 Years

Current Anthropology as an International Forum

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Current Anthropology was designed to be a worldwide community of scholars, and for a while it was. While Sol Tax was editor, the journal served as a kind of newsletter in which anthropologists from many countries communicated with each other on a variety of levels—not only contributing, refereeing, and commenting in print on articles but also announcing and reporting on conferences, asking for correspondence on research topics, recommending books, and describing the institutions they belonged to and the national traditions of anthropology in which they worked. The members of this community were called “Associates in *Current Anthropology*,” and they expected to be asked to participate in writing and commenting on contributions to the journal. By 1962 there were 2,471 of them, and 1,467 of them lived in 88 countries outside North America.

A tear-out reply letter addressed to the editor’s office and ready to be folded and mailed was included in every issue, and each one asked for a response on some aspect of the developing shape and scope of the journal. A letter to Associates typically produced some hundred or more responses that were tabulated, reported on, and used as the basis for decision making. Additional letters offering suggestions and airing complaints were printed on the first page of each issue. As Tax explained in an interview with Robert Rubinstein published in the April 1991 issue, “to print answers, suggestions, and especially complaints was our most important obligation.”

To facilitate direct contacts among Associates, a list of their names, addresses, and research interests was published in the journal once a year, and eventually there were successive editions of an international directory of anthropologists (the first since 1938) and one of anthropological institutions—all mailed to Associates as part of the journal. (The last of these lists, the hardbound *Fifth International Directory of Anthropologists*, which appeared in 1975, contained 4,752 entries, three times that of the 1938 original.)

The list “Publications Received” in every issue included many non-English titles, and “Journal Contents” regularly surveyed the contents of some 40 journals distributed around the world. Components of a proposed multilingual glossary

of anthropological terms were published in several issues, and an international dictionary of anthropology was planned.

The articles submitted to *Current Anthropology* were sent to referees selected partly from the list of Associates and partly from among 10–15 names supplied by the author. According to a summary of the system published in “Letter to Associates No. 41” (October 1967), each manuscript was sent to 20 referees. Given a minimum of five replies, if a majority favored publication, the author was offered the opportunity to take the comments into account in a final version. Then the article was set in type in preliminary form and mailed to as many as 50 Associates with a request for comments that would be published at the same time as the article. Every comment returned was printed. Originally there was an attempt to have the author incorporate the comments into his article, but this proved impractical and was soon abandoned in favor of printing them after the article and following this with the author’s reply. This printed exchange, which became known as “CA☆ treatment,” became the hallmark of the journal. Over time there were refinements in the process: photocopies of the articles (and, eventually, e-mail attachments) were sent out instead of proofs, the number of scholars invited to comment was reduced, and limits were imposed on the length of comments (the first being 1,000 words, a recent one 800). The system flourished, and the founders of *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* were inspired to set up one like it.

The scholars Tax consulted before launching *Current Anthropology* had decided that the journal should be published in English—this being the second language that most readers would be familiar with—with translation from the contributor’s language of choice being an option. The information for authors on the inside front cover was printed at one time or another in Arabic, Chinese, Czech, French, German, Hindi, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian, Serbo-Croatian, and Spanish (in translations provided by interested speakers of those languages). Getting adequate translations of articles and abstracts required heroic efforts in the early years, when international mail was slow and unreliable; there was no Internet, no fax, and no express courier service; and members of the staff (largely part-time graduate students) were ill-equipped to assess translations from Associates’ many languages. One article, sent out for comment in a translation that the author had not yet seen, required multiple corrections and successive mailings to make sure that the comments on it that were eventually printed referred only to things that the author had meant to say. A long translation from Russian printed without the author’s approval required the publication of two full journal pages of corrections once he had had a chance to review it.

At the end of the first year (September–November 1960), Tax summarized the distribution by country of major articles and comments (overwhelmingly from the United States, though less so for comments) and asked, “How is the journal to become as international as the community of Associates

in CA?" He pointed out that an editor's selection of articles was "colored by the prior self-selection manifest in what appears in his mailbox" and suggested, "It may well be that self-criticism of language competence has been in part responsible for the relative dearth of articles from outside the U.S.A." He went on: "We hope we have made a good start on demonstrating that (a) an editorial staff which is aided by authors as co-operative as those publishing in CA, and by helpful professionals on the local scene as well, can satisfactorily cope with any version of English on any subject and that (b) nothing is published without prior approval from its author." When he hired me to copyedit the journal in 1964, he said that my job was to be making sure that differences in language competence among Associates didn't interfere with their scholarly communication.

With an article written by a native speaker of English, the objectives of copyediting were clarity, economy, the avoidance of jargon and of local references that might put a non-native speaker of English at a disadvantage, and civility. With a contribution written in English by a speaker of some other language or a translation from some other language, an additional objective was the elimination of any awkwardness of expression that might obscure what the writer intended. Our guides were *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language* (and subsequent revisions) and the *Oxford English Dictionary* (so that we could preserve contributors' British spellings), the University of Chicago's *Manual of Style*, and Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*. Much later, the *Oxford Guide to English Usage* helped me to be more sensitive in editing in British. (For reasons of practicality in printing and proofreading we never attempted to retain British punctuation, but no one ever made an issue of it.)

In "Letter to Associates No. 47" (February 1969), at Tax's request, I described what I was trying to do as follows:

The aim of my copyediting is more effective communication. Communication is served, I think, by (1) adherence to the conventions of standard academic English with regard to sentence construction, punctuation, spelling, and choice of words; (2) concise statement—elimination of redundancy and irrelevancy; (3) logical ordering of statements; and (4) moderation in emotional tone. . . . Every edited paper goes back to the author for approval, and any substantive change he cannot see as an improvement is abandoned. . . . The ultimate justification of editing is the author's free acceptance of the edited version as clearer and more concise than the original but still definitely his own. . . . I hope . . . that contributors to CA will look upon my work as an attempt to help them say what they want to say more clearly and that they will feel free to tell me when I fail in that attempt.

Over the years, people did, of course, tell me that I'd misunderstood them, and it was sometimes possible to resolve our differences with an alternative that didn't lend itself to the same misunderstanding. Every so often someone would

object to the very idea that his work might benefit from editing and insist that the original be restored. In a few cases a contributor objected to the editing of the *comments* on his article on the ground that my interference had strengthened the criticism of it, and one of them even threatened to sue the journal on this account.

Corrections of grammar and punctuation were usually uncontroversial, though one contributor protested, when I insisted on the possessive before a gerund, that "no one bothers with that any more." Persuading contributors to avoid jargon was harder, especially with the emergence of fields of study in which word play or the use of the neologisms of founding members was considered essential to internal communication—and it wasn't always possible to achieve complete clarity of expression for outsiders in these cases. (In one instance a commentator who had apparently learned one subdiscipline's special uses of words all too well was puzzled by the use of the word "engendered" in its dictionary meaning in a context that had nothing to do with gender.)

The objective of maintaining civility by discouraging ad hominem argument was the topic of lively discussion in the journal's first years. In "Letter to Associates No. 12" (February 1962), Tax reported on an exchange with a commentator who had objected to the deletion from his comment of personal references that the staff felt "might interfere with the scholarly substantive discussion." This exchange had caused Tax to recognize, he said, that his own belief that "scientific discussion should be unemotional, impersonal, and quiet" was "a possibly ethnocentric opinion" and that he would probably perform his function as editor better by letting the comment stand as written. His request for discussion of this position brought several hundred thoughtful responses from Associates, many of them appreciating his hands-off stance but many others indicating that they too valued civility in scholarly discussion (and several from the commentator's own country reporting that his style wasn't typical there).

In the absence of a clear directive, Tax proposed (in "Letter to Associates No. 23" [April 1964]) that "when a manuscript contains personal references, the author is to be asked to consider carefully if they can be justified by the scientific and scholarly purpose to be served. If the author persists, his remarks are to be published, and furthermore all criticism his personal references evoke is to be published." When ad hominem argument became an issue, it was usually possible to persuade the contributor to criticize the ideas in an article without attacking its author (though sometimes authors, identifying with their ideas, felt attacked nevertheless). Eventually, the publication agreement that all contributors had to sign required a guarantee that their remarks were not libelous, and this helped make the case for moderation.

Generally speaking, contributors who were native speakers of English were accepting and even appreciative of the editing of their work. Contributors who were not native speakers tended to welcome it and even, some of them said, to depend on it. Careful copyediting and proofreading, especially after

the University of Chicago Press added *Current Anthropology* to its list of scholarly journals in the mid-1980s, helped make the journal easier to read for everyone.

Maintaining a worldwide community required time and energy on the part of both staff and scholars. Tax wrote in "Letter to Associates No. 40" (June 1967), "Leaving aside my own time, it now requires a daily average of 60 man-hours (almost all spent in this office) of work to take care of the editing and production of the journal and the management of accounts." Some readers were in fact impatient with the "town meeting" aspect of *Current Anthropology* from the start. (We know this because they wrote the editor's office saying so, and their letters were printed on page 1.) At the same time, the world was changing; the discipline was growing everywhere, communication was becoming easier and less hampered by political strictures, and scholars were facing both more opportunities and more demands on their time. Perhaps for these reasons and perhaps because—despite all his efforts to stand back and let the community decide—it owed a lot to the force of Tax's personality, the idea of *Current Anthropology* as a community gradually faded after he retired.

Cyril Belshaw published an occasional request for advice from Associates and tabulated the responses as part of a section that, while it continued to be called "Our Readers Write," now appeared not on the first page but wherever space could be found at the end of an article. Adam Kuper invited comment from Associates when he took over the editorship (finding then that the journal still commanded from its readers "a profound loyalty and even a certain proprietorial pride") and again halfway through it and reported in print on the results. Richard Fox addressed Associates in his early editorials, but both he and Ben Orlove confined themselves in print to commenting on the contents of particular issues. Both also turned to online sources (by then abundant) rather than a list of Associates to find appropriate referees and commentators, and the list fell into disuse.

The concept of Associates persisted in the summary of information for authors printed in every issue throughout this period, but it disappeared from the table of subscription rates on the inside front cover after June 2001. Finally, the two-tiered subscription rate structure—A for developed countries and B for others—was quietly dropped with the February 2008 issue. (At one time this would have occasioned at least an explanation, if not advance warning and consultation.) "Our Readers Write" dwindled to the occasional letter and finally disappeared in the 1990s. Sol Tax commented on this with, I think, some regret in the 1991 interview mentioned earlier, but, characteristically, he left the matter to the judgment of the "changing and growing world community."

Although *Current Anthropology* began to look more conventional over time, each of the subsequent four editors remained committed to its international character and made efforts to enhance it. Cyril Belshaw was active, as Tax had been, in the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, and when he became editor he began

printing the reports of the union's various topical working groups in newsletter format at the end of each issue. During his tenure the occasional short contribution was printed—until the cost became prohibitive—in both the language of the contributor's choice and English, and the abstracts of major articles and the information on the inside front cover regularly appeared in French, Spanish, and Russian. Belshaw appointed a set of regional corresponding editors to help identify articles appropriate for *Current Anthropology* around the world and organized a conference on the international aspects of anthropological publishing and a workshop for African scholars on writing for international publications.

Under Adam Kuper, the first (and so far the only) editor from outside North America, *Current Anthropology* became lean and elegant (having undergone a much-needed redesign) and rose to the top of the list of leading anthropology journals in the Institute for Scientific Information's rating of citations per citable item published. Abstracts and information for authors were now printed in English only, but articles continued to be translated for publication. In August–October 1987 there was a special supplement on Japanese anthropology by Japanese for which more than half of the papers had been translated into English. A series of interviews with senior anthropologists—Javanese, Chinese, French, Dutch, South African, Brazilian, Russian, Belgian, British, and American (two of these latter interviewed by British colleagues)—helped call attention to commonalities and differences in the world anthropological community. At the end of his term (in a December 1993 editorial), Kuper described anthropology as "an international field with an increasing number of active, creative communities" and *Current Anthropology* as "the most international of the anthropology journals."

Richard Fox, in his first editorial (February 1994), called for more participation from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Eastern Europe and invited papers on such issues as the relationship of anthropology to national and international development policies, the interaction of anthropologists in these regions with those in the First World, the development of indigenous social theory, the reaction to postmodernism, ecofeminism, and post-Marxism, and other recent research agendas. Papers along these lines and others were published as commentary and provided the materials for a series of "Forums on Anthropology in Public" dealing with controversies over anthropology's authority to speak to current public issues. In the February 2000 issue Fox introduced the electronic edition of *Current Anthropology* and encouraged contributors to take advantage of the possibilities for enhancement of scholarly communication that the Internet provided.

Embarking on his editorship in February 2001, Ben Orlove expressed his belief that the availability of an online version of *Current Anthropology* might strengthen the journal's international character, allowing it to reach scholars with limited access to research libraries. Arguing that, while the discussion of globalization "might suggest that area studies could at best describe the past, . . . the international character of anthro-

Table 1. Distribution by country of articles and comments in *Current Anthropology*

	1967	1979	1989	1997	2004
Major articles:					
United States/Canada	8	14	11	18	16
Other	4	7	2	4	9
Total	12	21	13	22	25
% Other	33	33	15	18	36
Comments:					
United States/Canada	85	125	73	93	59
Other	38	124	36	53	83
Total	123	249	109	146	142
% Other	31	50	33	36	58

Note: Each of the years chosen for a count was in the middle of a different editor's term (Tax 1960–1974, Belshaw 1975–1984, Kuper 1985–1993, Fox 1994–2000, Orlove 2001–2008). The numbers of countries represented by the two kinds of contributions combined were 22 (1967), 36 (1979), 12 (1989), 20 (1997), and 26 (2004).

pology and the growth of centers of anthropological research around the world have led to a reformulation or reconstitution of area studies," he periodically called attention, in a section called "Areas of Inquiry" and in special issues, to emerging topics in particular world areas that were of interest to anthropology at large. The annual publication of reviews of books on the history of anthropology highlighted the diverse national traditions of Australia, Austria, China, Ecuador, France, Germany, Japan, and Turkey.

All these editors' efforts ultimately failed to tip the balance

with regard to the sources of major articles in the direction of a non-U.S./Canadian majority (see table 1). Why this should have been so isn't clear. It has often been suggested that American dominance was unavoidable, given U.S.-based editors and sponsors, but placing the editor's office in the United Kingdom doesn't seem to have altered the picture. Pointing out, as Tax did, that an editor is limited by what turns up in his mailbox just moves the question a step farther away. It does appear, however, that when the editors were in a position to solicit individual contributions, they did a bit better. The proportion of non-North American commentators sometimes rose to half or more.

This means that the contributors of major articles, wherever they came from, were getting the benefit of discussion of their ideas by colleagues from a number of countries around the world, additional evidence for (or against) their arguments from perhaps unexpected sources, new ways of looking at their research problems, and new opportunities for collaboration. Whether or not this exchange was considered sufficiently "international," it was a good thing, and it was probably not all that common in anthropology or elsewhere.

The idea of *Current Anthropology* as a worldwide community of scholars had a colorful life, but it belonged to a simpler time. What has survived of Tax's original vision is CA☆ treatment—a forum for the civilized and effective exchange of ideas among the anthropologists of the world in all their variety. After 50 years and a world of change, this seems to me something worth celebrating.