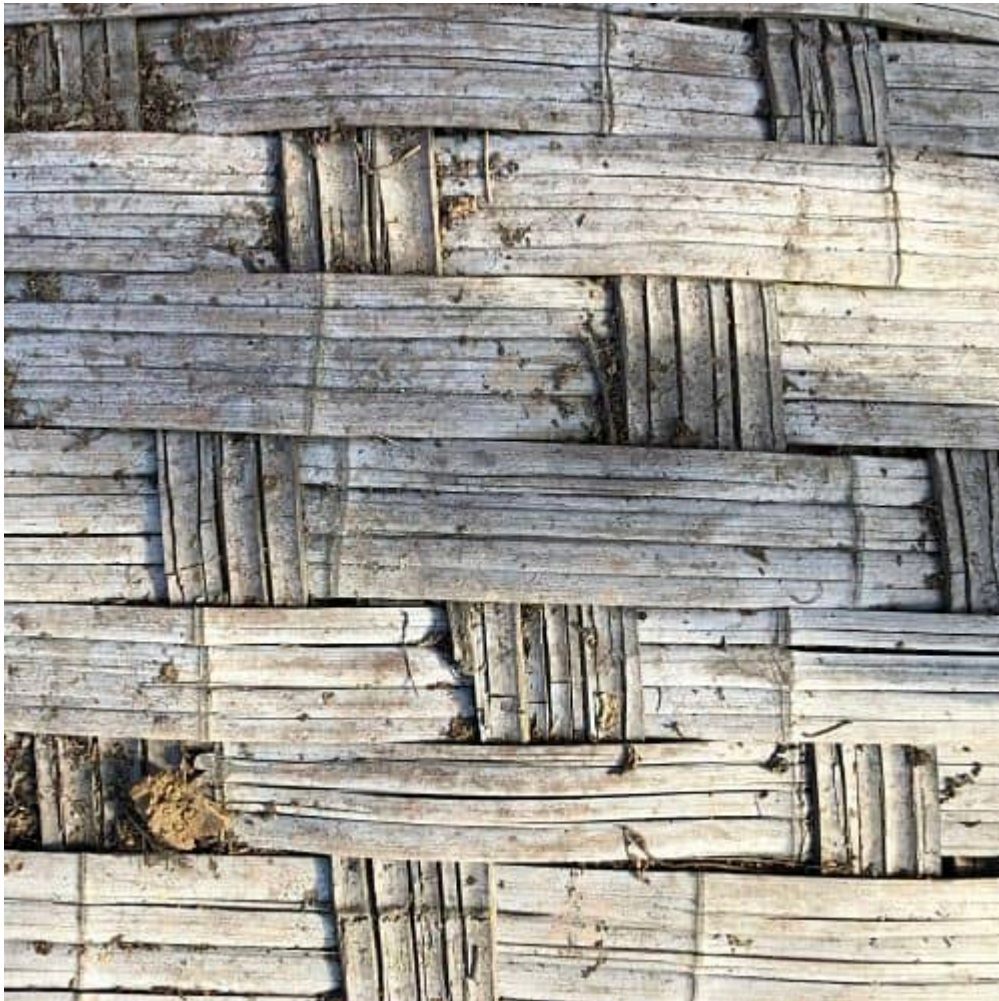




# Community-Based Open Access, Fast and Slow

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I would like to make the case that open access remains relevant to the mix of painful problems and worthy opportunities still before the ethnographic disciplines in the #hautalk moment.

The promise of doing good in the world is what attracted so many of our colleagues to support HAU as a means of transitioning to greater open access (OA) in our publishing work. This is clear from the two anonymous insider letters



(link [here](#) and [here](#)). I honor the commitment of these student and early-career scholar-activists and I worried throughout, in a vague way, about their fate even as I also worried over what HAU would do for, and to, our fields and to the cause of a more accessible and ethical publishing ecosystem. I support the work that they (as HAU's non-leaders) did and the difference that they were trying to—and did—make. The monumental fruits of their labor are worth celebrating, engaging, and honoring. I thank them.

(With others) I have tried to make the ethical case for OA on too many other occasions already. I feel like a broken record (what we owe the communities we engage and study; global and intra-societal inequality; corporate enclosures; tuition-driven student debt; textbook costs; the degradation of scholarly libraries; regulatory capture; tragedies of the anti-commons; intellectual propertization; self-piracy, other issues...) The OA world is already too baroque, with too many confusing distinctions (corporate, predatory, green, gold, author-pays, etc.) and legal/technical systems. I am sorry that it has been so hard for us to collectively make sense of it and to act on what we have learned. I have tried to help. As with HAU, it sometimes seems a lot easier to just do OA than to explain and weigh OA. Our projects thrive (or, as with HAU, for a time appear to thrive) even as our discussions fail over and over again.

In this context, I worry about drawing out a new set of distinctions, but I think that they relate to the work of making sense of HAU.

*My understanding is that Allegra Lab has been an advocate for slowness and here I can try to speak of a slow OA.*

Whatever else HAU has been, it has not been slow in the slow movement sense. The whole ethos was one of more, bigger, better, faster ([see Ilana Gershon's analysis](#)). An ethos in this sense is not primordial. An ethos is made by some people interacting with some other people in interaction with various objects and knowledges and values (etc.) in networks, face-to-face contexts, performances (etc.). I am not close enough to the details to know how HAU became so fast and



big not just in product but in ethos, but I hope that I am not alone in seeing this dynamic. Giant issues, a giant, star-studded masthead, a book series, another book series, still another book series, conferences, networks, sophisticated social media campaigns, skyrocketing metrics and prestige. It was hard (before #hautalk) not to be impressed by the sheer amount of activity and scholarship published and performed under HAU's flag. It might not be everyone's cup of ethnographic tea, but it was a lot of scholarly stuff getting made. For those who were doing similar work before HAU was born and while it was growing so rapidly, it was a bit of a shocker to see it unfolding. I think those, like me, who were watching from the outside found it astounding. The case made by the anonymous letter writers is that it was also shocking on the inside, but for (unhealthy) reasons that help explain the shock of those watching on the outside. It doesn't look good.

The case for the move of HAU into partnership with the (well-regarded, highly-skilled, non-profit) University of Chicago Press has been described by HAU insiders as essential in order to stabilize the organization's many efforts. In explaining the HAU position, a HAU Facebook post spoke of requiring "an infrastructure commensurate with its newly-found scope. We believe that the success of its various endeavors has necessitated a rearranging of its financial footing and editorial organization."

*On the ethical plane, I have to ask why again did HAU have to do so much so fast?*

I am sure that for HAU leaders, it was rather exciting in the same way that being in a successful startup tech firm might be exciting for those who want to be in a successful startup tech firm. But did anthropology need it to be so big so fast? Who among us is short on scholarly reading material? Who among us is able to keep up with the core literatures in our subfields? I started a [new journal](#) in a strange institutional and organizational context so I can hardly question the founding of new journals to do new things, but the story of HAU includes a rare



story of scale and speed.

When *Cultural Anthropology* moved to a gold [open access framework](#), it made an existing journal better (in my book at least) through transformation. HAU was instead additive. I get how that can be good, compelling. *Cultural Anthropology* was once the exciting new journal breaking with established conventions in U.S. anthropology. But survey the output of HAU and HAU Books and then re-read the anonymous letters from the HAU participants. The drive to do fast and big open access haunts those accounts. Some of that drive was surely entrepreneurial and centers on the Editor-in-Chief, but HAU published a lot of authors and a lot of scholars said yes when asked to join the masthead, do peer-reviews, copyedit, social mediatize, build technical infrastructures, and lobby their librarians for money (as I did). A sizable group of our colleagues joined in an effort to quickly build a giant OA machine. For myself, I wish that it had not gone down the way it did.

Why? First look at where we are now. Those letters paint an awful picture of suffering and, if we take them seriously (which I do), they reveal many laminated layers of collective failure, including failure to protect and support and foster the well-being and careers of vulnerable colleagues. The HAU effort has clearly done harm (even as it has done real scholarly work). Even if one somehow refused to accept the hurt and frustration conveyed by the authors of those letters, look what big, fast HAU has done by way of anger, distrust, hostility, frustration, etc. in the larger community that it aspired, as a collective project, to serve.

I accept that “save OA” is not the main point right now, but I feared this day in which HAU’s failure (big, fast, start-up company-like things do often fail or flounder, after all) would cast further doubt on all efforts at scholarly communication reform. Speaking of the kinds of grassroots publishing efforts that HAU began as, leaders in the corporate scholarly publishing world describe them as foolish, utopian, amateur boondoggles. Scholars, they argue, should get back to scholarship and let publishers do the work of publishing. Setting out to prove such voices wrong, HAU has now provided a lot of evidence to support just this



contention. That really bums me out, because in the shadow of fast and giant HAU are many smaller, slower, more patient, experimental, and humanely-scaled DIY publishing efforts. Those efforts aspire to do, and clearly do do, ethical work in ethical ways and at a scale that enhances the life of those who participate in them.

*What has happened with HAU makes the work of those slower, more local or more topically focused or more experimental or more diverse (or just less characterized by ambition or hubris) projects harder.*

It will now be still more difficult to seek funding from potential patrons. It will be harder to recruit volunteers to labor in the “everyone give a little labor sitting around the table eating pizza tonight because we are all in this together” way that has been common to such projects. It will be still harder to secure graduate editorial assistantships, for instance, from Deans or Provosts, thereby depriving students of unique opportunities for training and supportive mentorship and networking and also experiences that can lead to jobs in academic publishing. I spend enough time with Deans to not have trouble anticipating replies like: “Money is tight and the last thing we want is to be at the center of some debacle. Didn’t anthropology already have some [big fiasco with some open access journal](#) recently?”

Support for publishing projects and editorial offices has been in decline for two decades already. In the United States, budget contraction and risk avoidance (after monumental disasters at Penn State University and Michigan State University) are generally stifling innovation and fostering the very corporate enclosure of our publishing projects that community-based, open access publishing projects are trying to respond to.

In the HAU case, I sense (without proof) that the decision to partner with the University of Chicago Press was not only about money but about the organizational problems that are now being weighed publicly. That would be logical on some level, but the “save OA” crowd would be right, I think, in feeling





that OA was thrown under the bus, with “firmer financial footing” being the manifest function but dealing with the mess behind the scenes as the latent one. For me, the firmer financial footing argument is based on a commitment to sustaining the big, fast HAU that I do not share. Why couldn’t some of the energy that went into HAU have gone into transitioning some existing journals to not-author pays gold OA? Why couldn’t some of it have been distributed more widely around a range of projects or, if it had to be under one roof, couldn’t there have been, as with the [Environmental Planning](#) family of journals HAU A, HAU B, HAU C and HAU D, each with different (and more diverse) editorial teams?

*Why did the spirit of the gift have, in this instance, to be a giant pile of trade blankets set on fire in a masculine display of prowess and scale when it could have been sharing banana bread and fruit salad within a small group of colleagues and students working on a small book together?*

The could have been (and might still become) scenarios are many. The bottom line for me is that the HAU we got produced the mess that we are now trying to sort out. First, fellow colleagues seemed to have been hurt by it. Second, the discussion now makes clear that a sizable number of our colleagues took offense at the HAU ethos (for different and understandable reasons that I acknowledge but have only evoked on the edges). Third, what has happened with HAU is bad for the people involved but also bad for our fields as a whole, even as many understandably want to use it as an instructive case for addressing bigger structural problems. Fourth, what has happened with HAU has harmed the broader publishing reform effort that it endeavored to be at the vanguard of. It has given it a black eye within anthropology and it has created the appearance that community-driven open access cannot work when in actuality, HAU’s problems are longstanding problems—social and cultural and interpersonal—remaining to be addressed in collective scholarly life.

Because community-based (rather than corporate) open access aims to address the greatest number of ethical or moral goals, it in the end is part and parcel of



the larger project of making anthropology and the other ethnographic fields better—better for those who live and work and study within them and better for all those living and working in the social worlds that these fields seek to engage and understand. Those at the heart of HAU clearly believed themselves to be advancing this work but I feel like I spent seven years watching a fast-moving train speeding towards a wreck. I feared it, but I did not imagine it would be nearly as big as it has turned out to be. If HAU survives, I hope that its next incarnation will have a different—slower and less self-confident—ethos.