



Pyramid Scheme. #hautalk

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For people immersed in bureaucratic institutions, like universities, the current ruckus over HAU raises at least one longstanding anthropological question: what kinds of organizational structures not only allow certain types of behavior but even allow these to be repeated over and over again? And here I don't simply mean: "when is someone allowed to repeatedly behave badly," but also "when is someone allowed to repeatedly behave well?" This question underlies people's concerns around the kind of oversight that existed at HAU but also underlies people's praise because the journal managed to contribute to productive intellectual dialogues time and time again. With this in mind, I want to write



without condemning anyone. Instead, I appeal to readers' anthropologically grounded curiosity about social organization as I discuss what I know about how HAU was structured before its transfer to University of Chicago Press.

How do I know what I know? I was on the HAU monograph board (2014-2017) and an associate editor at the journal (2016-2017). But more importantly, I was one of three people who agreed to run the journal as a team while Giovanni da Col took a six-month leave in 2016. The transition process was rocky, and I stepped down before I could fully take on the shared responsibility of interim editor-in-chief, but continued as an associate editor. But during this process I talked to staff members, read the HAU constitution carefully, and afterward continued talking to staff members and various people involved in HAU's organization. I was never involved in the day to day running of HAU, and so some of what I describe below may be inaccurate regarding the actual practice, although staff have read a draft of this and confirmed my account.

HAU was not run the ways that other scholarly journals I have been involved with are run. Yes, HAU had a constitution, and several boards associated with it; yet, to understand the internal distribution of labor, it helps to understand the open access software platform HAU uses, Open Journals Systems, which encourages but does not determine a certain way of organizing a journal. To be clear, social organization is more important than the interactions implied in the platform, but it helps to understand what the platform suggests.

The journal was run as a pyramid of labor, which intriguingly enough reflects the social organization imagined by OJS, which is the most popular open access software freely available.

Jason Baird Jackson, a colleague at IU, editor of the journal *Museum Anthropology Review* and fellow commentator in this series, explained to me (after my tenure at HAU) how OJS works, based on his own editorial experience. OJS is a platform that was initially designed not only with very large journals in mind, but was also supposed to facilitate scaling up quickly from a smallish



journal to a mammoth journal. It is a platform that could easily run a journal like *Nature* or *Science*, if that is desired, with thousands of contributors and many moving parts. It is built to allow a great many people to donate (or get paid for) labor. It can have one or many editors, section editors, and a huge number of other internal roles. The idea of different people with different roles is fundamental to the platform. In a small operation, one person can assume several roles, but that person must wear different (software) hats for each role. The platform also creates logical flows between tasks and people based on common norms already present in many journals. But like all platforms, OJS (especially the version that precedes the latest release) coaxes users down paths built into the software, especially by reminding users constantly that the journal could get bigger.

There are consequences to using a platform like this. It is designed to be a pyramid of labor, based on the assumption that many people will be willing to give a tiny bit of free labor, and other people will be willing to devote larger chunks of time, but may only be willing to do so sporadically. To address the quandary this poses for running an organization, it encourages cells: small labor collectives of people tackling one or two tasks, such as copy-editing a special section, or finding reviewers for a set of articles, with a few other people coordinating these tasks. All these cells are overseen by the editor-in-chief, and perhaps a handful of other people – the top of the pyramid can be a plateau instead of a peak. The higher you go up in the pyramid, the more you can see of other people's labor below you, but usually you can only see the segment of the triangle below you (you are at the top of a mini-pyramid within the overarching pyramid). Indeed, the only person who really has access to all moving parts and is able to coordinate everything is at the top of the pyramid. While the software could be adjusted so that this concentration of control is ameliorated, at HAU, the editor-in-chief was the only one who knew about all the moving parts, and who clearly invested social labor into ensuring that this remained the case. The platform's organizational suggestions were also supplemented by HAU's constitution and what little I know secondhand about the University of Chicago



Press's agreement with HAU, which proposed that the editor-in-chief was also envisioned as editor-for-life, with only one unlikely and complicated mechanism in place for removing the editor-in-chief being mentioned in HAU's founding document.

This of course could potentially be mitigated by having in-person or virtual meetings; indeed, all associate editors could theoretically meet and communicate beyond the OJS platform. This was not the case with HAU. All communication within the journal was funneled through the editor-in-chief. The different pockets of labor never coordinated with each other. Associate editors neither consulted with each other about how to handle a set of reviews, nor discussed about other concerns that came up in running the journal. The faculty board of HAU monographs never met to discuss book proposals, and indeed only made a decision at the front end, voting by individually assigning numbers to each book proposal to determine which projects should be pursued. After the manuscripts were reviewed, we never met to discuss the reviews and whether the book should be published. Any attempts to change this system were dissipated, and perhaps quite reasonably. After all, changing this system would have created more work for participants, and as academics, we try to minimize service work whenever possible. What is important to note is that while HAU regularly had parties at conferences, there were no institutional moments in which the boards as a whole were coming together to discuss running the journal. And as far as I know, there weren't actually many long-standing members who worked steadily together - except for the staff. The left hand truly never knew what the right hand was doing, indeed the fingers on the hands didn't coordinate often with each other either.

This meant that it was possible for associate editors (who were mainly tenured anthropologists) to have only minimal contact with the HAU staff (who were mainly graduate students at far-flung institutions), say, a brief email exchange about finding reviewers for an article. The editorial boards, to the best of my knowledge, never had any contact with the staff, who were all under the purview of the editor-in-chief. Should social problems arise at any stage in the publishing



process, there was no institutionalized process for dealing with these problems.

To repeat, all of this was made possible by the software-aided division of labor, but also the typical ways in which academics approach service work of this nature. In my experience, we engage the service tasks directly in front of us, often as quickly as possible, and ask few questions unless we are physically in a meeting together.

We have too little time: the academic life means juggling many obligations, and so we tend to accept institutional processes already in place instead of questioning them.

Scholars often find it boring and thankless (as indeed it often is) to get involved in running their institutions and associations. We often even encourage others to minimize the time they devote to institutional maintenance. This, of course, may be a rational response when those institutions are less and less committed to the individuals within them. Yet possibly as a result of this relationship to service, not many people knew how HAU was actually run, even those people prominently associated with HAU. This is the social consequence when a pyramid of labor occurs within the constraints of our contemporary academic lives.

There are two other aspects that I personally find useful for understanding how HAU functioned.

First, HAU's temporal rhythms were crisis-driven, much like the temporal rhythms of classroom teaching or many projects in contemporary capitalist workplaces. HAU would present authors and staff with challenging deadlines, commonly presented as an emergency situation in which all hands were needed on deck. This seems to have happened for every issue. And when you are living in periods of crisis, punctuated by periods of recovery in which you have time to deal with the other demands that were brewing in the background while you were in crisis mode, you are less likely to engage critically with the processes that created the 'crisis' in the first place.



Second, the editor-in-chief is assumed to remain editor-for-life. There is no expectation of a transition written into the HAU constitution, and no HAU board has the right to replace the editor-in-chief. This speaks to the nature of workplaces in which people tend to stay in the same career for life. Many academics are used to having to live with colleagues who behave in ways we wish they wouldn't, and realize we have to deal with them for the rest of our working lives.

We develop skills for tolerating less than desirable behavior.

I have been suggesting that HAU was possible because relatively new technologies allowed for new participant structures, and many of the academics involved were applying older models of how journals are typically run and what sort of practices institutional oversight enables (and/or prevents). It might sound like I am asking for institutional oversight, but this, [as Sara Ahmed has pointed out so elegantly](#), is a double-edged sword. What if the current uproar about HAU is precisely because it lacked the institutional oversight that typically buries problems created by people who have been engaged in community exchanges and institutional norms because they have been part of an institution and part of an academic community for a number of years?

In HAU's case, a newness carved out of older forms became possible, allowing for both good and bad in less familiar packages. At the same time, it was hard to know who knew what in the process – did associate editors know what staff experiences were like at the journal? Or even what authors' experiences publishing with the journal was like? Did the chair of the advisory board know? I personally believe that there were serious problems in how the staff were treated, but I was never sure myself who knew and what solutions were being attempted. Some people knew there were problems (not always the same problems!), but didn't always know the extent of the problems, and found it hard to confer with each other, and extremely difficult to assemble information even when they tried. And so I lived, very unwillingly I might add, one of the dilemmas that I find myself



reiterating about new media all the [time](#): new participant structures dramatically change in unexpected ways how knowledge circulates and how it leads to action; yet everyone involved can still think things are going on pretty much as normally as they ever do.