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How to Open-Access in Social and Cultural Anthropology?



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Open Access: A Question of Discipline?

In many disciplinary contexts, the decision of whether to publish open access or not is primarily a question of reputation, impact and financing. Is the journal that publishes my work reputable? Is it influential in my field and among my peers? Can my institution afford the article processing charges (APCs) required for gold open access?[1] Sometimes, open access publishing is a funding requirement, not quite a choice but rather dictated by contracts and implemented along the way.

The ethical aspects of open (and closed) access—particularly in relation to one's research and publication practices—are rarely discussed, as long as a publication furthers an academic career.

Researchers in social and cultural anthropology often engage with open access differently than those in other disciplines. Our workshop proposal for the DGSKA conference "Un/Commoning Anthropology", titled *'Commoning Knowledge' – Open Science ideologies, strategies, practicalities and its (un)foreseen effects for anthropological knowledge production* sheds light on some of the contestations and debates surrounding open access publishing within social and cultural anthropology and neighboring disciplines.

The questions posed in the workshop proposal oscillate between hope, ambivalence, and even disenchantment: Open access "gives back" disciplinary knowledge to audiences that did not have (free of cost) access in the past. It enables broad use and reuse of anthropological knowledge, potentially extending beyond established research practices such as referencing and citation.

At the same time, the proposal asks: Who profits from open access? — insinuating that profits are made that are external to academic benefits. Do open access and open licensing facilitate the extraction of knowledge for purposes that are not wanted by researchers and the communities they study? Does open access give way to the misuse of ethnographic insights? Are (moral) rights at stake and is local knowledge endangered through access and openness on the internet? These are questions not usually asked concerning open access in mathematics or literature studies, but they accompany publishing and licensing decisions in social and cultural anthropology.

"Imagine There's No Paywalls"[2]

Let me start with the hopeful, utopian perspective. In the 2000s and 2010s, worldwide, free-of-charge access to ethnological research was widely and enthusiastically discussed within the discipline, especially in the North American context (cf. Jackson and Anderson 2014; Dallemagne et al. 2015; Weiss 2016; Vieira and Kipphut-Smith 2019). Social and cultural anthropologists embraced the possibility to overcome financial and institutional barriers and to share their knowledge with research partners, communities, and academics from different contexts and career stages, as well as with academic and non-academic audiences from the Global South.

In 2021 the members of both German ethnological associations—the German Association of Social and Cultural Anthropology (DGSKA) and the German Society for Cultural Analysis | European Ethnology (DGEKW) —voted in favor of transforming their respective journals, Journal of Social and Cultural Anthropology (ZfE/JSCA) and Journal for Cultural Analysis and European Ethnology (ZEKW), to open access. This transformation was completed by 2024 and is now in a phase of consolidation and professionalization.

Furthermore, open access is perceived as a driving force for new digital formats of dissemination and for reaching new authors and audiences (cf. Heft, Dippel, and Thanner 2025).

(Un)Foreseen Effects of Digitality and Open Access

Then there is the ambivalent, critical stance towards open access that scrutinizes the impact of digitalization—a prerequisite for open access and other practices of open science—as well as the implications of openness and recent developments in 'artificial intelligence' on the discipline, its ethics, and its publishing culture. This ambivalent perspective highlights the challenges the discipline must address and the

need for internal discussions.

Any publication from the field of social and cultural anthropology—whether open or closed access—is entangled with disciplinary ethics, particularly with regard to practices of informed consent and the protection of research contexts and partners, life worlds and local knowledge. Open access publishing practices trigger these long-standing disciplinary conundrums and debates once more. Issues central to the field—such as the inherently collaborative nature and co-authorship of ethnographic knowledge production, and the colonial histories and legacies of the discipline—are made newly urgent by the implementation of open access and open licensing.

What if a photograph of research partners in a private setting appears on the internet, much to their dismay? What if anyone is not only invited to read and cite text and images, but to also to reuse and alter them with explicit permission?

While misuses of published ethnological knowledge were certainly possible in closed-access publishing, open licensing—particularly through Creative Commons licenses[3]—foregoes many aspects of copyright and (presumed) control over the afterlife of a publication. This allows for both unimagined and unforeseen uses, some of which might well be considered misuses.

So what if the photograph mentioned earlier is not only online, but also licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution license (CC BY), allowing for a wide range of reuses, provided the author of the original publication is credited appropriately? Open access does indeed introduce new considerations and explicit decisions that were far less common in closed-access publishing.

What if access to disputed and outdated ethnographic research—including colonial discourse and imagery created within the discipline—becomes widely available through retro-digitalization? The digital opening of historic publications from the discipline for broader scrutiny, including from researchers from the Global South,

creates access that is more equitable. At the same time, it demands a serious reckoning with colonial legacies (cf. Andreoletti in this blog) and calls for the revision of outdated terms and classifications (cf. Harbeck and Strickert in this blog).

And last but not least: How does digitalization and open access change the ways we connect, read and perceive, and interact with texts, knowledge, and data?

Notwithstanding these ambivalent perspectives, open access is widely seen as both an opportunity and a future standard for publishing in the ethnological disciplines.

It is in this highly dynamic context that the EthnOA project is situated.

An Open Access Project for Social and Cultural Anthropology

The DFG funded project EthnOA – Open Access in the ethnological disciplines supports open access activities through training, consultation, discussion, and the development of tailored infrastructures.

The project goals focus on 1) the development and expansion of expertise and support structures for open access publishing; 2) the transformation of three journals of social and cultural anthropology into diamond open access journals[1] and 3) on supporting researchers in self-archiving publications via the green route to open access.

The project brings together partners across the relevant disciplines—social and cultural anthropology, European ethnology, and library and infrastructure perspectives, the latter represented by the Specialised Information Service for Social and Cultural Anthropology.

While major efforts of the project focus on infrastructure and technical aspects of open access—including the setup and operation of two disciplinary repositories:

EthnOA_text for text-based publications and EthnOA_media for audiovisual media—the project simultaneously engages in issues specific to the ethnological disciplines (cf. Heft and Rosenbaum 2025). It takes into account that social and cultural anthropology must address ethical questions around consent and the protection of knowledge from research contexts.

We therefore consult and collaborate with researchers from social and cultural anthropology to adapt our infrastructure to discipline specific needs. This includes, for example, the addition of metadata fields that allow for the attribution of multiple authors or creators, explicitly stating their individual contributions to a publication. We debate and carefully choose keywords and classifications, and seek to update outdated taxonomies and standards—a long-term undertaking.

From our vantage point at the intersection of service provision, library and information studies, and the ethnological disciplines, we also hope to foster discussions and critical interventions into open access policies and projects.

Recognizing that digitality and open access in publishing is here to stay, EthnOA actively participates in and contributes to ongoing disciplinary debates. For our colleagues within the discipline this entails proactive engagement with open access, including:

– explicitly and consciously engaging with forms and norms of researching, writing and (open access) publishing within the ethnological disciplines;

– reflecting on and enabling openness, while actively shaping open access practices and infrastructures according to disciplinary ethical considerations;

– raising awareness on these issues in teaching, research and writing, always already enabling openness while safeguarding ethical principles specific to the discipline.

For any questions about open access, feel free to contact the EthnOA-team. We also

offer customized workshops and consultations—online and in person, in both German and English: ethnoa-kontakt@hu-berlin.de.

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Footnotes

[1] Gold open access refers to publications that are published directly in open access journals or as open access books. Gold open access is often financed through article or book processing charges, which are paid for by authors or their institutions. In contrast, green open access refers to the retrospective self-archiving of closed access publications in institutional or disciplinary open access repositories. Green open access is free-of-charge.

[2] Slogan on a giveaway pencil by https://open-access.network/en/home (last checked: 23-09-2025).

[3] See https://creativecommons.org/share-your-work/ (last checked: 23-09-2025) for an overview on Creative Commons licensing and licenses.

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