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American Anthropological Association
Pioneers Digital Book Review Process

An innovative new platform for producing scholarly book reviews will be developed with the support of the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, the American Anthropological Association (AAA) announced today. “The new platform will reduce editorial turn-around time and expense, increase readership, and introduce dynamic content,” said Oona Schmid, AAA's publishing director.

Using the current print-centric process, only a small fraction of books mailed out by presses results in a published book review. And even among these published reviews, they often appear at least one year – and sometimes up to four years – after a book's publication. By using a completely digital workflow, the AAA will provide book authors with a wider audience and an opportunity for social engagement, as well as reducing costs for scholarly presses and the journals featuring reviews.

“Using digital information technology to improve the book review process is a potential game changer for academic publishing,” says Josh Greenberg, Director of the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation’s Scholarly Communication program. “It's better for authors. It's better for reviewers. It's better for publishers. And most of all, it's better for science, because it encourages and supports the debate, discussion, and evaluation that is the cornerstone of good scholarship. We're honored to support the American Anthropological Association's efforts to bring scholarly book reviewing into the digital age.”

The platform will expand the open source Open Journals System from the Public Knowledge Project. Once released, the platform will be available to any discipline or journal using OJS software. Freie Universität Berlin provided PKP with the original iteration of the Objects for Review plugin, and provides active guidance in the prototype development. Publishers will upload book descriptions into the system along with digital versions that will be electronically available to authorized reviewers. Reviewers will then upload their reviews into the database for approval and eventual publication online at the award-winning Anthropology News website.

Five university presses pledged early support of the platform, with more expressing great interest – University of Chicago Press, University of Nebraska Press, University of New Mexico Press, University Press of Colorado, and the University Press of Florida. The presses emphasized the need for improvements in the existing process. Darrin Pratt, Director at the University Press of Colorado, is looking forward to helping pioneer this “radically new workflow for scholarly book reviews.” Pratt notes, “the slow turnaround for book reviews in academic journals...is maddening for university presses.” He can recall titles that were reviewed so long after publication that the books were no longer in print. Pratt's counterpart, John Byram, Director at University of New Mexico Press, also echoes frustration with the timely process. Byram anticipates “that these efforts will result in a more efficient, cost-effective, and accessible workflow process for a wide variety of international stakeholders.”

“This is an exciting time for publishing,” said Schmid. “The Sloan Foundation is providing the means for participating publishers and the Association to catalyze book reviews into a vibrant part of scholarly discourse.” Work will begin immediately to build the platform’s prototype version. By mid-2015 the prototype and new process with undergo evaluation to determine areas of improvement.

The prototype is expected to launch later this year.

The Alfred P. Sloan Foundation is a philanthropic, not-for-profit grantmaking institution based in New York City. Established in 1934 by Alfred Pritchard Sloan Jr., then-President and Chief Executive Officer of the General Motors Corporation, the Foundation makes grants in support of original research and education in science, technology, engineering, mathematics and economic performance. www.sloan.org

Founded in 1902, the American Anthropological Association is the world’s largest professional organization of anthropologists and others interested in anthropology, with about 10,000 members. The Arlington, VA – based association represents anthropology's major specialties – cultural anthropology, biological anthropology, linguistic anthropology, and archaeology.