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Letter from the President

Welcome to the debut of our re-envisioned newsletter *Second Opinion* under the editorship of Digital Media Coordinator, Elizabeth Lewis. Liz is currently a doctoral student at the University of Texas, Austin. Her dissertation research focuses on rare and undiagnosed disabilities and examines how shifting understandings of disability unfold in everyday life contexts, including school and family life, and in relation to advocacy efforts. Liz is on the lookout for content for future newsletters and invites SMA members interested in writing a piece for *Second Opinion* to get in touch with her (see contact information at end of the newsletter).

In addition to SMA-related announcements, this issue includes two more substantive features. One, by Natali Valdez, expands on a piece that appeared in the May 2015 SMA column of *Anthropology News*. The other, by incoming SMA president, Elisa Sobo, centers on a news “splash” – and online public debate – occasioned by a reporter’s problematic translation of one of Elisa’s research articles that was originally published in *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* [MAQ]. One of the points Elisa raises is the need to make peer-reviewed research articles available to all. Under the leadership of current MAQ editor, Clarence (Lance) Gravlee, MAQ has established a “green” open access repository and worked to ensure that peer-reviewed “post-prints” of work subsequently published in MAQ – including Elisa’s piece – are included in the repository and accessible to anyone with an internet connection (see link to repository in the SMA Announcements section of this newsletter). I encourage SMA members to help disseminate information about this repository and to direct potential readers to it. And authors considering submitting their work to MAQ should keep in mind the SMA’s efforts toward making medical anthropological research accessible to new audiences.

The results of the SMA elections are in and four new members will join the SMA board at the close of the annual SMA Business Meeting in November. We look forward to welcoming Alexander Rödlach, our new Treasurer, and our three new members-at-large, Mary Anglin, Erin Finley and Eileen Moyer. On behalf of the SMA Board and the Nominations Committee, chaired by Elisa Sobo, I thank everyone who participated in the process and especially those willing to stand for election.

I wanted to alert everyone that the SMA Business Meeting and Awards Ceremony will be held at this year at the AAA annual meeting in Denver on Thursday evening beginning at 6:15 p.m. with a reception and cash bar to follow. Program scheduling changes at the AAA level have limited the times available for section activities and SMA opted to move to an earlier time on Thursday rather than a later start on Friday.

As Lance Gravlee’s term as MAQ editor ends in December 2016, a search for a new MAQ editor will begin soon. Although a formal announcement is forthcoming, it isn’t too early to start thinking about encouraging someone, or perhaps yourself, to consider becoming a candidate for this key role. I will happily receive any expressions of interest.

May Your News Splash be Helpful: On the Challenge of Public Dissemination

Elisa (EJ) Sobo, SMA President-Elect, San Diego State University

The *New York Times* recently published an op-ed piece by Noam Scheiber titled '[Academics seek a big splash](#).' Coincidentally, the day it came out, The Huffington Post featured a *Pacific Standard* essay from the week before, 'An anthropological approach to California's vaccination problem,' purporting to summarize a peer-reviewed [article](#) of mine forthcoming in MAQ. From there, the essay proliferated quickly through numerous websites domestically and internationally. I should be ecstatic.

As Scheiber notes in the 'big splash' article: "Many social scientists have observed that their disciplines, which once regarded the ability to attract attention with suspicion, increasingly reward it." Our newfound interest in cultivating mass publicity is in part due to the fact that funding agencies like it when the work they sponsor is in the news.

According to Scheiber, this "has led to a new model of disseminating social science research through the media." Scheiber notes that a number of scholars "at top departments said colleagues were now tailoring and pitching their academic papers to journalists, rather than writing papers and allowing the news media to discover them on their own." When journalists cover academic work, academics in turn publicize their publicity via social media, university websites, and the like.

It's a win-win situation, right? Not always.

The coverage my vaccination project received celebrated anthropology's applied potential, which is wonderful. The report contained some factually accurate statements about what I did, found, and concluded. So far so good. However, it also included a number of disturbing errors - errors which multiplied and deepened as reports drawing on the original coverage spread.

So what? Isn't any publicity good publicity? No, it is not.

As Scheiber observes, "Many journalists are not equipped to distinguish good science from shoddy science. That is a particular risk when the work does not wend its way through the usual academic channels before entering the news media's consciousness." Beyond this, journalists also may be pushed toward sensationalism. They may not be equipped to still their biases. They may not be allowed the space it takes to explain things fully and clearly to lay readers. Accuracy may be compromised by deadline pressures or infrastructural conditions that limit fact checking. In these ways, even reporting on research that has been through the peer review process can be problematic.

Poor reporting is especially troubling when it comes to hot-button topics like vaccination or abortion. With stakeholders primed to be on the defensive, extra care is needed: accuracy and an understanding of the '[science of science communication](#)' are paramount.

So the last thing I wanted was for anyone to know about my news coverage. I do understand that taking this position may be a luxury: in brief, Scheiber ties the need for publicity to the need for employment security. And I know that if the reporter wrote a story of the same quality on any other research project of mine, I might have told the world. Nonetheless, my initial impulse on reading the essay when it was first published was to crawl under a rock.

Realizing the essay's inflammatory potential, I wrote to the author immediately, asking respectfully for corrections. To his credit, he did retract his egregious assertions that the participants saw themselves as "superior" (they most certainly did not) and that they "imagined" vaccine side effects (these are in fact very real, as vaccine package inserts and the existence of a federal "[vaccine court](#)" confirm).

But other corrections were not made. For example, my methods remained misreported. The reporter's mistaken assertion that [anthroposophy](#) (a holistic spiritual philosophy) drives parental skepticism regarding vaccines in the community under study remained, although my article stated clearly that no such link was found (indeed, as one HuffPost commenter later stated, the reporter's assertion was "absolutely incorrect"). Even my name remained repeatedly misspelled.

The author ignored further inquiry. I resolved to shrug it all off, assuming the essay would stay unnoticed.

Its redistribution, through The Huffington Post, forced me back into action. I contacted an editorial director there. She responded commendably fast, saying she would contact the source publisher. I followed suit, requesting this time a full retraction. Meanwhile, the essay (and reinterpretations of it) proliferated via shares and other websites.

Eventually, and without notice of any kind that my inquiry had even been received, the source publisher toned down the assertion regarding anthroposophy. But other errors remained. And in any case, damage had already been done. Beyond disseminating misinformation, the report reinforced polarization.

I know this because I read the Huffington Post comments. They self-segregated clearly as 'for' or 'against'.

Nonetheless, they were informative. Some, such as one regarding the connotations of 'under-vaccinated,' will be helpful to me moving forward.

More immediately, and distressingly, I learned that readers often saw the reporter and me as one being. Many others simply assumed that, because the reporter had reported it, I had written what he said or implied that I had written. For instance, vaccine-cautious commenters sought to debunk (imputed) generalizations that I never made. They often did this by providing testimony that in fact parallels my actual findings. For example one stated that parents from schools similar to the one that was my field site "are very involved [and seek] to ensure the best they possibly can for their children." But nobody stopped to check the source itself. Nobody stopped to see if the reporter had summarized my work accurately or taken anything out of context.

In fairness, access to academic articles can be hard to come by. So can the kind of background needed to read and interpret academic writing. However, not one commenter voiced an intention to read my journal article. Many seemed content to dismiss or argue with "Sobo's" [sic] research on the basis of what the reporter told them it encompassed.

Readers are right to think critically about findings reported. Many past expert safety assurances (e.g., regarding DDT, asbestos, cigarettes, frequent antibiotic use) have been upended. Furthermore, [funding bias has been shown](#), scientifically, as a problem in some research trials.

However, and in addition to the problem of training that Scheiber highlighted, reporters also filter things,

even if unconsciously. Further, they do not always bear in mind the environment receiving their reporting. As [Dan Kahan warned in 2013 in *Science*](#), “inattention to the quality of the science communication environment” can contribute to misunderstanding. Reporting that polarizes—even unintentionally—is beyond unhelpful: it is dangerous. It feeds the destructive side-taking that most medical anthropology works against. It crushes attempts to build bridges.

Given the need for constructive dialog, how can we ensure that the media splashes our research may make are the right kinds of splashes? Answers include: education, access, and outreach.

Improved scientific and information literacy training in school would leave the public better able to grasp the difference between original, peer-reviewed research articles and secondary reporting, as in blogs and online magazines. Such training should also promote the skills needed to understand and evaluate research articles properly and it should do so without suggesting to learners that basic scientific and information literacy equal expertise.

Making peer-reviewed research articles available to all is also crucial. If we do not find ways to support open access, we cannot complain when members of the lay public rely on the internet ([and reader comments](#)) for information.

More immediately, as Kahan's research suggests, we must maintain better control over how our work is presented to lay audiences. Writing for the public ourselves is one way to do this, as is working with reporters proactively from the start when possible. We also can use the science of science communication in drafting editorials and so on. Additionally, we should use feedback on past efforts (i.e., reader comments) to inform future messaging.

The fact that the public is actually interested in our work should give us hope as we seek solutions to the problem of dissemination. As academic professionals today we may need to make media splashes, but doing so need not entail neglecting our higher aspirations.

SMA Initiates Member Listserv

With support from AAA, SMA has created a listserv. This will make it easier for SMA members to tap each other's expertise and share information in a timely manner. We hope that the increased flow of communication provided by this service will be a welcome perk of SMA membership. The listserv's main webpage is available [here](#).

All SMA members have been added to our listserv and will receive messages from fellow members automatically. No passwords or logins are needed.

To post a message—for instance, to request reading suggestions on a topic that's new to you—members can just email AAA_SMA@binhost.com. This address, along with other important information, will appear in the welcome message you should have received. If you have not yet received a welcome message, please check your junk mail folder, confirm the email address you have on file with the AAA, or go to the [website](#) to ensure you are enrolled.

The listserv is a great way to foster informal connections among SMA members. It supplements but does not replace formal modes of communication, which include this newsletter as well as occasional 'presidential blasts.' It also complements our presence on social media, including both Facebook and Twitter.

If you have suggestions or questions about the Listserv, please feel free to contact our intrepid moderator, Lily Shapiro. Ms. Shapiro is a graduate student in sociocultural anthropology at the University of Washington, Seattle. Her dissertation research concerns factory accidents and reconstructive plastic surgery in South India. Through this lens she explores the body, care, labor, and the globalization of medical expertise and technologies. We are grateful to have Lily's assistance with this groundbreaking endeavor. Because it is SMA oriented, SMA/AAA operated, and requires no sign-in, our new listserv is distinct from the recently reformatted H-Medanthro list. (For a brief history of that see [this page](#).)

We hope you will value this new mode of direct communication with fellow SMA members, but if you prefer not to receive listserv email, you may disable your account by emailing your request to listserv@medanthro.net or altering your settings on your [subscription page](#).

Food, Fat, Fetus, and the Future: Histories of Weight Gain During Pregnancy in the US and UK Natali Valdez, University of California - Irvine

How does weight gain come to matter at certain places and at certain times for certain pregnant women? The *Anthropology News* feature from May 2015 titled, “[Food, Fat, Fetus, and the Future: Histories of weight gain during pregnancy in the US and UK](#)” engages this question. The feature in *Anthropology News* explores divergent histories related to weight gain during pregnancy in the US and UK.

Throughout the 20th century practices and approaches to gestational weight gain changed dramatically. During the first half of the last century, the justification for weight surveillance and promotion of diets during pregnancy emerged from a false correlation between weight gain and toxemia. In the 1970's scientific consensus changed in both national contexts. But while the US continues to survey, monitor, and standardize gestational weight gain as a significant measure of health during pregnancy, the UK diverged and maintains that routinely weighing women is not an evidenced based practiced and therefore not necessary during pregnancy.

These different views on weight during pregnancy are part of my larger dissertation project that explores how epigenetic logics are reconfiguring pregnant bodies in relation to food, fat, fetuses, and the future. During 2012 and 2014, I ethnographically examined the design and implementation of two randomized clinical trials (RCT), one in the US and one in the UK. At each site, I followed ethnically diverse pregnant women through their journeys in the clinical trial. I observed processes of recruitment, data collection, and intervention implementation. I also interviewed principle investigators, staff, and collaborators.

Guided by different national approaches to weight during pregnancy, the trial in the US implements a dietary intervention based on weight control and the UK trial does not. However, both trials utilize the same epigenetic theories to justify interventions on pregnant women. The underlying epigenetic theories in both trials claim that women who are obese during pregnancy have a higher risk of having children who develop obesity and diabetes in adulthood. Overall, both trials maintain a similar goal: intervene in

women's diets during pregnancy in the hopes of preventing future obesity.

Reproductive and feminist anthropology provide solid ground for understanding the medicalization of pregnancy and the proliferation of interventions during pregnancy. However, limited research addresses the recent epigenetic focus on pregnant women for clinical trial intervention. My work explores the ways in which future epidemics are individualized to dietary behaviors of pregnant women in the present. Currently there is no agreement on how to address, treat, or prevent obesity during pregnancy. This research is timely and will shed light on the knowledge production processes related to obesity, pregnancy, and epigenetics.

SMA Announcements

SMA Mentorship Program

SMA is beginning a new mentoring program for student members of SMA. Any student attending the AAA meetings may apply to meet with a mentor. The student and mentor will meet over coffee at a time agreeable to both during AAA. The student application is a few sentences (perhaps one paragraph) to include your name, interests, and degree program. This should be sent to R. Baer baer@usf.edu by **Oct. 1, 2015**. We also need mentors--professional members of SMA. Please indicate your willingness to be a mentor in a few sentences to include your name, department and institution, and main interests in medical anthropology. This should also be sent to baer@usf.edu by **Oct. 1**.

George Foster Practicing Medical Anthropology Award

The Society for Medical Anthropology announces that nominations for the George Foster Practicing Medical Anthropology Award are now being accepted. This award, first given in 2005, recognizes those who have made significant contributions to applying theory and methods in medical anthropology, particularly in diverse contexts, to multidisciplinary audiences, and with some impact on policy. Nominations for the award should include: a letter of nomination, an additional supporting letter, a biographical statement by the nominee, and the candidate's current CV. Inquiries and nominations should be sent to Robbie Baer (baer@usf.edu), Foster Award Committee Chair, by **August 15**. Complete information about the award and nominations procedure is available [here](#).

2015 MASA Graduate Student Mentor Award

The MASA Graduate Student Mentor Award recognizes excellence in graduate student mentorship, and is aimed at senior or mid-career scholars who have demonstrated an ongoing commitment to teaching and mentorship throughout their careers, particularly those who have taken the time to successfully guide their MA and PhD students through fieldwork and the thesis or dissertation writing process. A minimum of three letters of nomination should be from current and/or former students outlining the ways in which the candidate has been a strong mentor, advisor and/or teacher. Detailed information can be found [here](#). Please send nomination letters to Jonathan Stillo at jstillo@gmail.com by **August 1**.

MAQ News

Spread the word about MAQ's post-print [archive](#), where readers can access past articles instantly and free of charge. This is a fantastic open-access resource that has the potential to bring cutting-edge medical anthropology research to new and broader audiences. Needless to say, we are very excited!

Second Opinion Seeks Contributors

Do you have an idea for an article, response piece, or conference report? Perhaps you would like to do a write-up of your experiences with an applied anthropology or public health project? *Second Opinion* seeks contributors for future issues. Please contact SMA Digital Media Coordinator Liz Lewis at emlewis@utexas.edu with any inquiries regarding possible newsletter pieces.

Comments, questions, or ideas? Please contact the SMA's Digital Communications Manager, Liz Lewis, at emlewis@utexas.edu.



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