

Plenary Presentation: *The Access Issue: Publishing at a Critical Juncture*

Speaker:

John Willinsky
University of British Columbia
Vancouver, British Columbia

Reporter:

Lisa R Dittrich
Academic Medicine
Washington, DC

CSE plenary speaker John Willinsky is principal investigator of the Public Knowledge Project at the University of British Columbia, where he is also Pacific Press Professor of Literacy and Technology. Having bicycled from his office at the University of British Columbia to the conference hotel in downtown Vancouver, he continued his low-tech approach by relying solely on the “human voice”—no PowerPoint slides—to make his case for the establishment of open access to scholarly research of all kinds. He compared the struggle to establish open access in the 21st century with the struggle to establish public libraries in the 19th century, seeing the goals as similar. He believes that anything that increases access to knowledge is a good thing.

Willinsky outlined several current “flavors” of open access:

- E-print archives.
- “Pure” open access.
- Delayed open access (some months after initial publication).
- Dual mode (print is sold, online

is free, à la the Public Library of Science).

- Author pays to have his or her article posted free online.
- Partial open access (select articles made free each month—typically “the ones one is looking for”).
- Per-capita open access for developing countries (for example, the World Health Organization’s HINARI initiative).
- Open abstract (or “open-access lite”—although even this is a critical tool for researchers).

As a social scientist, Willinsky sees several key arguments for open access. One is that “knowledge’s claim to validity is based on wide circulation”. We know from a few initial studies that open-access papers are cited more frequently than closed-access papers and that authors are more concerned about their papers’ getting the widest possible distribution than they are about the selectivity of the journals in which they publish. In other words, distribute knowledge widely and let the scholarly community vote on its validity by citing it.

A second argument is that we need to ensure that the public, including the wider global community, has access to the latest scientific research. Although many believe that the public can’t make use of this information, the fact is that more people are using libraries, and more are using the Internet in their libraries; about 40% use the Internet to obtain information about

medical conditions. In fields other than medicine, such as astronomy, amateurs are making strides in the field by collaborating with professors, tracking comets, and so on (see Timothy Ferris’s book *Seeing in the Dark*). Some have argued that the participation of amateur scientists in this and other fields has the potential to rejuvenate these disciplines. And apart from any potential contributions amateur scientists might make, there is the basic human right to know what is known.

Willinsky didn’t end with a command that all the journal editors in the room immediately delete their subscriber rolls and open their online journals to all. However, he did ask that we think of ways to begin loosening up a bit—and at this point in his talk, I was willing to listen to anything this engaging speaker had to say. Among his suggestions: sponsor an open-access journal for high-school students to introduce them to the peer-review and publication processes, possibly using his free journal-management and publishing system, Open Journal Systems. More important, look at our own journals and consider ways to increase access to content, however incrementally, as a service to our authors and a wider readership. Open access, said Willinsky, is here to stay and we have to deal with it; it may speak to a human vanity (the desire to be read) but also, in his view, to a fundamental human right. For more information, see the Public Knowledge Project (www.pkp.ubc.ca). 