



THE ACCESS PRINCIPLE: THE CASE FOR OPEN ACCESS TO RESEARCH AND SCHOLARSHIP. JOHN WILLINSKY. CAMBRIDGE, MA: THE MIT PRESS; 2005. 272 PAGES. HARDCOVER. \$34.95. ISBN-10: 0-262-23242-1; ISBN-13: 978-0-262-23242-5.

Imagine this scenario: You are an internationally renowned pediatrician in Africa with expertise in infectious diseases. The World Health Organization contacts you to ask you to investigate an outbreak of a disease affecting children in southern Sudan. The first thing you do is go online to search the literature to learn what is already known about the disease because you hope to equip yourself with the best available data on the topic before your fieldwork. Unfortunately, the exorbitant download fees—typically \$30 per article—put crucial knowledge about the disease out of your reach. In a country with a health budget of \$9 per person per year, the notion that you as a physician will be able to afford to read the literature is clearly ludicrous.

This story is real. The pediatrician was James Tumwine, a professor at Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda, and editor-in-chief of *African Health Sciences*. The disease was “nodding disease”, an unusual childhood seizure disorder in which children have absence seizures after they eat and appear to be nodding. Tumwine had a basic right to access the archival research literature on the disease, and the denial of this right was a moral failure. Just as AIDS activists in Africa and elsewhere have campaigned for access to essential life-saving antiretroviral medicines, we in the publishing community surely have a duty to advocate for open access to essential life-saving biomedical knowledge.

If you think that this story is an isolated one, you should set aside a day or two to read every word (including all the scholarly footnotes and appendixes) of *The Access Principle*, John Willinsky’s rousing call for open access to research and scholarship. Throughout his book, Willinsky, founder of the Public Knowledge Project (pkp.sfu.ca), gives other depressing examples of what he calls the “current state of declining access to research”. A former director of the Indian Council of Medical Research, for example, points out that Indian researchers are often unaware of the latest science because “hardly 10 percent of our libraries get the top journals.”

One of the criticisms leveled at the

open-access movement is that it is “a solution looking for a problem”. Critics feel that the current subscription-based model of biomedical publishing is working just fine and should not be tampered with. One of the many services that *The Access Principle* provides is to dispel that myth, in part by giving the long history of gross global inequities in access to knowledge. I was aware that the United Nations has, over the last few years, called repeatedly for universal access to the biomedical literature, but I had not recognized that the UN’s concerns about the issue are decades old. A 1969 UN report presented in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, for example, proposed that overcoming the “vicious cycle of underdevelopment” would require an “indigenous scientific capacity”, which meant, among other things, overcoming the “highly imperfect access to the body of world scientific knowledge”. And Article 27 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that everyone has the right to “share in scientific advancement and its benefits”. The language in the declaration makes it clear, says Willinsky, that the human right at issue is not just enjoying the fruits of scientific progress, such as new medicines, but access to scientific knowledge.

Over and over, Willinsky paints a picture of an information system that is elitist and exclusionary (access to the system depends on ability to pay). He cites Colin Darch, an academic librarian in Cape Town, South Africa, as saying that the big question for those in the South is whether the “North will continue to refuse to cooperate in the establishment of an equitable world order”, which should be based on “entrenched principles of full disclosure and free flow”. The time has come, says Willinsky, for researchers in the developed world to consider how easily they can contribute to the research capacity of the developing world by moving to a more open approach to scholarly publishing.

Indeed, Willinsky argues that researchers have a *duty* to disseminate their work, a duty that he calls the “access principle”, the idea that “a commitment to the value

and quality of research carries with it a responsibility to extend the circulation of this work as far as possible, and ideally to all who are interested in it and all who might profit by it." Thanks to the Internet, circulating knowledge to everyone is now within our grasp. As Harold Varmus, one of the founders of the Public Library of Science (PLoS), famously remarked, "It is now possible to share the results of medical research with anyone, anywhere, who could benefit from it. How could we not do it?"

The Access Principle is not just a historical treatise, with a truly global scope, but a blueprint for making universal access happen. It concerns itself with the new technologies, economic models, and institutional relationships that can help to advance the global circulation of knowledge, from open-access publishing to personal and institutional archiving and

"online publishing cooperatives" (such as JSTOR). It would be impossible to criticize Willinsky for being "all talk and no action", inasmuch as one of the main achievements of the Public Knowledge Project has been the development of Open Journal Systems, an open-source journal management and publishing system that is now being used by more than 800 open-access journals published in 10 languages.

With all the options now available to publishers and researchers worldwide, what excuses can possibly be left for maintaining the status quo of restricted access?

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