

Books & electronic media

The access principle

Author: John Willinsky
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“All men by nature desire to know” is how Aristotle begins *Metaphysics*.¹ Professor John Willinsky, who from 2001 to 2004 occupied the splendidly titled Pacific Press Chair of Literacy and Technology at the University of British Columbia, cites this statement as the basis of the modern knowledge economy and uses it to construct his arguments for the principle of free access to information. In fewer than 300 pages he gives a broad overview of the open access movement.

The well-known arguments in favour of free access to the results of publicly funded research are presented. However, the author's background in the humanities and his broad scholarship allow him to examine the issue from many different angles, including its historical and philosophical framework. He particularly emphasizes the “public good” character of access to knowledge; i.e. that the greater use of knowledge does not deplete its supply, as occurs with private goods, but rather tends to increase its value. This wider analysis of the impact and implications of open access is refreshingly different from the narrow debate on the viability of various economic models that currently dominates the debate among scientific, technological and medical publishers.

The author's long experience with scholarship and publishing is demonstrated by his many insightful comments throughout the text. I particularly like his casting of the interaction of academy and publishing as a mixture of the “right to know” and “the right to be known” facets of the complex mix of vanity and human rights that drives scholarly publishing. He also skilfully draws the connection between the

current open access movement and the history of public libraries, beginning from the great Library of Alexandria of classical times through the mosque libraries, such as the one that flourished at Al-Azhar in Cairo, to the nineteenth-century public library movement. Open access is essentially a digital version of the public libraries' traditional role of providing access to printed information.

Willinsky also draws the link between the greater access to information that open access gives to developing countries and the empowerment this gives to researchers in such countries to contribute to scholarly discourse. For example, African studies programmes in northern universities would be greatly enriched by improved critical input from African-based researchers who have access to current local scholarly knowledge.

The author approaches the access principle from many different angles, and includes separate chapters on copyright, indexing and development. He particularly champions a cooperative model between libraries and scholarly societies. His own involvement with the open-source online journal management software Open Journal Systems and the Public Knowledge Project enriches the chapters on the economics and politics of open-access publishing.

As open access is a fast-changing field, constantly experiencing technical and political developments such as the proposed Federal Research Public Access Act of 2006,² certain parts of the book unfortunately appear dated. Some chapters also appear to have been written at the turn of the century and to have been supplemented with brief updates.

Other limitations include a North American bias in the content. For example, Vitek Tracz, who is based in England and is one of the pioneers of open access and founder of the largest commercial open-access publisher, is referred to as “an employee of a publishing company”. Also, the SciELO project, one of the earliest free-access publishing initiatives and responsible for publishing hundreds of open-access journals in

Latin America and Iberia, is relegated to a footnote.

I also noticed a few errors in the text. The clause in the US Constitution that grants Congress the right to legislate on copyright is in Article I (and not Article II, as stated). Interestingly, the Constitution granted this right in order “to promote the progress of Science and useful Arts ...” and not to create excess profits for film studios, record companies, software houses and commercial publishers, which appears to be a distortion of its original function. Other errors should have been fixed by careful proofreading, such as the use of “with” instead of “without” at the top of page xi, thereby defeating the object of the phrase regarding the purpose of open-access journals.

Even with these small limitations, the book provides a balanced view on open access, written by one of its advocates, that serves well as an introduction to the context in which the current open-access debate is taking place. ■

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References

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2. Federal Research Public Access Act of 2006, S.2695. Available at: <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/z?c109:S.2695>

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