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Review: *The Access Principle: The Case for Open Access to Research and Scholarship* by John Willinsky

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The Access Principle: The Case for Open Access to Research and Scholarship by John Willinsky. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006. 287 pp. ISBN 0-262-23242-1

With the Budapest Open Access Initiative, and the publication of the first free scientific journal, *PLoS Biology*, the topic of open access, or free availability to scholarly and scientific literature on the public Internet, has steadily gained interest. While it is important to define open access, it is even more important to address the issue of why and how it serves to improve access to knowledge and to ensure that knowledge remains a public good. This is precisely what John Willinsky, Pacific Press Professor of Literacy and Technology at the University of British Columbia, sets out to do in his latest book, *The Access Principle: The Case for Open Access to Research and Scholarship*. Willinsky is candid about his intention that the book serve as a call to action as well as a contribution to scholarship. In arguing for innovative approaches to open access, Willinsky offers what he calls an access principle that reflects an ongoing commitment to the value and quality of research, which “carries with it a responsibility to extend the circulation of such work as far as possible and ideally to all who are interested in it and all who might profit by it” (p. xii).

Improving and providing access to knowledge is a complex and multifaceted problem, and Willinsky builds his case accordingly. He clearly identifies the problem and approaches it in a systematic and straightforward manner. In the course of thirteen chapters and six appendices he covers a range of topics, from the history of scholarly communication (beginning with the printing press) to issues of copyright, cooperation, reading, and indexing. On the one hand he deals with practical matters of digitizing scholarly journals, while on the other he considers some of scholarly publishing’s more expansive themes, such as extending the research capabilities of developing nations. In order to emphasize the significance of improving and providing access to knowledge Willinsky compares the present-day situation to the print revolution and the emergence of the first scholarly and scientific journals.

Although the access principle problem is as old as the great libraries of the past, as Willinsky himself acknowledges, he is interested in exploring a more recent phenomenon, the open access movement, which has been triggered by two events. The first is the issue of soaring prices for scholarly journals that has forced libraries to eliminate journal subscriptions and/or resulted in severe hits to library budgets. This state of “declining access to research and publishing” is itself the result of the transformation of knowledge into “a capitalized commodity and economic driver” (p. 16). The second event is the advent of Internet and digital publishing that have created a viable alternative to the existing publishing model.

Although publishers who are responsible for soaring prices can be portrayed as villains, the book offers a much more complex story. Willinsky acknowledges that commercial scholarly publishers have provided free access to research literature for developing countries, and have allowed authors to archive their papers in open university repositories. In addition, he acknowledges the role that these publishers played in the rapid expansion of the sciences in the 1950s by launching journals covering a number of new fields for which scholarly societies were reluctant to add new titles.

In his quest for open access, Willinsky makes sure that he is not advocating the impossible (i.e. free access). Likewise, he does not recommend one particular solution. Instead, he offers ten different models for improving access (home page, e-print archive, author fee, subsidized, dual-mode, delayed, partial, per capita, indexing and cooperative open access), and points to their strengths and weaknesses, taking into account economic realities. He shows how open-access journals, e-print archives, and institutional repositories are parts of a new, emerging public space of knowledge. He draws upon his experience with the Public Knowledge Project, a research initiative based at the University of British Columbia and Simon Fraser University that has developed open source publishing software to test some of the prospects of open access. He also provides an interesting scenario for fruitful publishing and archiving collaboration between libraries, professional associations and publishers. This model includes a technical infrastructure and information science expertise important for indexing and organizing the scholarly associations by bringing the communities of authors, editors, publishers and readers together, while publishers provide proficiency in editing, design and portal management.

The importance of open access to scholarly and scientific literature is usually weighed based upon its importance to researchers. Willinsky is quick to provide arguments and propose solutions that take into account the significance of citations for career advancement, and the impact open access can have on increasing the visibility and research of authors and their work. However, he points out that while open access to scholarly literature is of utmost importance to researchers in general, it is even more critical for researchers at smaller, less well-endowed research institutions, particularly in developing countries where access to literature remains difficult. To this end, Willinsky demonstrates that the colonial division between center and periphery is still at work. And, while he advocates for providing open access to the developing world, he warns that innovations in open access publishing in such countries takes place “against the chilling historical backdrop of earlier efforts at instilling universal education and global knowledge systems, when the West placed educating the native at the heart of imperialism’s moral economy” (p.110). Replication of center-periphery arrangements pertaining to research content, language, and distribution are all

very critical issues related to open-access, yet they fall beyond the scope of this book. Hopefully, Willinsky will tackle these issues in his future research.

Willinsky contends that open access should not only be directed toward increasing access to researchers but it is also “about turning this knowledge into a greater vehicle of public education, in the broadest sense” (p. 9). Students and their instructors are likely beneficiaries to improved access. Here he stresses that it is important not only to provide access, but also to use research in learning how to read in order to improve “the design of the reading environment that online journals create” (p. 157). The same also applies for the general public. Examples such as patients’ access to medical information on the Internet or an amateur astronomer’s contribution to research, has changed the way in which information is sought and disseminated. Nevertheless, he admits that open access to research literature “will mean little enough, admittedly, to most of the people most of the time” (p. 111). On the other hand, with the increased emphasis on political accountability and the corresponding call for “evidence-based policymaking”, as well as the emergence of a “digital democracy”, open access can be used to further advance democratic participation among citizens.

Willinsky shows that despite the concerns about recent amendments and extensions of the Copyright Act in the United States, the copyright law is ultimately an ally to greater openness. This is achieved through a balancing of both the author and the public’s interests. He distinguishes between copyright and publication rights, stating that at the moment the copyright is often used to protect the publisher’s right to charge what it wishes for its journals.

It is commendable that Willinsky devotes a significant portion of the book to the problem of indexing. For example, he says that “access to high-quality indexing of the scholarly literature needs to go along with open access to the literature itself” (p. 126). Therefore, he goes beyond the case for open access indexing and argues for “more comprehensive, integrated, and automated indexing of the scholarly literature” (p. 176). Willinsky, however, does not discuss the influence of more recent developments such as social computing and folksonomies.

This well-researched and documented book does an excellent job of presenting a case for improved access, and also provides models for how this can be achieved. It provides a balanced view of all models, pointing out the strengths and weaknesses of each. However, the limitations of open access in general are not discussed. This is not surprising, since by the author’s own admission, the book is “a work of inquiry and advocacy.” It is my impression that he accomplishes both.

Another goal of this book is to show the value of increasing and improving access to journal literature through the use of the Internet. Willinsky comments that “in presenting the case for open access, this book works from

historical precedent and global perspectives, as well as with the development of new technologies and economic models. As a result, the goal is incremental advances in the circulation of knowledge within the academic community and beyond” (p. 31). This book will be of interest to both professional and academic students of scholarly communication. While Willinsky does not claim to have all the answers, he certainly raises numerous interesting questions and provides possible models and scenarios for the future. This is an excellent attempt at providing an intellectual foundation to research on open access issues. Now that Willinsky has presented the enormous complexity of the problem, he will hopefully do more in depth studies of some of the issues he raised, while keeping in mind that open access is one step towards bridging the digital divide.

Reviewer

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