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Review

The Access Principle: the case for open access to research and scholarship John Willinsky (2006)

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This is a book for everyone who has suddenly needed at short notice to check a reference, who has tried to find that missing quote, or who has needed urgently to get hold of a copy of that latest article that has unfortunately appeared in precisely their own research area just when they were about to submit their own paper – and who then finds: first, that that article is not in their own institution's library and, second, that the journal's sprightly webpage lets them have all kinds of interesting details about the article but will not let them read it, at least not without paying out a hefty per-article buying price or arranging an institutional subscription.

This book is then even more for those who have taken the next steps; those who have questioned this state of affairs, have wondered just why their library doesn't appear to subscribe to the journal in question and have asked-only to be informed that, in fact, *cuts* in subscriptions have been made necessary by dramatic price increases for institutional journal subscriptions.

The book is, finally, also for those who have never wondered about these issues at all and who have assumed that the practice of publishing results in scholarly journals was a successful and appropriate solution to the task of distributing knowledge and making their research results known: as Willinsky shows in great detail, actually at present it is not and a substantial re-think concerning the principles of knowledge distribution is urgently required.

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In the *Access Principle*, Willinsky addresses the basic foundations underlying consideration of all these issues and comes to some dramatic conclusions. Conclusions which very strongly suggest that it is time for a radical change in the way information is made available – especially scientific information that is the result of public research. Rather than the much vaunted wealth of choice that is commonly raised in descriptions of the 'information age' that we have now entered, Willinsky shows with use-case after use-case that in the area of scientific publishing, almost the exact opposite is true: more and more information is becoming less and less available. He ascribes this to outdated publishing practices and, perhaps more importantly in the long run, to a lack of awareness concerning the fact that it could (and moreover should) be different.

Willinsky sets out over thirteen chapters a detailed and sustained argument that should convince anyone not only that all is not well in the scientific publishing arena but also that there are some very concrete steps that can now be taken to correct the situation. The book's argumentative thrust is based on the tenet that information, and scientific research results in particular, are a public good which society and individuals have an obligation to make as widely accessible as possible and which individuals should be able to access as a basic right. A commitment to this tenet is what Willinsky terms the *Access Principle*: the adoption of methods and practice by which the abstract right of access is turned into a reality. Over the course of the book, Willinsky addresses the social, philosophical and practical motivations and consequences of the Access Principle, establishing it at the centre of a philosophy of access for all public research that Willinsky sees as the logical continuation of practices of information distribution into the electronic age, fully utilising the capabilities of the technologies now available to bring information to anyone who can use it.

Much of the effectiveness of the book's discussion comes from the fact that Willinsky is by no means suggesting some simple utopian world of 'everything for free'. On the one hand, Willinsky sets out detailed aspects of copyright law, enhanced indexing, diverse economic business models for publishing, and case studies of those models in action. On the other, he opens up philosophical and historical discussions of the right to know, the history of the academic journal and more. These issues taken together argue for alternative economic models for information dissemination which are far more suited to the research communities' needs and to the public's right to know what is being done with its tax money. By taking in such wide-ranging discussions of history, rights, and the economics of journal publishing as well as illustrating in detail value-adding through indexing and cooperations between researchers, publishers and libraries to make their information accessible, the book addresses just about every angle that one could think of on the issue of providing and increasing access.

Willinsky also includes several very detailed appendixes, in which he compares the costs and savings of the range of the publishing models he discusses, the range of e-journal systems that can now be drawn on and the financial and practical consequences of adopting them, the role and methods for indexing scholarly literature now available, the annual publication costs of some major American scholarly associations and the potential (and in some case already realized) benefits of changing their publishing arrangements. All of these contribute solid facts and figures that flesh out the nitty-gritty details of the points made in the rest of the book. Also of note here is the considerable number of web-pointers that Willinsky gives for online and accessible open document archiving systems, electronic journal systems, and other related solutions for achieving workable and sustainable accessibility.

While the discussion of alternative publishing models will be of interest to those concerned with the business of scholarly publishing (including those who have to pay for it – as shown by Willinsky's examples of the considerable sums still paid by professional academic organizations for publishing their organization's journals), the book also contains much that is of relevance to individual researchers. One of Willinsky's many points is the need for publishing academics to take a much stronger and deliberated role in how they choose to make their research results available. Choosing journals that do not have an open access policy – at least one that allows pre-print versions of articles to be hosted on websites – is tellingly presented as a lose-lose situation. Current statistics clearly show that papers that are accessible online win hands down in the citation stakes. And, given the increasingly important role in evaluation that is played by such citation statistics, researchers should think very carefully before cutting off this source of readership.

Moreover, on a perhaps less individualistic note are Willinsky's points concerning the broader unfavourable consequences of not supporting more open access for research results. In particular, he describes how

> basic rights of participation … are taken for granted by scholars who exist at the centers of publishing activity, even as they assume that these publications represent an open and free discussion of ideas, while in reality … [circulation limits] define an intellectual periphery … (p. 106)

This intellectual periphery is in practice denied access to the research results that researchers in the centre are still assuming to be generally available. This is one of the systematic problems that Willinsky repeatedly draws attention to. When publishers can take a dominant position in procuring and keeping library budgets, price increases force less affluent libraries and countries out of the picture. Some of the more progressive publishers are, of course, already contributing to fundamental changes in this respect – but, Willinsky argues, this must go much further.

In this, Willinsky is very much at the centre of a movement towards open access that is growing in strength and significance. Both the Budapest Open-Access Initiative (2002) and the more recent Berlin Declaration on Open Access to Knowledge in the Sciences and Humanities (2003) and subsequent 'Berlin 3' report on implementation progress (2005) show that Open Access is an idea whose time has come. Supporters of these initiatives agree both to encourage and, where necessary, to support models of access that guarantee accessibility. The outcome of the 'Berlin 3' meeting was an understanding that:

In order to implement the Berlin Declaration institutions should implement a policy to:

1. require their researchers to deposit a copy of all their published articles in an open access repository, and
2. encourage their researchers to publish their research articles in open access journals where a suitable journal exists (and provide the support to enable that to happen).

(http://www.eprints.org/events/berlin3/outcomes.html; accessed 5 Nov 2006)

Many institutions have already signed this agreement (and for those who do not know how to form open access repositories, Willinsky provides a host of concrete pointers).

Willinsky's book fills in the necessary detail to understand the basic issues and motivations for supporting this movement. The 'access principle' as such is an orientation and awareness of the various ways of distributing knowledge more effectively, an awareness that Willinsky argues to be an obligation of those producing that knowledge. The very definition of knowledge should, according to Willinsky, include its distribution and this book provides economic models that can make this happen. In short, with his multiple bottom line that, first, the reliance on the older models of publishing in scientific journals are no longer tenable, second, are leading to radically increased journal prices and, third, have already resulted in more and more information becoming available to fewer and fewer readers, Willinsky's book is a much needed document. If any libraries, publishers, colleagues, and institutions are not yet convinced both of the need to radically extend accessibility and of the practicality of doing so, then they should be pointed very firmly to the case being made in this book.

Book reviewed

Willinsky, J. (2006) *The Access Principle*: *the case for open access to research and scholarship.* Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology. xv + 287 pp. ISBN 0–262–23242–1.