

Books & electronic media

The access principle

Author: John Willinsky
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asp?tttype=2&tid=10611](http://mitpress.mit.edu/catalog/item/ebook.asp?tttype=2&tid=10611))

“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

1. Aristotle. *Metaphysics*. Translated by WD Ross. Book 1, part 1. Available at: <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/metaphysics.html>
2. Federal Research Public Access Act of 2006, S.2695. Available at: <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/z?c109:S.2695>

Tiim

Film produced by: Pharmaciens Sans Frontieres Comité International and CINOMADE (<http://www.cinomade.org>).

Duration: 31 minutes (subtitles in English and French).

Available in VHS and VCD formats (15 euros) or DVD format (30 euros) from CINOMADE, 62 rue Rouget de l'Isles, 93 160 Noisy-le-Grand, France (e-mail: cinomade@hotmail.com).

Burkina Faso is a small, impoverished country in west Africa with a health infrastructure that is less than adequate. As is the case in most developing countries, the improper and inappropriate

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use of medicines is a major problem. Costly medications, improper use of prescription and nonprescription drugs, misuse of advertised brand-name medicines and use of inadequate and incomplete courses of medication are among the problems that Burkina Faso faces.

“Tiim” is a documentary film that deals with the problem of street-sold medicines in Burkina Faso. It explores the attitudes of providers and consumers of street medicines in the country’s Ouahigouya region, where street sales of medicines are common.

One of the main characters in the film is Kariim Campaori, a street vendor who carries his medicine bag containing paracetamol, ibuprofen, chloroquine, iron, vitamins and other drugs around the villages to peddle his wares. He is uneducated, like the majority of street vendors in Burkina Faso, and his knowledge of his wares is limited to information shown in pictorial representations on the drug packaging. He sells medicines for both people and animals. As the medicines are expensive, a complete course is too costly for most customers and often he sells only one or two tablets. The same medicines are used for both children and adults, with paediatric doses obtained by subdividing those for adults.

Later in the film, two farmers are interviewed. One states that he used to take street medicines, while the other is addicted to a stimulant pill called “14s”. It is claimed that this and another pill called “bleu-bleu” help people

to work harder, neglecting even their needs for food and water. As shown in the film, however, after a certain period of time the stimulant effects of these drugs wear off and their adverse effects appear.

A former vendor of street medicines who works as a cobbler is also interviewed. He reports that vendors sometimes hand out medications for free to retain their clientele. They also commonly self-medicate themselves and become addicted to the drugs they sell.

The film then highlights an initiative to introduce generic medicines into the community. Covered in detail are some of the advantages that generic medicines have over brand-name products. A medication’s life-cycle from a newly introduced innovator brand with patent protection to patent expiration and the manufacture of generic equivalents is discussed. Many of the problems posed by street medicines, including the question of whether the sellers of street medicines have the necessary training and expertise, are covered. A community clinic run by a trained pharmacist is shown; the generic drugs that it stocks are properly stored and neatly arranged. These generics can be bought for much less than their branded counterparts and are supplied with proper directions for use, unlike most street medicines. Because the generics are cheaper, it may be easier for patients to complete the required course of treatment.

Many of the problems covered in the documentary are prevalent in other areas of the world where illiteracy and poverty are common. Although street vendors of medicines may not be common on a global scale, in many other settings drugs may be available over the counter without a prescription. Often, complete courses of medication are not purchased, or they are stopped once the patient starts feeling better.

The documentary is very well produced and the backing music by Badema sets the mood. It will be useful for training medical, pharmacy, nursing and other health sciences students in the more rational use of medicines. ■

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