

What stops academics from sharing?

The answer: One of the world's biggest publishers. But publicly funded research should be allowed to be distributed worldwide with a click of the mouse, writes **Denise R Nicholson**. After all, the public paid for it in the first place

ACCCESS to information is a basic human right entrenched in the constitution. Yet there are so many barriers restricting or preventing access to information.

Daily, researchers, educators, librarians, students, schoolchildren and citizens in general encounter problems accessing information, whether it be printed or online material.

A large section of the population lacks access to basic amenities such as water, electricity and food, let alone access to reading material, libraries, bookstores and information. Not everyone has access to the internet and digital resources and they depend on printed material (often photocopied) for their information needs.

Even those who are privileged to have access to the internet or other reading material experience access problems because of restrictive copyright laws, excessively priced books and journals, prohibitive licences, or digital rights management systems with technological protection measures that restrict or lock up information.

In addition, unreasonable policies and embargo periods set by publishers on online material exacerbate the whole access situation.

South Africa is a developing country in transformation, with a world-renowned Bill of Rights and a National Development Plan, but these noble provisions cannot be fulfilled when its citizens do not have adequate access to information, whether for personal development, education, research or general civic or other purposes.

This is the reason Open Access is so crucial for South Africa and other developing countries.

Open Access is an international movement that facilitates access to information that is usually locked up or held behind expensive paywalls or copyright barriers.

Many educational institutions around the world, including South Africa, have created Open Access institutional repositories to make their research outputs accessible on the global stage.

These repositories provide access to public-financed works to anyone who can access the internet, but,



Open Access wants peer-reviewed research available without restrictions online.

PICTURE: REUTERS

more importantly, they open the door to research and other knowledge that has been closed to developing countries, including South Africa, in the past.

The excessive prices of books and journals published by multinational publishing houses are not accessible to most South Africans, unless they are privileged to belong to a library that can afford such subscriptions. Institutional repositories are free and open, providing full-text

articles, book chapters and other research outputs of institutions, without the users having to pay for access. In many ways, if it weren't for Open Access material, health workers, researchers, educators and librarians would not be able to find up-to-date relevant information.

In South African rural areas, many doctors do not have access to the internet, let alone subscription journals, and so depend on assistance from fellow health workers

who have access to libraries.

Without this, they often depend on outdated information, which is detrimental to the medical profession and in particular to their patients who are then being treated based on outdated information.

Without access to Open Access material, these researchers, medical scientists, etc would not be able to add to research and change the face of medical practice and health services in South Africa.

Just as the young US student, Jack Andraka, in recent years researched and discovered a new cancer test by accessing Open Access material on Google, so South African students and researchers will only be able to contribute and add new knowledge to their fields if they have access to the best international and local up-to-date journals, books and other research.

South Africa is doing some amazing research, but if it is not permitted

to be shared on the global stage because of restrictive copyright laws or unreasonable policies and embargo periods set by publishers, others cannot benefit from the research.

Neither can South African authors become known and cited if their works are locked up behind expensive paywalls, from which only a limited number of readers who have access to those journals can benefit.

More than 820 enlightened publishers around the world now facilitate access to knowledge by allowing institutions to deposit their final PDF published articles on Open Access institutional repositories. They realise the benefit of sharing knowledge but, by doing so, their publications will receive more exposure, more readership, and their authors will attract more citations. The subject content of their publications will be read and shared by a much wider and cross-disciplinary audience, which all goes to boost readership and impact factors for their publications.

Impede

They have seen that Open Access complements their conventional publishing practices and does not impede it in any way.

Unfortunately there are other publishers, one being Elsevier, that believe that locking up knowledge somehow "benefits" academia, research and knowledge production.

Elsevier's new "sharing" policy attempts to place unreasonable embargoes on material so that they can't be made available on institutional repositories for a long period of time. This means that institutions cannot make their own research outputs accessible on Open Access, until such time as Elsevier or other publishers decide they can.

Somehow the whole balance of ownership and production has become skewed. Academic institutions pay researchers to write articles and books to make their research public, they provide free editorial services in most cases for journals and then publishers get authors to sign over all their copyright to them so that they can control the content forever afterwards.

This is a bizarre practice if ever there was one.

Authors have a whole bundle of rights granted to them by copyright law, yet publishers do not tell authors that they can retain rights, or that they only need to give the publisher a "non-exclusive" licence to publish their works.

Authors do not always know their rights and often sign them over to publishers. Authors should have the final choice of what happens to their works, not publishers. The copyright law gives rights to authors. Authors need to realise what their rights are so that they do not relinquish control over their works.

How ridiculous is it for an author, an expert in his/her field, to have to ask permission from a publisher to do certain acts with his/her own works, such as use them for teaching purposes; share them with colleagues in meetings or in rural areas; place them on a personal or institutional repository; and/or permit translations or modifications of their works.

In recent months, academic institutions and libraries around the world have objected strongly to Elsevier's new policy and to date 263 institutions and 2 688 concerned librarians and academics have signed a petition against the policy.

Elsevier have responded with attempts to show the benefits of such a policy, but for all intents and purposes, it just entrenches their policy of restrictions and control over research, which institutions themselves have produced via their academic authors.

It is very important that South African research reaches a regional and global audience; after all, our research is very important, often groundbreaking and beneficial to the world at large. More importantly, publicly financed research should be made available freely to the public, since the public paid for the research in the first place.

Sharing knowledge ultimately results in more research, more publications, more marketing and more funds for the publishers, so why do they have such aggressive policies towards Open Access?

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