



INFORMATION WANTS TO BE FREE

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Yes, I admit it; I've always been in favour of Open Access. There is something so inspiring about the saying "information wants to be free" that hackers in the early days of Internet chanted. And as I participate, in my role as librarian, in Malmö University's Master's course Communication for Development, these old words are filled with new connotations.

The thought that information wants to be free is a serious one, grounded in great ethical and epistemological positions, and it has obvious implications in the areas of communication and development. As the Internet has narrowed the world, enabling fast communication and meetings all over the globe, it has also increased the information gap and widened the digital divide. Each updated attempt to map the Internet, displaying hubs and nodes of connection clusters, clearly shows that there is still much to ask for.

But the divide is not only of a technical nature -who has initial access to the Internet-. What parts of the content you have access to, also matters. There is an information gap, because not all information is freely available, and there is a divide between those who have the means to pay for the information needed and those who have not.

There is an ongoing movement, raised as a reaction to the unethical price rise of scientific journals, and also as a result of the discussion of who owns the research information/knowledge/experience produced in the public sphere: for example, at universities around the world.

The moral right of a work can never be sold, but as from the economic rights tied to copyright you can elaborate, keeping the right to freely use and publish on the Internet, thus making your texts available for everyone, for the sake of spreading the results and helping to create new knowledge worldwide.

The information society is put under the magnifying glass by international attempts, as the World Summit of Information Society (WSIS) declares the desire "...to build a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society, where everyone can create, access, utilize and share information and knowledge, enabling individuals, communities and peoples to achieve their full potential in promoting their sustainable

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development and improving their quality of life” [1].

Some initiatives on this matter already exist. Pre-print archives as *ArXiv.org*, where you can access research results in physics without the slowness of traditional journal publishing, is one example. *Pub Med*, providing access to abstracts in the medical sphere, is another one.

Another initiative well worth mentioning is the project *HINARI*, hosted by the WHO. It is an attempt to bridge the information gap when it comes to health research by giving local, non-profit institutions in developing countries online access to journals in biomedical and related social sciences. This is done at a low cost, in order to facilitate knowledge-sharing in these subject areas.

But once we have fought the first barrier in the way of information spreading by providing open access, we have to overcome the difficulties to actually find information. Although search engines are improving and getting better at clustering information and ranking relevance, still a huge part of the net is not searchable with an ordinary search engine. Other parts are just scattered around the web, and it takes time to locate the useful information in the massive amount of web pages.

Librarians are well aware of the difficulties faced when seeking for information, and of the importance of structuring information in order to facilitate retrieval.

One way to do this is to develop gateways for open access material. The *Directory of Open Access Journals* (DOAJ) is a grand first step in collecting and making open access journals accessible from one point. Another useful gateway is the *Body of Knowledge*, recently launched by the Communication for Social Change Consortium. This database consists of listings of works about communication for social change and development communication, and tries to embrace contributions from all regions.

Another example is the development of search engines. With *Scirus* you get access to the index of *Elsevier's* expensive collections of e-journals. You might not get the whole articles, but you can at least see if something has been published. Also *Google* is keen on attracting surfers that search the Internet for scientific materials, and is therefore adjusting algorithms and launching new products, such as *Google Scholar*.

With all these examples in mind, let us return to the beginning: *information wants to be free*. If we believe this, we have to take our part of the responsibility to set the information free -by promoting open access, facilitating information retrieval and narrowing the digital divide.

Learn more

WSIS <http://www.itu.int/wsis/>

ArXiv.org <http://arxiv.org/>

Pub Med www.pubmed.org

HINARI <http://www.healthinternetwork.org/src/eligibility.php>

DOAJ www.doaj.org

CSC Body of Knowledge www.communicationforsocialchange.org/body-of-knowledge.php

Scirus www.scirus.com

Google Scholar www.scholar.google.com

SPARC <http://www.arl.org/sparc/>

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[1]

Declaration of Principles, Building the Information Society: a global challenge in the new Millennium 1§, World Summit of Information Society (cited 050513)

Available from: www.itu.int/wsis/docs/geneva/official/dop.html

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