- PDF
- Send to a friend

Might the Age of Information Graduate into an Era of Public Knowledge?

Essay by John Willinsky, June 4, 2008 in response to The Opening of Science and Scholarship

Some forty years ago, Marshall McLuhan spoke in his now predictably prescient manner of an "age of instant information," while others at the time held high-speed computing responsible for an "information revolution." And while it is tempting to say that they hadn't imagined the half of it, I think there is an optimistic distinction to be made in what has taken place over the last four decades. In those days, it was indeed information that was computed. Today, with the advent of networked information systems facilitating global collaboration, a good deal of knowledge is being hammered out and openly shared online today. It is tempting, at this early stage, to imagine that the openness of this knowledge is contributing to the educational and democratic quality of our lives and, in this optimistic and perhaps naive vein, to look for ways of supporting its development.

Now, of course, the better part of Internet traffic is taken up with financial and commercial information, augmented by a good deal of shopping and other, less savory, activities. But what distinguishes today's information flow in a more promising way is how people are coming online to discover, read, review, revise, instruct, and comment. It is like a massive second wave of the public library movement that swept large and small communities more than a century ago, only this time with annotation, commentary and marginal notes invited. Pundits may decry the ineptness to be found in much of it, but I come at this as an educator. Teachers work hard to foster just such engagement, interpretation, and judgment because it speaks to an educated sensibility and concern. It speaks to a democratic exuberance that will take some getting used to, much as did the idea of teaching every child to read and write, as a human right.

Thus, I am fascinated by the 5,000th review added at Amazon of Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone and the five years of editing that has gone into Wikipedia's entry on the Japanese American Internment. I am encouraged by the federal government efforts to support knowledge's newfound public sphere by providing freely accessible indexes to the latest research in medicine (PubMed) and education (ERIC) by requiring National Institute of Health sponsored researchers to archive a copy of all related publications online, and by having the Energy Department share climate change data, as well as by citizen's responding with 1,800 blog entries, up to this point, discussing this data, according to the blog index Tenchnorati.

If scholars remain concerned about quality and value of the ideas shared online, then they should indeed be heartened by the open access movement that Peter Suber describes in "The Opening of Science and Scholarship". While this opening is principally a boon for the circulation of knowledge among academics, especially those at less-well-endowed institutions, they should see it as an opportunity to both move a greater part of their work into this new public marketplace of ideas, raising its overall quality in the process. After all, the sharing and reviewing of knowledge is the scholar's very business, even if the prospect of doing it on so vast a public scale is at first a little intimidating.

As to what we can expect with this opening of science and scholarship, studies that I and others have conducted suggest that readers of Wikipedia will look at more of the scholarship related to the entries that they are consulting, teachers will bring fresh ideas to the high school classes,

health professionals will consult more of the research concerning conditions that stymie them, and policymakers will assemble a greater new depth of background materials on the current issues they are addressing.

What, then, of the scholarly publishers' fears that this open access approach to scholarship threatens the viability of the peer-review journal? Well, it needs to be said that both authors and researchers do not ask publishers to be paid for their work, as part of their commitment to openness (and review). We understand, as well, how incredibly dear research is at every point, from the years of training it takes to participate in this enterprise, through the public or tax-exempt support of the institutions in which it takes place, to the copy-editing and proof-reading of the article prior to publication.

In fact, when it comes to the publishing stage, it appears that there is more than enough money on the table to make all that is published freely and universally available. I say more than enough, because studies by Ted Bergstrom show that in economics the scholarly societies are publishing the highest quality journals for a fifth of the cost (on a per-page basis) of the corporate publishers who currently hold a majority of the titles in this field. Add to that the 60 or so economic journals that make their contents open access, and it would indeed seem possible for librarians, societies, and publishers to sit down together and hammer out a fair price for publishing this literature in a form that would be universally available. As hopelessly naïve as that may sound, the high-energy physics community of researchers is well on its way at arriving at just such an agreement.

Whether we stand before an age of public knowledge or not, I would have to be a McLuhan to pronounce with any confidence. I do know what I would prefer, and I know what is possible. Such an age can only happen if we increasingly imagine and act on this newly extended right to know, that is, the right to know what is known as a result of public support and in the name of a greater public good. If we take this as the way things should be, and work smartly and hard on making it happen, then chances are very good that what universities have long done with knowledge will transform the public sphere for the educational and democratic benefit of all.

John Willinsky *is Khosla Family Professor of Education at Stanford University and Visiting Professor at the University of British Columbia. He is the author of The Access Principle: The Case for Open Access to Research and Scholarship (MIT Press, 2006), and directs the* Public Knowledge Project*, which is the developer of Open Journal Systems and Open Conference Systems that offer open source approaches for improving the scholarly and public quality of academic research.*

All Access Essays

Diversity and Global Inclusion

- Understanding our Knowledge Gaps: Or, Do we have an ICT4D field? And do we want one?
  by Michael Best
- Open ICT ecosystems transforming the developing world
  by Matthew Smith and Laurent Elder
- ICT Diffusion: Have we really made any progress?
  by Sabri Saidam

Open Access

- The Need for a "Knowledge Web" for Scholarship
  by Carolina Rossini
- Opening Access in a Networked Science
  by Melanie Dulong de Rosnay
- A Take on Peter Suber's "The Opening of Science and Scholarship"
  by Jean-Claude Guedon

Open Infrastructure

- Metaphors We Regulate By
  by Rikke Frank Jørgensen
- FORWARD WITH FIBER: An Infrastructure Investment Plan for the New Administration
  by Doc Searls

View all thematic areas »

Source URL:
http://publius.cc/might_age_information_graduate_era_public_knowledge#comment-0