



Access to knowledge – the times they are a’changing

I am back in South Africa, after more intercontinental flights than I would like to recall, with an overwhelming sense that there is a decisive shift happening on a number of fronts in the area I work in. I have been to conferences and workshops on open access, A2K, scholarly publishing futures, and the formulation of a more balanced and just intellectual property regime. At all of them, there was a sense of urgency, but also of confidence, as a diverse community engaged with changing paradigms in all of these fields.

That on its own would not be too surprising. The broad community I work in is one that is committed to change, to equalising and democratising access to and participation in knowledge production. What feels different now is that our efforts are being accompanied by a landslide of other events – signs of shifts in national and regional policy, consolidated support for open access, acceleration in the development of alternative metrics for evaluating research effectiveness, and increased and sometimes vehement media attention.

In this blog I will try to track the broad landscape of change and will then engage with the different threads in a series of blogs, to spell out what I think the implications are for South Africa, Africa and the developing world. What I fear is that we in Africa are all too often, in our attempts to be ‘world class’, chasing last year’s – or rather last century’s – vision. As Rhodes University Vice-Chancellor, Saleem Badat, wrote in the [UNESCO World Social Science Report 2010](#), there is a danger for developing country universities in ‘uncritical mimicry and ‘catching up’ with the so-called world class university in order to further socio-economic development’. With the current rate of change, this is a clear and present danger and we risk being stuck in last year’s paradigms.

So – a brief overview of what has been happening. (or brief-ish, as a lot is going on):

In **scholarly publishing** there has been a lively debate on **alternative metrics** to replace the dominant Web of Science journal impact factor as a measure of research effectiveness. This is particularly important for developing countries, marginalised by this system and by the global university rankings that go with it. The Altmetric discussion has involved the development of a range of technology tools and fostered arguments for more diversified, qualitative and nuanced ways of evaluating academic performance. A core argument is that readers of journal articles should be able to replicate the experiments described in journal articles, requiring the availability of data and information on research process provided online alongside the journal article itself.

This in turn interfaces with changes in **scholarly publishing models**. In the first instance, there has been a dramatic growth in open access journal publishing. The [PLOSOne open access journal model](#) is getting increased prominence and is being emulated by other journals. The features are a broad disciplinary focus rather than a narrow concept of ‘the journal of...’. The peer review model is different, with articles being reviewed for scientific rigour before publication and impact after publication, using ‘citation metrics, usage statistics, blogosphere coverage, social bookmarks, community rating and expert assessment’. PLOSOne encourages the creation of communities, and the generation of a ‘hub’ of information around a journal article.

What emerges is a view of journal publishing that sees the article as part of the research process. This in turn surely means closing the gap between open access and open science.

Commercial scholarly journal publishing has been under the lash in the media, with George Monbiot writing a scathing [article in the Guardian](#) claiming that ‘academic publishers make Murdoch look like a socialist’ and the [New York Times](#) charting rising levels of protest in US and UK universities to the high prices of scholarly journals, with cancelled subscriptions and increased support for open access.

The question of **peer review** has been taken up at government level in the UK, where a [parliamentary committee is reviewing this area](#). It appears to broadly support the PLOSOne model; supports the idea of pre-print servers to allow for collaboration and early feedback; argues for transparency and openness rather than blind review; and expresses serious caution about the use of the journal impact factor as a proxy for individual evaluation.

Intellectual property has also been in the spotlight. A series of regional workshops culminated in the [World Congress on Intellectual Property and the Public Interest](#) held at the American University of Washington. The outcome was the [Washington Declaration on Intellectual Property and the Public Interest](#) signed by over 700 people in the weeks after its launch. This challenges the industry-dominated IP regime that currently dominates and provides a policy agenda geared to a more balanced acknowledgement of the rights of creators and users.

This approach is echoed in the [UK’s Hargreaves Report on IP](#), commissioned by the UK government in late 2010. The report recommends that IP policy should be based on evidence rather than on industry lobbies; that over-regulation should be resisted; argues for limits on copyright and more generous exceptions; and recommends ways of creating access to orphan works. Parliament has supported the rapid implementation of the report’s recommendation.

The European Union has also taken up [the issue of orphan works](#) and has agreed a set of principles for making out of print books and journals available, providing for the digitisation and making available of out-of-print works through a voluntary system run through a democratically-managed collecting society.

In general, there seems to be a move towards openness, rising criticism of big corporation lobbying and protectionism.

by Eve



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