

Open sesame

The 1973 edition of the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles* (just 2762 pages long), which stands on a bookshelf behind my desk, has a declaration which, in the age of almost free online dictionaries and Creative Commons licences, may seem strange:

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the Oxford University Press.

Presumably, this requirement applies equally to the passage just quoted as it would, for example, to citing the definition of 'open' as being:

Open a. (adv.) 1. Of a door, gate, etc.: Not 'put to' not closed or shut; 'up', set up so as to allow free passage through.

If so, reproducing a statement does not only require an appropriate citation to the source of the information but also, more stringently, it requires permission (presumably in writing) from the Oxford University Press. Thus two copyright infringements have just occurred.

Anyone who has access to the full, constantly updated, *Oxford English Dictionary* online faces no such restrictions, although, of course, the online version is hardly 'set up so as to allow free passage' unless, of course, one pays handsomely in advance. But things have changed. In 1974, I paid dearly earned postgraduate stipend funds for the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, but still had to face the 'rights reserved' condition. Now one may pay and quote. The world of scholarly publishing has come a long way over the past 40 years.

From 20 October to 26 October, the world will celebrate, and advance the cause of, open access through 'Open Access Week,' an event whose location is, appropriately, posted on the Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Commission (SPARC) site as being 'everywhere'. SPARC

*...believes that faster and wider sharing of the outputs of the scholarly research process increases the impact of research, fuels the advancement of knowledge, and increases the return on research investments. SPARC focuses on taking action in collaboration with stakeholders – including authors, publishers, and libraries – to build on the unprecedented opportunities created by the networked digital environment to advance the conduct of scholarship.*¹

As a notion, movement and, now, a well-established practice (in some quarters), open access began its freedom march with the Budapest Declaration 12 years ago.² This declaration opens with these words:

*An old tradition and a new technology have converged to make possible an unprecedented public good. The old tradition is the willingness of scientists and scholars to publish the fruits of their research in scholarly journals without payment, for the sake of inquiry and knowledge. The new technology is the internet. The public good they make possible is the world-wide electronic distribution of the peer-reviewed journal literature and completely free and unrestricted access to it by all scientists, scholars, teachers, students, and other curious minds.*³

Leaders of the movement that brought the declaration to life include Jean-Claude Guedon of the University of Montreal and Lars Bjornhaug (both of whom recently addressed the South African National Scholarly Editors' Forum in Cape Town), along with a distinguished list of people from institutions including The Wellcome and Open Society Foundations; Harvard, Minho and Southampton Universities; the Max Planck Institute and the European Union.

The Budapest Declaration was followed by the Bethesda Statement on Open Access Publishing in June 2003⁴ and the Berlin Declaration on Open Access to Knowledge in the Sciences and Humanities in October 2003.

Since then, the movement has made considerable progress across publications, scholarly societies and nations, and the theoretical underpinnings of the need for open access have been clearly spelled out. Jean-Claude Guedon has explained the manner in which scientific cores and peripheries are created using geo-economic theory, while Erin McKiernan, a researcher working in experimental and theoretical neuroscience, points out that:

*Every day we make amazing discoveries, some of which could even save lives. Then we lock that information in journals that most of the population cannot read. In many parts of the world, access to subscription journals is just too expensive.A lack of access to information hinders learning, stifles innovation and slows scientific progress.*⁵

There are also more radical and, at the same time, very human positions on the importance of open access. Delivering an address entitled 'The case against privatising knowledge', during a Vice Chancellor's Open Lecture at the University of Cape Town last month, Dr Rajesh Tandon, who holds the UNESCO Chair in Health Research and Social Responsibility at the University, observed that

*...knowledge industries have workers and elites...so you have the propertied classes and the property-less masses when it comes to knowledge as a commodity. It creates the divide of the haves and the have-nots, and it creates therefore control over knowledge in ways that [create] not just power...but also wealth.*⁶

Yet, despite the unquestionable logic and morality of Tandon's observations and the valuable contributions made by McKiernan and by Guedon, there is much progress to be made. Large publishing corporations make substantial profits by charging either article-processing charges or subscription fees (or both). Universities have to reduce serial subscriptions in order to cover these costs. And researchers face the damaging consequences of the remaining challenges that limit scholarly communication. I urge you to read Czernewicz and Goodier's article in this issue for more on the topic of open access.

Here's to Open Access Week.

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HOW TO CITE: Butler-Adam J. Open sesame. *S Afr J Sci.* 2014;110(9/10), Art. #a0082, 1 page. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/sajs.2014/a0082>

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