
Special Forum: An Ethical Imperative of Open Access

Open Access Ethic

by Brad Ost

In the early 1990s, just 30 short years ago, most librarians were bound by and to their immediate geographic location. In larger cities, that location comprised several blocks or the immediate neighborhood. In rural areas, their community included those who could easily reach the library on foot or by car. The boundaries were even more constrained for academic librarians, usually by the campus size. And within those local boundaries, the librarian's ethical imperative usually boiled down to ensuring that everyone who should have access (the local community) had access and keeping the particulars of that access private. Bookmobiles were often the limit of the positive outworking of that ethic. Otherwise, librarians often worked in a defensive posture as a bulwark against book banners and burners and then faded away until another "attack" brought it again to the fore. Willinsky and Alperin give a sharper definition regarding the difference between a defensive ethic and an ethic that moves forward positively. The defensive ethic would correlate to "attending to those who break the rules ... This approach carries with it, however, the implication that, if and when such misconduct is eliminated, ethical questions would politely disappear from view. [This is contrasted with] treating the ethical domain as a realm of positive action - in which, for example, one goes out of one's way to help someone" (Willinsky and Alperin 2011, 217). And what would those ethical imperatives be? In the ALA Code of Ethics, we read that as a profession, librarians are "explicitly committed to intellectual freedom and the freedom of access to information" (American Library Association 2021).

Those ethical imperatives are stretched beyond their traditional and geographic boundaries with the universal use of the Internet. The question could reasonably be asked, do librarians need any longer to advocate for access with this overabundance of information so readily available? After all, the online encyclopedia *Wikipedia* is the 7th most viewed website in the world, providing access to a broad swath of information and engaging between 4 and 5 billion unique visitors each month (Wikipedia 2023; Statista 2023). It appears that the gates to knowledge have been flung open. Even so, it seems that much of the knowledge freely available on the Internet is not necessarily the kind that helps us advance as a global community. As of 2019, Elsevier, the world's largest publisher of academic journals, has about 3,000 journals containing "articles [that] account for some 18 percent of all the world's research output" (Resnick and Belluz 2019). In critical medical research, over 70% of scholarly publications are still behind paywalls (Day, Rennie, Luo, and Tucker 2020). With this reality in mind, the Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition (SPARC) provides an essential definition for open access that helps situate us in our continuing ethical mission as librarians. They state that open access is "the free, immediate, online availability of research articles combined with the rights to use these articles fully in the digital environment. Open access is the needed modern update for the communication of research that fully utilizes the Internet for what it was originally built to do—accelerate research" (SPARC 2023). Though we may no longer need our ethical weapons to conquer the barriers of the past, our ethics are once again engaged in this battle between open research and the profit margin.

Now, with our hybrid learning institutions expanding our reach globally, we can more readily see that what hurts one region of the world wounds us all. We are no longer only interested in our

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immediate physical location because we are serving patrons who make their homes around the world. Now a landlocked private college in mid-America might find itself serving a patron from an archipelago in the Pacific. So, while geographical and socially constructed barriers within the library begin to dissolve, the positive expression of our access ethic, going out of our way to help others, once again increases. We must recognize that our remit extends far beyond our local communities and campuses.

In 2021, the International Open Access Week theme was “It Matters How We Open Knowledge: Building Structural Equity.” That week may have come and gone, but the initiative is as vital today as it was two years ago. We’ve all participated in listserv discussions about the dire straits we found ourselves in due to the rising cost of databases and journal subscriptions. It’s all too clear to us that those rising costs and the cost-cutting measures we must take in light of them lead to a lack of access, which leads to lessening knowledge and scientific advancement. If, within one of the wealthiest nations in the world, this is a rising concern, what must it be for those within developing countries far removed from our wealth? UNESCO’s 2021 Recommendation on Open Science, with slight modification, could rightly convey this global need:

Open [access] should play a significant role in ensuring equity among researchers from developed and developing countries, enabling fair and reciprocal sharing of [academic] inputs and outputs and equal access to [...] knowledge to both producers and consumers of knowledge regardless of location, nationality, race, age, gender, income, socio-economic circumstances, career stage, discipline, language, religion, disability, ethnicity or migratory status or any other grounds. (UNESCO 2021)

If this principle is agreed upon, the question becomes, who is best placed to implement the ethic of open access mentioned? For the Western world, that ethic goes back to England and its Public Libraries Act of 1850, which allowed many boroughs to finance public libraries (Spartacus Educational 2020). In so doing, access to knowledge was no longer confined only to those who could afford it. So, while librarians’ ethic of access was initially implemented at least 200 years ago, the positive crusading for and implementation of that ethic across global boundaries had to await the advent of the Internet. With that resource now available, it is imperative that librarians, whether working in the smallest public library or the most extensive university research library, arm themselves with their historic open access ethic and step into their role as advocates for global change.

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