Title: Applying the Access Principle in the Digital Age: A Case Study Approach

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Abstract

This paper argues that scholarly publishing as a field is experiencing a crisis of access. As a possible response to the factors driving this crisis, Open Access publishing is explored from an empirical case study basis. While some of the key concepts in this area are considered, the paper aims to address the broader concerns at a practical business planning level, which has relevance to multiple publishing contexts.

Introduction

Scholarly publishing faces an important moment in its history. We are faced with growing concerns over access to scholarship in the midst of a digital age that promises so much in opening up access. It is in these crucial moments that we need to return to some of the basic principles underlying the scholarly enterprise and reflect on the socio-economic roles played by this small but important industry.

This paper considers the concept of the access principle and how this can be applied in the field of scholarly publishing today. It is not a new principle emerging from the digital age, but an historic one inherent in scholarship with a long African history stretching back to the collections of Alexandria and Timbuktu.

The approach is case study based, using the author’s experience in establishing and developing an Open Access scholarly publishing unit, the HSRC Press, in South Africa. The conceptual frameworks of publishing fields and forms of publishing capital are used to reflect on this case study and highlight some of the ways these forms of capital have been approached and some of the mistakes made thus far. The structure of the paper inserts ‘case study notes’ within broader considerations of the field of scholarly publishing today. Finally, the notion of an African Knowledge Commons is introduced as a vision to which the HSRC Press aspires to be one contributor.

An Overview of the HSRC Press

The HSRC Press is a Directorate of the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) of South Africa, a statutory research organization focused on Social Science and Humanities. Since the establishment of a centralized Press in 2002 it has evolved into what it terms a ‘public benefit’ publisher, serving the research community focused on key development challenges facing South Africa and Africa. In an environment characterized by increasing commercialization of public resources, including publicly funded scholarship, the Press strives to contribute to a ‘knowledge commons’ through its Open Access publishing model.
In this endeavor, our focus is on social science and humanities research-based scholarship of exceptional quality. The publishing program follows the research areas of the HSRC, in terms of academic disciplines and a bias to policy-relevant scholarship.

The Publishing Model
The Press employs a dual media publishing strategy, publishing simultaneously in print and on-line electronic formats. Print-based publications are sold through conventional book distribution channels, while electronic versions are available on an Open Access (OA) basis, which means without cost, with no limitation or restriction, except respecting the author’s Moral Rights. It should be noted that in the current scholarly publishing environment, obscurity is a bigger threat than piracy to our authors.

Our dual media approach results in much higher levels of engagement with our authors’ work. While our print-based titles sell in standard quantities for a Press of our nature, approximately 600 copies for the first year, the web activity for the same title could be over 1000 visitors in a month. The extent of overlap between on-line uses and hardcopy purchases is unclear. However, we know two things for sure: engagement with a publication increases exponentially, and the OA market for a publication is largely a ‘secondary readership’. In other words, those who will buy the publication will buy it anyway because it’s exactly what they want. Readers for whom the publication will not compel a ‘buy decision’, but rather a milder form of interest, will however also engage with it.

By its nature, scholarly publishing is not market-driven. It is focused on quality of scholarship and contribution to a field of enquiry, as oppose to ‘total satisfaction of consumer needs’ to increase revenue. Therefore strategies to improve intellectual engagement are important to avoid valuable scholarship being overlooked.

The value chain we employ for OA is the same as for conventional scholarly publishing. This can be summarized as: (1) a comprehensive peer review system, (2) professional product development, (3) active marketing and distribution. The dimensions of quality, such as editorial intelligence and professional production, for on-line publications are no different to conventional scholarly publishing. Marketing indicators, such as rate of reviews, coverage in mass media and influencing government policy (an unusual but relevant indicator) show that the HSRC Press competes well with other scholarly publishers in the country.

What we publish
The Press publishes HSRC research output in the form of Research Monographs and Occasional Papers, and internally or externally authored books; in total approximately 50 titles per year. It should be noted that the HSRC has become a collaborative institution, acting as a hub for humanities and social science research. Therefore the organization’s research outputs are invariably also the outputs of other academic institutions or individuals.
The publishing program for books consists of a wide range of authors, largely South African and African, but including a fair number of authors from developed countries. Regardless of the origin, all works published must meet the same standards in all respects. It should be stressed that we are not building an ‘institutional repository’ in terms of posting anything and everything written by the institution’s members, which is a valuable but different activity.

The Press has gone through a few changes over the past four years but the guiding principle, what has been called the ‘access principle’, has remained constant.

The Access Principle

The principle underlying scholarly open access publishing is centuries old, but has gained new impetus as it is increasing threatened by trends in commercial publishing. Willinsky (2006), suggestively argues that “a commitment to the value and quality of research carries with it a responsibility to extend the circulation of this work as far as possible, and ideally to all who are interested in it and all who might profit by it.” (pg. 5) This principle has a history that dates back to the great libraries of the past, from the collections held at Alexandria founded in the third century B.C., and the mosque libraries such as al-Azhar in Cario, which flourished in the sixteenth century. It is what Nature, a leading scientific publication, set out to do in 1896, when it promised to “place before the general public the grand results of Scientific Work and Scientific Discovery, and to urge the claims of Science to a more general recognition in Education and Daily Life”.

This underlying principle, that a commitment to scholarship carries the obligation of broad dissemination, is an ongoing story finding various articulations in differing contexts. Over the last couple of decades the impact of the digital revolution on publishing has been the topic of much speculation. Publishing in the ‘digital future’ has been the subject of numerous conferences (for some time it was a joke in the industry that the only way to make money out of electronic publishing was to organize a conference on it), and many working papers (of which the Vista series is perhaps the most innovative and worthwhile). While many of the extravagant claims, such as the ‘death of the printed book’, are now merely amusing memories, digitization has had and will continue to have a significant impact on publishing. In has thankfully introduced an element of experimentation into publishing and affected the business of publishing on at least four levels: (1) the level of operating systems, (2) the level of content management and manipulation, (3) the level of marketing and service provision, and (4) the level of content delivery.

The level of content delivery is potentially the most profound, as the delivery of content to the end-user electronically, rather than in the form of the physical book, would transform the whole financial model of publishing. In its most idealistic expression it would no longer be necessary to lock up resources in physical books, stock books in warehouses, ship them to foreign markets, accept returns and it would be possible to bypass traditional intermediaries. All this would amount to a significant cost saving and reduced risk. Most important for the scholarly enterprise is the potential to achieve wider
and more immediate dissemination of scholarly works, in addition to persevering works at nominal costs.

The access principle has found new currency on the back of the Open Source and later the Open Culture movements, geared towards freeing creative potential of innovation in the Internet era from rampant commercialization. Lessig (2002) promotes Open Source largely as a reaction to the ‘privatization of the commons’, or the encroachment of commercialization on public resources. This is a danger familiar to the field of scholarly publishing, where much of the publicly funded research output becomes a commodity, traded like any other, under the control of multinational corporations. Here the access principle is replaced by the ‘profit principle’.

However, in seeking ways to apply this access principle in the current scholarly communication context, particularly with an Africa focus, one needs to be mindful of what Thompson (2005) calls the ‘technological fallacy’. He claims that the mindset informing the technological fallacy assumes a technological view of the world, a view that is preoccupied with the latest developments in technology and tends to assume that technology is the pacesetter for social change. The problem with this view is that it does not give sufficient attention to the nature of markets and to what end-users actually want. It does not see, for example, that there might be all sorts of reasons many readers remain deeply attached to the physical book, ranging from an attachment to the physical and cultural artefact to the preferred reading experience of certain kinds of material.

Within South Africa, which has often been described as a two-nation-state, signaling its uneven development and modernization, to apply this technological fallacy would be to perpetuate and accentuate the current structures of privilege. One assumes that the conditions across the rest of Africa will similarly reveal uneven resources in terms of access to electronic publications.

To overcome the risks to the principle of access inherent in the technological fallacy, it needs to be emphasized that technologies must always be contextualized: they must always be analysed in relation to the specific social contexts of use. Therefore, while the digital future offers much in opening access to scholarship in Africa it needs to be considered in a manner that best serves the principle of access within a given context and not blindly follow the rhetoric of futurists. The approach taken here is to situate the use of technology within the case study of an existing Open Access scholarly Press in South Africa, to reveal some of the limitations, problems and opportunities.

Case Study Notes: Applying the access principle
The notion of Open Access has become synonymous with electronic publishing, based on its content delivery potential as described above. However, the HSRC Press as a general rule simultaneously publish all new titles in print and online. While many backlist titles are available electronically and in print-on-demand only, meaning we’ll only issue printed copies once an order is received.
The simple reason for this is our ‘publics’, or target readership groups, range from well resourced institutions to under resourced civic organizations such as trade unions. Within our socio-economic context, to publish online only would limit access for large segments of our readership. Firstly, because they do not have online access, or access for sufficient time. Secondly, because many prefer reading some forms of publication in print form. Much anecdotal evidence has been garnered over the past few years in support of this. Ranging from customers rushing to our exhibits to buy a printed book claiming they have been using the online version for more than a year but want the ‘actual book’, to authors insisting as a matter of principle that their work must be available in printed form as a few thousand people in their association don’t have online access.

In addition to the dual media publishing approach, we have found other means to increase access. We participate in a few ‘bundling’ initiatives, such as the e-Granary, International HIV/Aids Alliance and many others where our publications on a topic are bundled with others and provided on Local Access Networks. It’s one way of getting around bandwidth constraints in some developing countries. Occasionally we also do our own ‘bundling’, by producing CD’s of our publications on a topic and distributing them for free. In addition, the Press has numerous extracts of its publications used in course-packs for local and international higher education institutions.

An often forgotten component of access to scholarship is backlist management. For our Press, ‘backlist’ means all titles older than 18 months. As previously mentioned, digitization does offer new opportunities at the level of content management and manipulation. On principle we do not take publications ‘out of print’, but ensure their continued availability. However we do retain the right to remove a book from our list for other reasons, therefore our publishing agreements seem contrary to this principle.

Perhaps the most effective means to increasing access is our pricing model. Conventional publishing wisdom would claim that premium content equals premium pricing, in other words: if a market segment can not get the material anywhere else, such as is the case with publications based on primary research, the publisher can charge as much as the market can bear. This notion of price inelasticity, as economists call it, has become a practice of most commercial scholarly publishers. It is precisely this business practice that has given rise to the crisis of access, particularly in developing countries.

Our pricing model is based on recovery of direct costs. Therefore, if you prefer or require a printed book you have to pay for the printing, binding and distribution cost. Nothing more. Our approach to print-on-demand technology has also followed this logic. As previously mentioned, one must be cautious of the trap of the technological fallacy. Print-on-demand is a useful option, but not recommended as a general rule in establishing a publishing model. Many of our titles would cost at least twice as much should we launch them on this basis, due in part to the technology available in South Africa and simple economies of scale.
Currently we are examining new ways of improving dissemination, but as always the technological and other decision will follow our understanding of and commitment to the access principle.

The Field of Scholarly Publishing and Forms of Capital

The concept of ‘publishing field’ used here draws on the work of John Thompson (2005), in his application of Pierre Bourdieu’s writing on cultural production to the area of publishing. He describes a field as follows: “a structured space of social positions whose properties are defined primarily by the relations between these positions and by the resources attached to them” (30p). He further proposes that the publishing field be conceptualized as a space of positions occupied by different publishing organizations, where the positions depend largely on the quantity of resources they possess. These resources generally take the form of four types of capital: economic, human, intellectual, and symbolic.

However, the publishing field is not a unified space, but consists of numerous spaces with distinctive dynamics. Hence to speak of ‘publishing fields’ would be more accurate. This does not imply that an individual or an organization cannot exist in various fields. The advantage of the framework is that it firstly acknowledges the differences across fields and secondly enables us to examine the dynamics within fields.

So how do we distinguish a publishing field? A field is a market, but also much more than a market. It is a structured social environment comprising an array of networks, forms of competition and collaboration, supply chains, sets of consumers, specific forms of reward and recognition, and has its own conditions for success. Agents within a field tend to be shaped by and orientated towards the conditions of success within that field – what Bourdieu terms ‘habitus’. The construction of a field has implications for who gets published, what gets published and also who is allowed to participate, however I will not examine these aspects of the field here.

Publishing fields also have linguistic, spatial and technological properties. The linguistic barriers tend to define the limits of a field as the content of publications are only accessible to those who have the linguistic capacity to read them. Technology shapes a publishing field, as the form in which content is stored and delivered is dependent on available technologies and the economics associated with them. The traditional printed book incurs significant costs in storage and transport, in addition to marketing and selling costs, effectively placing limits on the geographical scope of the field.

Within what is often referred to as ‘academic publishing’, or publishing that supports the academic enterprise, we find two distinct fields, namely higher education publishing and scholarly publishing. The field of higher education publishing, which comprises largely of student textbooks with a pedagogical objective, has a very different structure to that of scholarly books, which comprises of more specialist works with advancement in a disciple as its objective. Publishers who stray from higher education to scholarly publishing have often missed this seemingly self-evident point.
The notion of Open Access publishing challenges the structure of the field of scholarly publishing. What traditionally constitutes success in this field could be summed up as sales revenue and/or prestige. If we take the access principle seriously then perhaps we would derive at success measures such as the economic efficiency of dissemination, breadth and depth of impact, preservation of knowledge products and access as the key dimensions of ‘success’ within this field. Open Access publishing can deliver on these success factors more effectively than traditional publishing models and thereby highlights their shortcomings.

Furthermore ‘the market’ is expanded with OA publishing. Not only does the market comprise consumers of printed works or free downloads, but also agencies who provide subventions to have their work included on the publishing system. Many donors agencies have already concluded that the diffusion rates are significantly higher from an Open Access system, therefore are willing to contribute a relatively modest amount for the level of dissemination - relative to consumers purchasing a product for the same level of access to the content. The question is really who pays and how much, as financial resources are needed in all publishing models. Importantly, many agencies have also concluded that this mode of publishing is more in line with their mission than traditional models might be.

**Case study notes: resource analysis**

As previously mentioned, there are four types of resources particularly important to publishing firms: economic capital, human capital, intellectual capital and symbolic capital. Economic capital is the accumulated financial resources to which publishers have access. Human capital is the staff employed and their accumulated knowledge, skills and expertise. Intellectual capital, or intellectual property, consists of the rights that a publisher owns or controls, rights which they are attested to by their stock of contracts with authors and other bodies. Symbolic capital can roughly be described as the accumulated prestige and status associated with a publishing house. This framework forms a useful model to analyse a given publishing concern, in this case the HSRC Press.

1. **Economic capital**

Part of the transformation of the HSRC from 2001 was a shift in financial model, which included an active pursuit of external income in addition to the Parliamentary Grant received from the State. The newly established Press in 2002 was developed within this framework, where indirect costs (such as rental, equipment and salaries), were allocated funds from the grant. The direct cost of the publishing program was to be self-sustaining, through a mix of sales revenue and subventions. In addition, any growth in the Press was to be funded by the publishing program. Over the past four years the Press has received the same level of financial support from the host institution, while increasing output more than threefold and doubling its staff complement.

An important factor was that there was no active backlist to fund future growth; the few existing titles had limited market appeal despite often having been produced with ‘commercial intent’. Therefore the increase in earning virtually started from scratch. The
main point in terms of economic capital is that the institution committed a baseline budget to the publishing operation from which it could develop. Had this not been the case, I suspect the Press would have evolved in a significantly different direction.

The cost structure can be summed up as follows, assuming a publication as the cost object:

- Indirect fixed cost, such as rental, some salaries and equipment, are paid from Parliamentary Grant.
- Direct fixed cost, such as production cost and cost directly related to a project, are paid from income from the publishing programme, either via subventions or income from a title. Often these are mixed.
- Direct variable cost, such as printing a book, are generally passed on to the consumer.

This costing structure roughly follows a publishing value chain breakdown, with various components of ‘adding value’ costed in different ways. Through this structure many titles that could not have been published in a conventional publishing model become viable. A drawback is the limitations it places on growth. When forecasted productivity exceeds the given resources, for example more office space and equipment, it requires an increase in funding. To factor this cost of growth into the pricing model will hamper the ability to make short-run publishing viable, therefore introducing the risk of mission-drift.

2. Human capital
The Press recruited experienced professionals as its core staff structure: that is heads of each functional unit such as commissioning, marketing and editorial. This is perhaps one of the most important factors leading to its achievements to date. Not only do they come with networks and competencies, but also a realistic understanding of the publishing industry.

The South African publishing industry was and still is largely populated by white professionals. Fortunately, women were always readily accepted. To overcome this lack of diversity the Press ensured that all new recruits were black individuals with exceptional talent. In addition we participate in an internship programme.

A key lesson learnt in terms of human capital is the approach to outsourcing. From the onset we outsourced non-core activities, such as web maintenance and warehousing. Despite the fact that we were attempting a rather innovative approach to publishing we appointed service providers from a book publishing background. In hindsight, it would have been logical to draw expertise from related industries. For example, in developing an online publishing programme it would have been beneficial to recruit expertise in this area, as oppose to book producers who do a bit of web work. This simple oversight costed the Press at least two years of progress in terms of its online development, a deficit we are currently remedying.
3. Intellectual capital
It is often assumed that a Press of a research institution would have access to a wealth of intellectual capital. However the nature of institutions and the internal workings often mitigate against this. It took the Press almost two years to oblige HSRC researchers to publish with the HSRC Press through establishing an intellectual property policy and winning goodwill. There were three key elements to winning goodwill: demonstrating that it was a capable publisher, advocating ‘public benefit’ publishing and accruing symbolic capital. Thereafter, it increasingly opened its publishing programme to authors outside of the institution and grew its intellectual capital. Currently there is an even mix of internal and external authors.

4. Symbolic capital
According to Thompson (1991), symbolic capital is best understood as the accumulated prestige, recognition and respect accorded to certain individuals or institutions. It is an intangible asset that is of great importance to publishing firms, as publishers are cultural mediators and arbitrators of quality. The accrual of symbolic capital improves the acquisitions ability of a firm as authors are drawn to what publishers represent, be it prestige or innovation. Within the field of scholarly publishing the importance of symbolic capital is accentuated by various scholarly mechanism, formal and informal, which endow differential degrees of symbolic reward on academics who publish with certain publishers. Formal mechanisms, like the British Research Assessment Exercise provide further incentives for authors to contract with publishers who have accumulated substantial stocks of symbolic capital. Symbolic capital plays an important role in academic life itself.

Within a competitive marketplace, symbolic capital provides a significant advantage in promoting a publication. The life of a book is influenced by a range of intermediaries, from retailers to reviewers, who grant attention to certain books and trust the reputation of certain publishers. Within these circuits of reception some publishers are privileged due to their symbolic capital and gain access to a type of virtuous circle of well-connected intermediaries.

Perhaps most importantly, it underpins publishers’ relationship of trust with readers and amounts to a form of branding. In the age of the Internet content is in oversupply, threatening to overwhelm intermediaries and consumers, making this an increasingly important resource in the battle for visibility.

In establishing a Press, building this form of capital is perhaps the hardest and most fragile. We have tried various means of gaining symbolic capital in a short time, which can be summarized as follows:

a) Borrow it. One tactic was collaborating with other publishers. We actively sought joint imprint co-publication arrangements with established publishers, even when it made little financial sense and created discomfort in terms of being true to our mission.
b) Select it. A second element was to establish an independent Editorial Board and apply stringent peer review processes. This not only serves as a quality control mechanism but also announces the Press within networks of reviewers. Our network of reviewers is international and includes many highly regarded academics. Often have they become our authors.

c) Print it. We often get the response on declining to publish a manuscript: will you publish it electronically then? There seems to be a pervasive attitude that online publishing is of inferior quality to print publications. Where authors accept that their work is not of sufficient standard to appear in print, they assume that anything is good enough for electronic publication. This seems to be based on an assumption that it is cheaper to publish electronically, while in reality the cost of print is a relatively small component of the full publishing cost. The printed word still carries authority due to its apparently fixed nature that seems to articulate with the notion of scholarship of an enduring nature. The printed word is after all a cornerstone of the construction of the dominant epistemology. This is not meant to imply one media is inherently better than another, but merely a reflection on authors’ attitudes to the two media we publish in.

An interesting dimension in terms of symbolic capital has emerged in recent years, as authors increasingly approach us because we are an Open Access publisher. They recognize that they are likely to be more widely read and cited. Also, many new authors approach us claiming that it’s ‘that open thing’ that ‘seems like the right thing to do’. Over the past year their numbers have swelled, as Open Access becomes more topical and academics sense that access is in crisis.

Thus far the focus of this paper has been on the recent past and present. What of the future for the HSRC Press? Having established a reasonable reputation over the past few years, the Press now seems in a position to make a contribution to larger objectives. One being the development of what I’ll call an ‘African Knowledge Commons’, to further the aims of access for consumers and producers of scholarly publications. We are convinced that this can only be pursued in collaboration with likeminded institutions, through combining resources for impact that is greater than the sum of its parts.

**An African Knowledge Commons**

*What is meant by a commons*

The concept of ‘commons’ used here draws on the writings of Lessig (2002), whose central claim is that there are significant benefits derived from resources held in common and that the Internet forms an innovation commons. The defining features of this space can be summed up as: a resource that is held in common or in joint use or possession, and is ‘free’ in that it is accessible without limitation or seeking permission from others. Free also from state or market control. It is outside the realm of capitalist logic as it is an undivided resource, contrary to the pervasive notions of property.
In theory any resource can be held in a commons. But Lessig’s writing prompts the question of which resources should be held in commons at a practical level. This is related to the character of the resource and how it relates to a community.

What makes research and scholarship such a suitable area for creating a knowledge commons and providing open access is this work’s standing as a ‘public good’. A public good, in economic terms, is something that is regarded as beneficial and can be provided to everyone who seeks it, without their use diminishing its value. Fritz Machlup (1984), a pioneering economist of the concept of ‘knowledge industries’, has described knowledge as a near perfect public good: “If a public or social good is defined as one that can be used by additional persons without causing any additional cost, then knowledge is such a good of the purest type” (159). He acknowledges that “to seek knowledge, to create, acquire, transmit, or retrieve knowledge” entails cost, but that “to use existing knowledge… may be costless” (159). Given developments in information technology it is possible to provide greater public access to this public good known as research and scholarship, without diminishing its quality and quantity. The university and research institutions’ capacity to make work widely available is part of what drives the call for open access.

Therefore a characteristic of knowledge as a resource is that it is not depleted when used, unlike material commodities it develops when used. It follows that the opening up of knowledge products, such as scholarly publications, could lead to more developed knowledge. Assuming that the nature of the product, as with electronic publications, allows for unlimited usage.

What is meant by African

For the purpose of this paper, African knowledge is used to denote outputs of research focused on Africa. This assumes current practice, researchers and research agendas. The question dealt with here is: what are we doing and what could we be doing with existing research outputs? As opposed to deconstructing epistemology. The contested nature of what constitutes ‘African knowledge’ is appreciated as is the construction of research agendas, research methodologies and by whom the research is conducted. These are all important questions, but different questions, deserving serious scholarship and informed interventions.

The purpose of the African Knowledge Commons would be to further the access principle through combined effort, throughout Africa. So that rigorous thought on matters pertinent to Africa, embracing variations of methodologies, can be held as a commonage for greater benefit. This could enable the greatest possible levels of access to scholarship at a time when we are not well served by international publishing firms. However, access on the demand side is not sufficient. We also need to be producers, to ensure local works are given the attention they deserve and not be overcome by editorial agendas framed by developed countries interests. This is not to propose an isolation of African scholarship, but rather an equitable inclusion.
Conclusion

The access principle is fundamental to the scholarly enterprise and is increasingly under threat as scholarly publishing has been transformed from the preserve of academic associations and institutions to multinational commercial corporations. Ironically, the commercialization has resulted in a growth in output but constricts access.

As we witness this trend from the vantage point of the global South, what do we learn? One lesson is that to follow the patterns developed by publishers of the North would surely lead to the further crisis. We need alternative publishing models and develop modes of scholarly publishing that would best service its socio-economic purpose. The digital era offers much potential which could be harnessed in this endeavor. At the HSRC Press we are attempting to find a way of achieving this and while we have had success we’ve also made many mistakes. But we continue to strive to make a contribution to the development of a commons of knowledge of Africa which can be harvested freely and will produce better understandings of the key challenges facing our continent.
References


