"Accessibility, Sustainability, and Universality":
An Interview with Open Access Scholar John Willinsky

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Dr. John Willinsky is an educator, author, and advocate of the Open Access Movement who seeks to redefine scholarly publishing as a public resource built upon accessibility, sustainability, and universality. Dr. Willinsky is a Professor Emeritus in the Stanford Graduate School of Education where he also serves as the Khosla Family Professor. Additionally, Dr. Willinsky directs The Public Knowledge Project – an Open Source publishing platform housing scholarly journals, books, and preprints that seeks the global advancement of Open Access and Open Science. He is the author of The Access Principle (2005) and frequently analyzes the relationships between research, scholarship, the publishing industry, the internet, and accessibility in his additional publications that have been featured in Learned Publishing, Perspectives on Medical Education, and the Canadian Journal of Higher Education among others.

Open Access is an international movement that supports open online access to academic information, including research, publications, and data across disciplines. The movement opposes the traditional subscription model of scholarly conversation and instead seeks to make information freely available to readers. Similar movements like Open Science and Open Source demonstrate the movement's discipline defying reach and the desire for accessible and collaborative research networks in not only scholarly publishing, but academia at large.

I was excited to speak with Dr. Willinsky because of his significance to my own research into the Open Access Movement as well his practical approaches to increasing accessibility within the classroom, the higher education system, and the scholarly publishing industry at large. This interview was conducted in October 2024.

JB: To begin, I wanted to discuss your work within the Open Access Movement. How did you become involved in this movement?

JW: My career started as a schoolteacher. I taught elementary and middle school for ten years and I was interested in helping kids learn how to read, in particular. When I became a professor of education I worked with and trained teachers. I realized – this was in the late 90s – that the internet had all this promise. I realized the students I taught to read would

have so much more to read because everything was going to be online and it was going to be free and accessible to everyone. Only, that wasn't the case. Things were starting to commercialize, research wasn't going online, and I thought there was something wrong with this picture. Public education and the spirit of democracy were all about the sharing of information, yet it wasn't working out that well. Journals were reluctant to move online and much of the online information was being commercialized – this was before Wikipedia and before Open Access was a name – so, I decided I would start working in this space. I had done work with high school students on using online systems and I thought I could use that knowledge to help journals come online and share their work as Open Access.

JB: A lot of people in this space write about these ideas theoretically, but you've also put these ideas into practice through the Public Knowledge Project. Could you talk about what that project has meant to you and how you came to be a part of that platform?

JW: I started the Public Knowledge Project as a research and development project within the University of British Columbia. In 1998, I received support from the local newspaper in Vancouver to write articles about technology in schools, but I was limited in what I could share by the library telling me the research couldn't be shared publicly – it could only be shared as part of their subscriptions. I decided at that point to do something practical and start making a difference by building free, Open Source software publishing platforms that would give journals a reason to go online. It turned out to be much more complicated than that and much more money was involved that people didn't want to give up. The software was at first not used by anyone. Now, 45,000 journals are using the software and are making their research freely available. It's still far less than half the research in the world and we're still working on that other half.

JB: You mention the amount of money that is involved with Open Access publishing – and the Public Knowledge Project is a great example of a platform that has successfully made information freely available despite this detriment. Could you talk more about the models that help support your platform?

JW: The Public Knowledge Project is supported by membership of libraries who think we're doing good work and who use our software. It's also supported by research grants because we're a university unit and we do research to improve the quality of publishing. We provide services too – we do technical work because we built the software and we host journals. Those three areas are very strong for support.
Open Access really just needs the libraries. The libraries are already

estimated to be paying about ten billion a year to the publishers and they will continue paying ten billion to keep the work open. So, we don't need any new money. Collective funding from the libraries and from research funders, like the National Institute of Health, could pay for the whole thing.

Open Access is just matter of will – just a matter of saying people have a right to this knowledge. The libraries agree with that. The publishers agree but some publishers want more and more money and this is causing a bit of a problem. One of the key challenges in Open Access remains fair pricing, which has parallels in the music industry, as seen in the case of Taylor Swift's copyright battles.

Taylor Swift is a champion of copyright and copyright reform. In 2014, Taylor Swift took her music off Spotify. In 2018, the U.S. government changed the law to bring Spotify under copyright that ensured they paid her fairly. What struck me about Taylor Swift's approach is it's a part of the music industry where there are price checks. Taylor doesn't set the price for Spotify – copyright judges decide what is fair for Spotify and what is fair for Taylor. We don't have that in scholarly publishing. But if we could bring in a similar kind of statutory licensing – which allows third parties to use copyrighted materials if they pay royalties to the copyright holder – then we have a price check we don't have right now. The publishers have monopoly pricing – with no competition they can set a price that maximizes their profits. Taylor doesn't have monopoly pricing – publishers do. It's unfair. That's the biggest problem with Open Access right now – it's going to be too expensive to sustain because we don't have any checks or fair market pricing. I think the music industry's model of statutory licensing and copyright law should be implemented.

JB: That's a wonderful connection and it's not one that I would've thought about! As someone that loves Taylor Swift – this is really exciting. While we're thinking about copyright… How do you feel about pedagogical materials that are posted online or shared openly being taken and monetized by other people or platforms?

JW: That's a violation of copyright. Copyright is a natural right in the sense that anything you write is protected by copyright – you don't need to register it. Educational or pedagogical materials are a part of that. There's a distinction to be made between Open Access and Open Educational Resources (OERs). My work has been on Open Access, not OERs, but at Stanford I'm the Khosla Family Professor Emeritus. Neeru Khosla has an Open Educational Resource project called CK12, where she creates free textbooks for every grade level and many subjects. That initiative is a good example where her work is protected by copyright, but she gives it away so it can't be monetized.

There's a big case coming before the courts now – the AI scraping of materials. What does it mean when Open AI scrapes all the Open Educational Materials online and puts it into its large language model?

Well, the courts haven't ruled yet. The New York Times is suing them, Sarah Silverman is suing them, John Grisham is suing them – all of these suits will be decided. It's a complicated case, but there's something in copyright called fair use, and part of fair use is educational use. The companies aren't using it for education, but Open AI will say the people are using Open AI for education. Transformative use – where you take something from the marketplace and you transform it into something else – is also protected.

I think Open AI are going to say this in court, but there hasn't been a formal ruling. We need to attend to where the courts go on this. It could result in a change in the law that would protect educational materials, but the judges will decide on the current law where fair use is well established. That is my prediction on what's happening on Open AI, but it's the biggest legal question right now about research and educational materials.

JB: In what other ways may AI impact Open Access research and scholarship?

JW: The AI question is huge. Will AI help us do peer reviews and improve the quality of those reviews by checking more thoroughly than any human being can check? Take literature for example. AI is helping authors write across languages and allowing contributions from authors whose first language isn't English. It's actually improving the quality of their research and contributing to the readability. We've done studies on abstracts and it's improving the quality of the abstracts.[1] Now, at what extent is it writing the research? That could be worrisome. There is also the danger of what we call paper mills that are fabricating research. Will AI play a part in that? So, I'm not ready to make a pronouncement on AI overall. I think we have to attend to all of these issues.

A number of publishers of research are trying to sell their material to Open AI – I think Taylor and Francis has signed a contract and maybe some of the others as well – so, what we need to think about from the public's perspective is that having more research in the large language model will mean a more reliable large language model. It will have more evidence and won't hallucinate as often because it will have sources. The hallucinations are often the result of not having a source and making it up and that is because the research hasn't been scraped and hasn't been a part of the large language models. We have an interest in the sharing of knowledge and AI is definitely going to play a part in that; To keep that knowledge out of the hands of AI means it's a faultier source of understanding. Drug discovery and all the other really exciting parts of AI

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[1] See Hagan, H. Wang, D.M., Mogavi, R.H., Tu, J., Zhang-Kennedy, L., Nacke, L.E. (2024). The great AI witch hunt: Reviewers' perception and (Mis)conception of generative AI in research writing. *Computers in Human Behavior: Artificial Humans*, 2(2). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chbah.2024.100095

need to have that access. It's early days and there are going to be a great number of issues and there won't be one simply blanket AI no or AI yes. It's going to take nuance, legal reasoning and legal decisions, and advocacy.

We are looking at using AI within the Public Knowledge Project to help us on a very tricky technical question of taking a researcher's paper and turning it into HTML. It can be an expensive process – marking it up in a way that makes it more readable, translating to multiple languages so that more people can have access – so, we are exploring the uses of large language models to see if they could facilitate these important technical tasks for improving communication. But at what expense? Environment expense in terms of the amount of electricity and resources that are involved? Computing expense in the terms of what it costs and how to share those and keep the costs of the journals down? As our community of 45,000+ journals are working on very low budgets, we need to develop tools that take advantage of AI but do not increase the price and make it prohibitive to publish this research.

JB: Obviously, Open Access is interdisciplinary in nature, but I'm curious how other fields conceptualize these ideas. How can people, regardless of discipline, research or advocate for Open Access?

JW: There is advocacy for Open Access in every field, but it's an advocacy, not a common knowledge. In Open Access, there are groups within each of the disciplines. The libraries have been crucial, so for anyone who wants to take an active role in increasing Open Access, the Master's of Library Science is a very strong route to go. Every university library in the United States has an Open Access librarian – scholarly communication librarian – so, it is a career path.

Within the disciplines, I think it's a matter of an interest. You don't specialize in Open Access – you advocate for it and look for opportunities to publish open, share your data, speak out on behalf of other societies or the lab you're working in. With each interview you do or each piece of work, you take that extra effort to ensure that it's open. It's a state of mind and an expectation. Why isn't this open? Just having that expectation will shift the tide so open is the default. Now it's like, I have to take this extra step, I have to think about if I can make this open or not, I have to check with my coauthors. It should be the other way. Is there some reason for national security or for health that we want to close this article and keep the data? No? Then let's make it open.

JB: How did you find yourself teaching these concepts? Did it take the form of an entire course or is it something that naturally informs whatever course you're teaching?

JW: I'm a schoolteacher and I'm a professor of education, so I treat

education as public education. Why are we teaching kids to read if not to read series materials that come from research and scholarship? I treat it as part of that. I would get students to start sharing their work immediately – sharing it online, thinking about their rights, understanding copyright. Teachers reach more students than anyone else – every child in America goes to school. In this age of misinformation, information literacy is a common education topic. Part of information literacy is: I need to see the research.

It wasn't natural in the school of education. There is no professor of publishing or professor of Open Access, but there's a program called Science, Technology, and Society (STS) at Stanford. It's the societal need to share the information, the technology to share it, and the science, research, and scholarship we are going to share. I only became involved because I worked in Open Access. I taught courses on the future of information and I taught about copyright as a right to information as a part of how science, technology, and society come together. If I wouldn't have had STS, I would've squeezed it in and introduced it. When I did honors theses at Stanford, I introduced the notion that theses should be public. I worked with student journals at Stanford so students have that experience of Open Access publishing as undergraduates that builds that expectation: It's research you want to share it! We talk about the quality of knowledge as the number of people who can enjoy and utilize it.

JB: Aside from more undergraduate publications, what are your other hopes for scholarly publishing?

JW: Complete Open Access, of course, at a reasonable price. I talk about sustainable and universal Open Access as the dream for scholarly publishing. Sustainability is an equity of access to the research and an equity of access to publish the research – to participate in the production of research. It's sustainable when we're able to publish all of the research and everyone who is doing research is able to participate in the sharing of that research. It will differ by country, by library, by discipline – the biomedical field has much more money involved in research. Sustainability is not a hard and fast – it's a principle. Is it currently sustainable? Well, ask the libraries. [2] They will tell you that the pricing is putting their budgets into duress. They are not finding it sustainable and are having to cut support. So, sustainability is a key factor and it's a recognition that research is vital to the success or the healthy future of humanity.

Universal means all of the research. Is that every single piece? No. There is some part of national security that requires that this piece on

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[2] See Nowakowsky, A., Voy, K. (2024). *The Ebook Pricing War: The Fight for Control Between Libraries and Publishers*. Open Education Alberta. https://pressbooks.openeducationalberta.ca/ciicm/chapter/the-ebook-pricing-war-the-fight-for-control-between-libraries-and-publishers/. CC BY-NC 4.0.

nuclear weapons is not made public. Okay. But universal means articles in every discipline. Universal means work that was published fifty years ago and ten weeks ago. Universal means the work that is being done in Pakistan and the work that is being done in Canada. All of these different aspects need to be brought to the front of what we advocate for and we need to look for opportunities to support these principles. Is this going to contribute to the sustainability? Is this going to contribute to the universality? Yes or no? That's a basis for making a decision.