

Why it's getting harder to access free, quality academic research

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It's one thing for a country's academics to produce great research – but what's the point if ordinary citizens can't access it? Shutterstock

Academics at South Africa's universities increased their research output by 250% between 2000 and 2013. Taxpayers funded a great deal of that research. For instance, R24 billion was spent on research and development in the 2012-13 financial year – more than half of it from the public purse.

That's a wealth of research and knowledge. The problem is that it may not be accessible to the broader public, even though it was they who footed the bill. It may also be hard for policymakers and the private sector to access this information and apply it when developing initiatives that can help develop the country.

Why is South Africans' access to important knowledge and research so limited? And, in the age of Open Access, what is being done to improve the situation?

The birth of a movement

It's been more than two decades since the birth of the international Open Access movement.

The demand for access to information in an open society has grown rapidly since the 1990s, driven by the fast developing internet. Resources and movements like Creative Commons, founded in 2001; the Budapest Open Access Initiative (2002); the Bethesda Statement on Open Access Publishing (2003); the Berlin Declaration on Open Access (2003) and the Lyon Declaration on Access to Information and Development (2014) have followed.

South African universities followed international trends. They drafted Open Access policies and made available thousands of already-published journal articles and chapters from books free of charge through online platforms. They also used institutional research repositories to share “grey literature” – research not controlled by commercial publishers. This included theses and dissertations, research reports, conference proceedings and student projects.

The idea was to ensure that universities' research outputs, which were all at least partially funded with taxpayers' money, were made visible and accessible.

Until then, academic research was largely published and protected by international conglomerate publishers. They used online sales, library leasing and subscription fees to charge for access to research outputs.

Models change, profits don't

The Open Access movement also saw the rise of new publishing platforms and mega journals like the Public Library of Science. It also birthed new business models for academic publishing, from the traditional journal subscription model to the Article Processing Charges (APC) or publication fee model and hybrid Open Access publishing options with traditional publishers.

Under the APC model, researchers, research funders or research institutions take responsibility for the payment of these charges, covering the journal's costs, so that articles can be published in an Open Access manner and be free to use.

But these changes in support of broader public access seem to have been to little avail. Publishers are maximising profits with a hybrid model of double payments, also referred to as “double dipping”. They collect Article Processing Charges from researchers to publish in an Open Access format and still collect subscription fees from users.

British higher education support body JISC conducted a study to explore this practice. It averaged the APC payment for 2014 by 20 universities in the United Kingdom at £1581. It concluded in a separate study that the overall increase in the total cost of ownership – subscription and APCs – when compared to capped subscription fees was as high as 73% at one UK institution.

The shifting model also brought with it a flood of predatory publishers, pirated academic journals and a variety of unethical research practices.

The South African story

So where does access to research stand in South Africa today? A survey by the country's National Research Foundation revealed that only 20 of the country's universities and three of its science councils have Open Access repositories. These repositories are used to make institutions' research outputs publicly available while honouring existing copyright regulations.

The Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) also conducted an Open Access audit of accredited journals. Only 48% of published research in local journals is free and accessible to the public.

South African institutions are fighting the same battle with publishers as their international counterparts. The results of preliminary, unpublished research by ASSAf estimated that university libraries paid around R470 million to national and international publishers for subscription fees to academic journals in 2014. These were limited for use by registered students and employees at universities only.

With the **weakening** rand and the implementation of a **value-added tax** on electronic resources, libraries claim to have lost an estimated 40% of their buying power over the last four years.

This makes it hard to continue subscribing to available research and knowledge sources and impossible to also pay APCs in support of research visibility and public access to knowledge.

A global fightback – but is it too late?

Researchers, libraries and universities have started to lobby against large academic publishing houses. There is **increasing resistance** to publishers who are trying to restrict access to information with stricter regulatory policies on the placement of articles in institutional repositories.

To date, these protests have had little effect on the global transition to Open Access proposed by the Max Planck Digital Library.

This makes it hard not to conclude that South Africans will in future be paying far more for knowledge – and will have even less access to it.



Research

Open Access

creative commons

South Africa

Open access week

Academic publishing

Scholarly publishing