

## **Asymmetry and inequality as a challenge for open access – an interview with Leslie Chan**

**(interview by Joachim Schöpfel)**

Open Divide: Critical Studies on Open Access

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### **How did you get involved with open access?**

My interest in Open Access was preceded by a broader interest in the nature of knowledge production and circulation. This interest began when I was a PhD student in Physical Anthropology, at the University of Toronto in the late 80s. The term Open Access was not formalized at that time. I was doing research on the evolutionary history of macaque monkeys, which live in various part of Africa and Asia. Through my research, I recognized that a lot of relevant work had been done by researchers in Southern Countries, but the majority of this work was published in journals to which the University of Toronto did not subscribe. This is when I first began asking questions around how libraries decide which journals to subscribe to, and what their criteria for selection actually entails. As an example, I found one highly relevant research institution in India that had been producing important research for upwards of 90 years. But this research was essentially unheard of by the University of Toronto libraries, because it wouldn't have met their criteria for credible research publications.

### **Was this a problem of dissemination, of indexing or of discovery tools?**

It was a combination of all these aspects. Above all, this problem reflected the way academic libraries selected academic journals. At that time, the library acquisition policy depended mainly on subscription agencies, and those journals did not get in. They were not part of the agencies' catalogs. Libraries go for convenience, and what is not in the agencies' catalogs is "out of scope". Another reason was the emerging practice of the "big deals," of bundling large numbers of journals by major publishers, which became the major business model of academic subscriptions. The problem with the big deals was that they ate up a large part of the library budgets, with less and less money for other journals.

### **This means that academic libraries often ignored journals from the global South, and if not, that they didn't allocate the necessary budget to subscribe to them?**

Right, this was a problem. And then, there were and still are two other reasons. The first one is that academic libraries make decisions on journal selection partly based on usage statistics. Now, journals from the Global South usually have a smaller readership than journals from the USA, Canada or Europe. They are in the margins, part of the long tail, compared to journals from the large academic publishers, and are thus disadvantaged by the library acquisition decision mechanisms. A last issue has to do with negative intellectual perception.

**What do you mean by intellectual perception?**

Historically, institutions, and in particular publishers, from the global North have largely established the quality standards for journals. Things like peer review, citation formats, writing or rhetoric styles, and external markers such as journal impact factor. Confronted with academic journals from countries of the global South that they are not familiar with, librarians but also scientists, often assume that if these quality markers are absent or not recognizable, than the journals are of lesser or even questionable quality. This assumption is wrong but it continues today.

**How did you find a solution? Did you find a solution?**

In the early 90s when the WWW had just become easily accessible, we thought it was ideal to use the web as a means for sharing scientific publications, particularly those that had been traditionally neglected. At the time my colleagues Barbara Kirsop and Vanderlai Canhos already established an online platform called Bioline for exactly this purpose. Their idea was to run a free platform on the web for peer-reviewed journals in biosciences for publishers who may not otherwise have sufficient resources on their own. We would provide the technology and assistance, the publishers would provide the content, i.e. reviewed papers. The goal was to increase the journals' visibility and discovery of neglected research on the web and to promote knowledge exchange.

In the early days of Bioline, the idea of "open access" was not formalized yet, and the journals that worked with us had the option of providing free access or paid access. By 2004, two years after the Budapest Open Access Initiative, for which I was an original signatory, we decided to host only journals that are willing to provide open access to their content and we renamed the platform Bioline International.

**Can you please tell us a little bit more about this platform? Did you succeed? What was the result?**

We initially contacted several publishers, primarily through our personal networks, and we asked them to put their journals on our platform. Interestingly, established international commercial publishers didn't take the project very seriously. But for other local publishers, it was an opportunity to improve the visibility of their titles, for example, essential knowledge in tropical medicine, infectious diseases, epidemiology, and biodiversity from local and regional research in developing countries and to experiment with what became known as open access. At one point the platform aggregates about 100 journals from more than twenty countries, including Iran, India, Bangladesh, Nigeria, Uganda, Kenya, Brazil, Chile and Venezuela.

**What is the situation today?**

The platform – Bioline International – still exists, 25 years after its launch in 1993[i]. Over the years, Bioline International became a pioneer in the provision of open access to peer reviewed bioscience journals published in developing countries. It is now a cooperative project involving two principal parties: the Reference Center on Environmental Information (CRIA) based in Brazil provides server hosting, administration, and server development on a pro bono basis, and Bioline International at the University of Toronto Scarborough which

oversees content management, project development and research, together with the Centre for Critical Development Studies and the UTSC Library.

When we first started, we mused that our job was to make our platform obsolete, as we were confident that as the technologies became more accessible, the publishers would take on their own hosting and distribution. This was in fact the case with many of the journals we used to work with, Medknow being a great example. So in recent years the number of journals we host have been dropping. But this has partly to do with limited resources on our part.

### **Can you describe the Bioline business model?**

First I think the term “sustainability model” would be better than “business model” as we are primarily a mission driven initiative. Since its inception, the platform has been supported mostly by substantial in-kind contributions by CRIA (server hosting and administration) and secondarily the University of Toronto Scarborough (office space and administrative support for the management team). In the past, Bioline also received funding support from organizations including the Open Society Institute, UNESCO and the International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications (INASP). Since 2008, Bioline has moved towards a community support model that calls for broad based support from libraries as well as communities with the mission of knowledge access for all. For example, OCUL (the Ontario Council of University Libraries), a consortium of 21 universities in Ontario, Canada, has been an early supporting member of our community support model, as was the Max Planck Digital Library. Their support allows us to hire work-study students to perform document formatting for online publishing and metadata enhancement of our partner journals.

### **What was the impact in developing countries?**

In the 90s, a group of Indian colleagues led by Dr. D.K. Sahu understood the Bioline platform as an opportunity to revitalize Indian journals in medical sciences. At that time, many locally published Indian medical journals were not in a good shape. Bioline appeared as a model for Indian learned societies, to improve the quality of their publications and increase their visibility on the web ([Sahu and Chan 2004](#)). In early 2000, Sahu launched Medknow<sup>[ii]</sup>, an open access platform dedicated to medical journals from Indian institutions. At the beginning, these journals were also available on the Bioline server.

### **What was their business model?**

Medknow started with a mixed business model – they charged the societies for publishing the medical journals, they added some freemium features, and they had revenue from advertising. After a couple of years, the Medknow strategy became sustainable, allowing investment for their own online manuscript submission and peer review system. After three years, Medknow had aggregated more than 60 journals. By 2010, Medknow was publishing over 100 journals, mostly on behalf of scholarly societies from various developing countries. A real success story.

### **And then?**

In a twisted way, Medknow was a victim of its success. After years of steady growth and development, they became a target of European publishers’ takeover strategies because of its wealth of content and the growing markets in emerging countries such as China and

India. In 2011, Medknow was acquired by Wolters Kluwer, to become one of the largest open access publishers worldwide, with nearly 400 medical associations and societies from India, China, the Middle East, and other growth markets, and more than 400 journals in several medical specialties. It is a success story but also a sad story.

### **Why that?**

A sad story for different reasons. Of course, many Indian authors are happy with this development, because they are now published in open access by one of the well known “international” academic publishers. On the other hand, the natively developed Indian company and platform are now under control of the Wolters Kluwer technology and management. With the takeover, the Medknow journals hosted on the Bioline International had to be removed. D.K. Sahu is no longer involved with Medknow, and my repeated efforts to contact him had failed.

This is a sad story also because this is not an isolated case. I have seen journals developed locally in Mexico, Kenya, Bangladesh, and when they were deemed “commercially viable”, they are taken over by multinational publishers and the local publishing capacity were destroyed. Far from reversing this trend, open access has actually enabled this kind of take over as open access became another lucrative revenue stream for commercial publishers through the APC route.

### **Is this inevitable? Or can this kind of “success-driven takeover” be avoided?**

I think there are other options. For instance, the case of SciELO in Brazil, an open access portal for journals published in Brazil. The initiative receives public funding, and they are supported by a public policy which considers scientific knowledge as a public good, not a private property. This is where the failure occurred elsewhere – letting the market control the production and dissemination of academic knowledge. We should take the private business out of the scientific information system, or at least have some regulatory oversight. You have similar problems with privatizing public health care. SciELO is a public enterprise which I think is a better sustainability model for long term development than a private company like Medknow.

There is the argument that publishing is best left to the market but I don't buy that. Keep in mind that the bulk of research is publicly funded, and publishing and dissemination of that research only represent a tiny fraction of that research investment. Also keep in mind that library budgets are publicly funded; so why not consider public funding for the supply side of academic publishing? I think public funding of publishing systems is better than paying public money to private companies to gain access to what should be publicly accessible. I have argued before that if all research libraries spend 1% of their acquisition budget for innovative infrastructure in the field of academic publishing and open access, the sustainability problem would be solved. But the problem here is not just financial but political as well: who will take responsibility for such a global project? Who will assume the governance of library based publishing? The library? The academic community? Funding agencies? The question remains open, for the moment.

**You criticize instruments from the North such as the journal impact factor because they contribute to the invisibility of research from the Global South. Can you give an example?**

I've been told by editor colleagues that despite repeated requests to Thomson-Reuter ISI for their journal to be indexed in the Web of Science, they were rejected without transparent reasons. It was not entirely clear how the company made decisions on what journals to include, although it was clear that the majority of indexed journals are published by established presses from the global North, with titles primarily in English. One reason for establishing Bioline International was to counter the fact that many journals were excluded from the ISI mainstream indexing system. The SciELO platform was created with the same motivation. The problem with this system was and still is that it belongs to a private company without any institutional control or public accountability. It is a system that renders large parts of the world's knowledge invisible. The private corporations and the instruments they constructed work hand in hand to maintain this situation, and my impression is that this power imbalance is becoming greater and greater. Open access has not disrupted this asymmetry in power structure.

**Elsevier's Scopus database made some efforts to include other sources, especially in life and medical sciences. Is this a potential solution - open up the existing scientometric instruments?**

I think this is not a real solution, for three reasons: the private control of inclusion and exclusion remains intact, the expanded selection is based on business-driven decisions and the assessment of the commercial potential of given journals, and there is no real motivation to include content from developing countries. Scopus is no solution to reducing the asymmetry of global knowledge either, as it is controlled by one of the most powerful publishers in the world. Its interest is in profit, not promoting knowledge equity. So far as I can see, the rapidly rising quantity of journals from India and especially China are not increasing the diversity of creativity and epistemology in a global knowledge commons. Recently, a French group came up with the term of "bibliographic diversity" to denote the need for intellectual diversity and representations in global knowledge. I think that this is an important revenue to explore.

**What do you think of the SciELO initiative for the creation of specific "regional" scientometrics?**

Basically you have two options: either you create your own tools and metrics or you conform to Thompson-Reuter or Elsevier. SciELO is a good example of the first option. Yet, the irony of SciELO is that in recent years, many journals on the SciELO platform decided that getting and increasing the Journal Impact Factor is their sign of success. I am not sure that this is a good outcome. It is certainly in contradiction to its original intent.

**And altmetrics? Could they reduce the asymmetry?**

Again, I think that the opposite is happening. While the original concept is to provide "alternatives" to the dominant metric of Journal Impact Factor, the so called "altmetrics" are really more technical inventions by the publishers to drive traffic to their sites. Keep in mind that the term is also a trade name owned by the company with the same name "Altmetrics", and it is being packaged as part of many commercial platforms. There are plenty of critiques

of why the prevailing system of impact analysis is deeply flawed, and adding more metrics to the flawed system only deepens the flaws.

But this is another example that those who have access and control of sophisticated technologies profit most from new technologies. They are, more than others, able to take advantage of these tools and infrastructure. Technically, “Altmetrics” are also tied into other “standards” like the DOI or ORCID, and those standards are once again set by organizations of the global North. When the “Altmetrics” become another de facto standard, either you play the game or you become invisible. You have very little choice. So it is just replacing the JIF in terms of dominance, but not challenging the underlying assumptions. Here is also where the technology gap and the lack of funding and resources further disadvantage publishers and scientists from developing countries. More importantly, as they don’t have a voice in how “standards” get set and adopted, they are further subjected to frameworks of research quality and excellence imposed on them, rather than setting the standard in their own terms and contexts.

### **Can open access be a solution? Which kind of open access would you promote?**

In the past, I was a big advocate of green open access, of self-archiving in institutional repositories or IR. For instance, I worked together with the Indian Academy of Sciences when they started to develop institutional repositories in the early 90s, and with the University of Nairobi a bit later on. However, more than ten years later, I see little progress. Institutions are mostly still stuck with journals and are concerned with JIF, despite the proliferation of IRs. In part this is because global North publishers have been very effective in selling their branding and prestige message to countries in the South, particularly countries that want to be seen as being part of the “global” conversation of science and technology. So they have been encouraging researchers and higher education institutions to emulate the publishing practices for gaining reputation and prestige. Unfortunately IR is left out of this.

### **So are you more in favor of gold open access, i.e. open access journal publishing?**

Today, the distinction between green and gold open access makes less sense than before. In some ways the differences are artificial. The so-called Megajournals, with PLoSOne setting the example, for instance are more similar to repositories than to traditional academic journals. They are essentially an overlay system, which means article publishing on top of broad based repositories, and “journals” or special collections could be created at will. I don’t see why institutions couldn’t “publish” with repositories, the question is how to take care of quality control through peer review or other procedures that could be overlaid on repositories. These kind of services are being developed, particularly for “pre-print” servers, which again are repositories by another name.

### **Could the Liège model - mandatory deposit in institutional repository - be a model for the global South?**

In the past, I would have answered “yes”. But I have changed my mind over the years. An institutional policy in favor of open access is important. But the Liège model became an auditing exercise. It is all about counting and compliance with the institutional policy and evaluation of research performance. Researchers become tired with auditing. Another reason why I have changed my mind is that the Liège model is specific to a certain type of

institution and cannot be implemented in the same way everywhere else. It is not a model for all academic institutions. Contexts really matter when it comes to policy development and implementation. The one-size-fits-all model doesn't work.

**What do you think of the German OA2020 initiative, i.e. transforming the subscription-based journals into open access journals with article processing charges?**

I think that gold open access with APCs is one of the interesting systems that has gone bad. Fundamentally, it is a commercially driven tool, an opportunity for the commercial publishers to making even more money with scientific journals. OA2020 is an extreme version of that model and again it will tend to favour those institutions who are already in strong position to take advantage of this model.

**Could this model be a solution for the global South, either for the access to information, or for the dissemination of their own results, or both?**

I am extremely concerned about this initiative. There is no money in developing countries for this model. The institutions and countries adopting the OA2020 initiative express very clearly that it is not their problem that scientists from developing countries can publish or not. It is a very selfish attitude, individualistic and even nationalistic. At the long term, this approach is really bad for global scholarly communication as a whole because some content will dominate. In other words, we will see regionalism emerging, and again, countries from Europe and N. America will continue to dominate.

**Which is or could be the role of private funding agencies, such as the Wellcome Trust or the Gates Foundation?**

On the one hand, it is good to see more private funders entering the OA space (though Wellcome Trust has been there from the start). Recently, we see nine funders (including the Gates) forming a collective called the Open Research Funders Group < <http://www.orfg.org> >. All of these donors have their own agendas and philosophies regarding OA and their missions. However by making their funded research open (while other, peer-reviewed academic material remains behind closed paywalls), these donors are actually becoming *over*-represented in terms of their contribution towards public knowledge, particularly in the areas of health and development. Early in 2017 we saw that Gates announced their own publishing platform called Gates Open Research < <https://gatesopenresearch.org> > which is modeled after the same platform used by Wellcome. The platform in this case was provided by F1000, another commercial provider. Because these private funders are the voices that everyone can easily access (provided they have internet access), their views and findings are more likely to be taken up and perpetuated by local institutions that cannot afford to pay for alternative knowledge sources. This is potentially a big problem in terms of perpetuating certain biases.

**In the past, academic publishers made large efforts to facilitate the access to scientific information in countries of the global South. Is this not enough?**

I assume you are referring to programs such as Research4Life, which encompasses four programs – [Hinari](#), [AGORA](#), [OARE](#) and [ARDI](#). These programs provide developing countries with “free or low cost access” to academic and professional peer-reviewed content online. I

am not convinced that providing this type of access based on the GDP of a country makes any sense. They only make sense from a business point of view, as these are essentially “market segmentation” strategies, ways to extract as much income from low income countries as much as possible. The publishers won’t lose money if the country is so poor they can’t afford to pay, but the moment their national GDP exceed the threshold, they have to start paying. So to me, these programs are just ways to test out the market, to find where the demands are, and then apply sales pressure accordingly. One of my colleagues likens this to drug selling tactics. Give the drug out for free and once someone is addicted, starting charging them. Recently one of my associates attended a meeting organized by a related group called Publishers for Development and [she wrote about her impression](#). Essentially not only are publishers pushing a rather outdated model of development, with access to knowledge from the North as being essential for local development, they are repeating the message that to be legitimate, researchers and journals from the South need to emulate those from the North. Again, the importance of local research and relevance was largely left out. This is not a model for empowerment.

### **What do you think about Open Science? Just a new and ephemeral tendency? Or here to stay?**

One of the drawbacks of Open Access was that it was far too focused on the journal article as the primary research *output* and who has access to that output. To me, an important part of Open Access should be an exploration of alternative ways for communicating research, aside from a traditional, published journal article.

In this regard, I find Open Science to be a more useful narrative. Open Science aims for the *entire* research process to become more open: including the production of the research question, methodologies, through to data collection, peer review, publication and dissemination. In that way, it is easier to look at *who* is participating in these processes of knowledge production and what kind of power they have in a given context. It allows us to be more cognizant of how power is prevalent in systems of knowledge production, and allows us to think of ways to democratize these processes - to make them more collaborative and equitable.

However, while Open Science is a relatively new concept, we see, more often than not, that those with power in processes of knowledge production are able to take advantage of the Open Science discourses and use them to their advantage. We are seeing that the framing of competitiveness in knowledge production and knowledge-as-an-economic-engine is reiterated in Open Science narratives. For instance, it has become popular to hear people say “[data is the new oil](#).” The idea is that data can be used to create knowledge that can be used for economic benefit. Of course, this is generally only true for those with the power to access and manipulate this data. Therefore, the idea of ‘extractive research’ has not really improved within discussions of open science. If anything, it has become more in line with a neoliberal agenda, in many ways.

### **Can you describe your work at OCSDNet?**

The Open and Collaborative Science in Development Network (OCSDNet) is an attempt to understand how the theories and practices of Open Science play out in various global South

contexts. The network is comprised of 12 research teams that span 26 countries in the global South. As an example, there is team that is using feminist theory to explore [indigenous knowledge and climate change in South Africa](#) while another team is composed of natural scientists looking at [water quality and local development in Lebanon](#). What binds the projects together is an overarching question of whether, and under what conditions, open and collaborative science could contribute to the effective application of research towards development objectives at multiple levels– from individuals to institutions, and from the national to regional and global communities.

A key emerging lesson of OCSDNet is that knowledge is being produced *everywhere* and that there are unique traditions of knowing from around the world. These unique realities call into question our focus on cost and competitiveness and redirect our attention back to how research is intended to improve our well being. By better understanding the different forms of knowledge, we think that we can actually do better science. So it is a way of expanding how we consider science. It is a chance for a richer and more inclusive science. OCSDNet is trying to remind all of us about that richness. Our work and the [manifesto](#) we have created is not proposing anything new. It's just a reminder of what we already know as a global community, but that has often been neglected.

Another key lesson is that the [different projects in the network](#) are revealing that there are many regional differences, in the way that open science can be practiced and understood around the world, all of which is shaped by history, culture and local politics. All of these different cases give us a unique understanding of how openness is *situated* within different contexts. We believe that 'Openness' needs to be understood in its own context, given these rich diversities.

Essentially, we are encouraging a definition of openness as a *process* rather than a set of conditions that need to be met. It is an adaptive and dynamic process, and one that is always changing.