

Kevin L. Smith

# At the Berlin 10 Conference, the key word was *confidence*

## Highlights of the meeting

**C***onfidence*. That is the word that best summarized the atmosphere at the tenth meeting of the Berlin Conference on Open Access to Knowledge in the Sciences and Humanities, which was held in November 2012. The conference convened at the University of Stellenbosch in South Africa, its first meeting on the African continent. But it was not by any means the first discussion of open access in South Africa; we quickly learned that this was a conversation that had been going on for quite a while, and was the subject of discussion, research, and negotiation at several South African universities.

So why was confidence the overwhelming sense that delegates got from the speakers? Because it was clear that a lot of reflection had gone in to the problem of growing the research enterprise in Africa, and that all of the speakers knew that a big part of the ongoing efforts—efforts at better research, greater visibility, and economic development in general—was open access to scholarship and research data. We were told repeatedly that the question of whether open access was an important part of the future for scholarly communication was decided long ago. Most of the speakers were not asking *whether*, and they were not trying to convince their audience that open access was the wave of the future. Instead, they focused on *how* to achieve a more open climate for research, scholarship, and publishing. And they knew that they could achieve that goal, sooner or later.

One of the most interesting illustrations of this focus came when the delegates were

addressed by Derek Hanekom, minister for science and technology in the South African government, during our gala dinner after the first day of the conference. When Hanekom began, it was clear that he was reading a speech that had been prepared for him by others. But as he read, he began to depart from his text and comment on the importance of open access specifically in the South African context.

These digressions became more frequent and detailed as delegates watched the minister begin to internalize what he was saying. We saw the dawning realization that open access really does offer an important step for better research and faster economic and social development. After the speech, Hanekom asked the representatives from the Max Planck Institute, one of the sponsors of the Berlin Conference, for a meeting to discuss open access policy.

The focus on development highlighted another theme from the conference, one that was in a bit of tension with the idea that whether we needed open access was a settled question. Several of the speakers reminded us that open access, for Africa, was not just a good idea but a moral imperative. From

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these speakers there was a sense that they did need to convince others, although the focus of their argument was really about the speed of the transition to open access. Both at a workshop on data management and in the presentation by Kingo Mchombu of the University of Namibia, we were told about how important it is to be able to share African research with Africa. This is true for research articles but especially for data collected in Africa about specifically African problems.

Unfortunately, in the current system this research is usually published in European or North American journals that are inaccessible to most Africans due to cost. Hence the sense of a moral imperative to facilitate open access so that key research and data on economic development and on central issues, like clean water and the HIV/AIDS epidemic, will actually have an impact on the lives of Africans.

Several speakers addressed the implementation of open access initiatives on the African continent, of course. Mchombu described projects to create ePortfolios through which academics could share their research, as well as institutional repositories and university open access publishing projects. We heard about a couple of new open access journals in Africa—a very broadly based *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* and a much more problem-oriented *Journal of Crop Science*.

Chris Bird of the Wellcome Trust talked about the Southern African Consortium for Research Excellence, a project to build capacity for openly accessible research, and Michelle Willmers of the University of Cape Town described her research into how best to facilitate access to the “lower levels” of research products—working papers, blogs, collaborative documents, and simulations of various kinds—that underlie published research.

A representative of BioMed Central talked about how new interdisciplinary open access journals, like BMC’s *Malaria Journal*, can accelerate the solution of local problems. And on a more macro level, we heard about the massive “Square Kilometer Array” radio

telescope project, a large part of which is being built in Africa and was described as an example of the amazing possibilities that can only be accomplished through global cooperation.

### **Possible obstacles**

As has been said, these discussions of open access were very optimistic and displayed great confidence that open access was both achievable and a vital step toward improving scholarship in Africa and the lives of Africans. But that does not mean that no attention was paid to the obstacles that stand in the way of open access. The structure of commercial publication was naturally one such problem, but I was especially struck by the sense of common problems that manifest themselves in local circumstances.

For example, during the discussion of data management, one researcher pointed out the fear that data that is too easily shared might be misappropriated by others, thus depriving the initial researcher of credit. The speaker, and all the rest of us, was keenly aware of the irony of this comment; the great virtue of open sharing of data is the possibility of unanticipated uses and serendipitous discoveries, yet these same possibilities could also be perceived as risks. And protecting academic prestige was acknowledged as an even wider problem in the unique rewards structure of African universities.

In several countries the government pays publication subsidies to universities based on the perceived status of the journals in which research articles are published. An “A-List” publication brings more money to the university than a B- or C-list journal does; and, predictably, most of the A-list journals are subscription-access. This will change over time, of course, but it is currently a significant obstacle to open access in Africa and contributes to what was referred to as “an imbalance between prestige and relevance.”

Because this obstacle was widely acknowledged by the conference speakers, the keynote address by European Commissioner for Research, Innovation, and Science Maire

Geoghegan-Quinn, was especially interesting. She began with the theme about the inevitability of open access, but she also addressed the perverse rewards structure that currently exists for academic research, suggesting that the possibilities for open access would broaden considerably, well beyond the now well-trodden Gold and Green roads, if universities, and academics, would consider restructuring the peer-review system. And in that regard, Geoghegan-Quinn stressed that the EC intended to move down both roads (and maybe others) toward full open access for research; she was very explicit in her disagreement with the perceived one-sidedness of the Finch Report on this issue.

More broadly, the commissioner spoke very highly about the U.S. National Institutes of Health public access mandate, noting that it has increased the return on investment for government funds spent supporting research and restating the EC conviction that open access supports innovation, creates new jobs, and provides benefits for small and medium-sized enterprises.

She also noted that many of the problems facing all of us today—climate change and food and water security were her examples—require the kind of global cooperation that can best be achieved through open access.

### **Solutions to access problems**

As if all this wasn't enough, perhaps the most dramatic moments of the conference came when speakers called on the delegates to embrace much more radical solutions to the access problem than had previously been given serious consideration. The context for these calls was nicely set by lawyer and economist Elliot Maxwell, who reminded us that in the digital knowledge economy, attempts to control access are both costly and ineffective. Intellectual property gets its value from use, and the Internet facilitates use. Thus attempts to control access and prevent "unauthorized" use are perceived as malfunctions in the system; they are expensive to maintain and easy to undermine.

Since commercial academic publishing still depends on these "bugs," it was not surprising that two different speakers called on the delegates to find ways to break the control that for-profit publishers have over academic research.

First, Lars Bjørnshauge of SPARC Europe called on the delegates to send a strong signal to all of the stakeholders in the academic research space that it is time to implement real, sweeping change. Subscriptions and restrictions on reuse simply do not work any longer, he told us, anticipating the remarks of Maxwell. Publishers are simply exploiting the conditions that are offered to them, so it is time for the stakeholders, especially academics and universities, to change those conditions.

Bjørnshauge specifically mentioned the impact factor as a "devastating symbol of an outdated system." His call to abandon the impact factor as a means (horribly inefficient) for evaluating scholarship reiterated the EC commissioner's suggestion of a new approach to peer-review.

Next, Adam Habib, deputy vice-chancellor for research at the University of Johannesburg, took the call for radical action a step further, suggesting that South African universities simply cannot thrive under the current subscription-access model, which he called "feudal" and "iniquitous." He suggested that South Africa simply require that all research publications be made open access after no more than six months, regardless of publication terms. He asserted that the global South should provide the leadership for this revolution in access. And he said that if publishers resisted or threatened to sue, that was a fight in which he, as a university vice-chancellor, would like to be engaged.

Confidence, urgency, and a call for more radical approaches. Those were the overarching themes of the Berlin 10 Conference on Open Access. It was a privilege to attend, to be allowed to overhear this conversation in the African context, and to bring the message of these exciting academics back home. *ZZ*