

Human rights, Global equity and access to knowledge Jayant Tekade

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Human Rights, Global Equity ,and Access to Knowledge

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Abstract

The transition to a global knowledge economy has underscored the critical role of information in human development, economic prosperity, and social justice. However, access to this knowledge remains highly unequal, dictated largely by geography, socio-economic status, and systemic barriers such as academic paywalls and intellectual property regimes. This paper examines access to knowledge not merely as a commodity, but as a fundamental human right rooted in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. By exploring the digital divide, the commercialization of academic publishing, and the implications for global equity, this paper argues that democratizing knowledge is essential for solving pressing global challenges and achieving sustainable, equitable development.

1. Introduction

In the 21st century, knowledge is the primary currency of progress. From developing life-saving vaccines to engineering climate-resilient agriculture, scientific and cultural information drives human survival and flourishing. Yet, the distribution of this knowledge is marked by profound disparities. The Global North largely controls the production, curation, and distribution of academic and scientific literature, while the Global South often faces insurmountable barriers to accessing it. This disparity is not just an academic issue; it is a profound human rights crisis. This paper explores how global equity is intrinsically linked to open access to information and why dismantling barriers to knowledge is a moral and practical imperative.

2. The Human Right to Knowledge

The assertion that access to knowledge is a human right is supported by international human rights frameworks.

Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) states that everyone has the right "to freely participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits."

Article 19 of the UDHR protects the freedom to "seek, receive and impart information and

ideas through any media and regardless of through any media and regardless of frontiers.”

When viewed through this lens, knowledge is a catalyst for the realization of all other human rights. For example, the right to health (Article 25) relies entirely on medical professionals having access to the latest research. The right to education (Article 26) is severely compromised if students and educators cannot access up-to-date educational resources. Therefore, the restriction of knowledge through artificial scarcity is a direct infringement on human development

. 3. Barriers to Global Equity in Knowledge Access

Despite the technological capacity to share information globally at near-zero marginal cost, several systemic barriers perpetuate the knowledge divide.

A. The Commercialization of Academic Publishing

The current model of scientific publishing often prioritizes profit over public good. Much of the world's research—often funded by public tax dollars—is locked behind exorbitant paywalls by a few legacy publishers. For institutions and researchers in developing nations, these subscription costs are prohibitive. This creates a systemic disadvantage where scholars in the Global South cannot access the literature necessary to advance their own research, effectively silencing their voices in global academic discourse.

B. Intellectual Property (IP) Regimes

While intellectual property laws (such as patents and copyrights) were designed to incentivize innovation by temporarily protecting creators, overly restrictive IP regimes frequently stifle equity. This was glaringly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, where patent protections on vaccines initially restricted the ability of lower-income nations to manufacture life-saving therapeutics, prioritizing corporate monopolies over global public health.

C. The Digital and Linguistic Divide

Access to knowledge requires more than just removing paywalls; it requires infrastructure. Billions of people still lack reliable, affordable internet access. Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of high-impact scientific research is published in English. This linguistic hegemony acts as a significant barrier for non-English speakers, marginalizing indigenous knowledge systems and local research.

4. The Impact of Restricted Access on Global Progress

The consequences of the knowledge divide are severe and far-reaching. When researchers in developing nations are cut off from global databases, the world loses out on diverse perspectives essential for solving localized and global problems. Issues like climate change, food security, and pandemic preparedness require decentralized, global collaboration. If the scientists most affected by these crises lack the resources to study them or the platforms to share their findings, global progress stalls. Restricted access actively maintains colonial power dynamics, where the Global South remains dependent on the Global North for innovation and progress.

Achieving global equity requires a paradigm shift in how knowledge is governed, shared, and valued. Several pathways offer solutions:

The Open Access (OA) Movement: Mandating that publicly funded research be made freely available to the public is a crucial first step. Initiatives like Plan S in Europe are pushing for immediate open access to scientific publications.

Open Educational Resources (OER): Expanding the use of openly licensed textbooks and course materials can democratize education, drastically reducing costs for students worldwide.

Reforming Intellectual Property

Law: Implementing flexible IP frameworks—such as patent pools, compulsory licensing during public emergencies, and the expansion of fair use doctrines—can balance the need for innovation

with the human right to life and knowledge.

Investing in Infrastructure and Multilingualism: Global

development funds must prioritize closing the digital divide through internet infrastructure expansion and investing in AI-driven translation tools to break down language barriers in academia.

6. Conclusion

Access to knowledge is not a luxury; it is the scaffolding upon which a fair, equitable, and sustainable world must be built. The current systems of knowledge privatization and restrictive intellectual property represent a profound failure of global equity, disproportionately harming the world's most vulnerable populations. Recognizing and enforcing the right to "share in scientific advancement and its benefits" is essential. By embracing open access, investing in global infrastructure, and dismantling commercial barriers to information, humanity can unlock its collective potential and ensure that the benefits of human ingenuity are shared by all.

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