



Stephen Pinfield: *Achieving global open access: The need for scientific, epistemic and participatory openness* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2024)¹

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Book review

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Stephen Pinfield, a professor of Information Services Management at Sheffield University, is well known for his writing on open access, and the open movement generally, as it affects libraries and their services. His new book (Pinfield, 2024), available both as a printed book and in free-to-access digital form, takes a step back and analyses the changes needed if open access is to become a truly global reality. These topics are of current relevance and continuing interest, as evidenced by, for example, the papers in a recent special issue of

¹ Pojasnilo uredništva

V reviji objavljamo (resda vsaj zaenkrat razmeroma redko) knjižne recenzije v slovenskem jeziku, saj želimo svojim bralcem približati zanimive publikacije. Tokrat izjemoma objavljamo recenzijo v angleškem jeziku, kajti gre za publikacijo, ki je tudi sama v angleščini, je pa zelo relevantna za knjižnice v dobi odprtega dostopa in odprte znanosti in je kot taka tudi vsebinsko povezana z našo lansko tematsko številko o odprti znanosti.



Knjižnica devoted to open science (2024), a report on LibGuides for citizen science in academic libraries (Chiu and Chen, 2024), and a discussion on implications for publishers (Poznanski et al., 2024).

This is the second title in Routledge's series *Critical Studies on Open Access*. The first was a book by Pinfield and colleagues on the relation between theory and practice in the context of open access (Pinfield et al., 2020). (For full disclosure, we should say that we, the reviewers, were co-authors of this first book.) This new book complements and extends its predecessor, since the 2020 work examined the specifics of how theory is, or is not, currently applied in the practice of open access publishing by researchers, publishers, librarians, and others. The new book has a considerably broader scope, although it also seeks to address both theoretical foundations and their practical consequences. It also complements a book by Sabina Leonelli, whom readers of this journal may remember as a keynote speaker at the Conceptions of Library and Information Science (CoLIS) conference in Ljubljana in 2019 who spoke on the philosophy of open science (Leonelli, 2023), which Pinfield notes was taken into account in the writing of this new book. Whereas Leonelli's book deals with the philosophical basis for openness in the practice of science, Pinfield's new work applies these ideas to the communication of knowledge.

In giving his reasons for writing this book, Pinfield identifies himself as "a long-standing advocate of open access", who has always considered it obvious that "the results of research should be openly available so that they can be used by others". While this may indeed seem obvious to those of us in the field of library/information, it is sadly true that "[o]pen access has its clear positives: among others, equity and democratization of information, higher readership and usage, increased citation for authors, and decreasing our carbon footprint [but] the transition to open access has been complex and unpredictable, sometimes even chaotic" (Poznanski et al., 2024).

Pinfield notes that criticism of open access has most often come from "people with a vested interest in the conventional scholarly communication system and its business models – commercial publishers, journal editors, senior members of learned societies, and so on". But recently it has come from some of those people who might have been expected to be supportive: those in lower income countries, and those in higher income countries working in smaller institutions. This new book, Pinfield tells us, has been written to engage with aspects of this new form of criticism of, and opposition to, open access. If we are to have open access which is truly global, effective, and equitable, Pinfield suggests, then we must go beyond simple open access to published research that embraces 'epistemic openness' (a wider and more inclusive understanding of what constitutes

valid knowledge) and ‘participatory openness’ (inclusion of more diverse viewpoints and communities). How this might be achieved is the overarching theme of this book.

The book opens with a concise introduction to open access, covering its history and current status; it offers a good primer for those unfamiliar with the topic. This is followed by an account of the criticisms, both theoretical and practical, that have been levelled at the open access movement in recent years. These include the claim that a push towards global open access imposes inappropriate publishing models on low- and middle-income countries, perpetuates inequalities in the research system, and endorses a research publishing system that excludes participants from outside the Western model of scientific research. These criticisms are somewhat ironic considering the claims made that open access would particularly benefit the developing world. In the words of the influential Budapest Open Access Initiative statement, one of the foundational documents of the open access movement: “Removing access barriers to [the research] literature will accelerate research, enrich education, share the learning of the rich with the poor and the poor with the rich, make this literature as useful as it can be, and lay the foundation for uniting humanity in a common intellectual conversation and quest for knowledge” (BOAI, 2002). As Pinfield points out, criticisms of this idealistic view soon emerged; for example, Haider (2007) argued that power asymmetries could limit the positive impact of open access. Such criticisms have increased in recent years, often using critical theory and post-colonial concepts to argue for harms caused by extensive open access. (We are pleased to recall that Jutta Haider wrote this article while researching for a PhD under our supervision.) Some criticisms relate to clear practical and economic issues; Pinfield points out that the increasing use of Article Processing Charges, and of institutional or national read-and-publish agreements, make literature access unaffordable for the developing world. We suggest that this may also be the case for independent scholars and those working for small institutions in developed countries. There is also the argument that open access amplifies sources from the Global North, and English language materials in particular, and may actively damage indigenous knowledge and dissemination in local languages. Pinfield’s examples here are from the Global South, and from Africa in particular, but it may be that the same is true for smaller language communities in Europe. It would have been interesting if the analysis had included open access publications for smaller language communities in the Global North, of which *Knjižnica* is a good example. The issues and concerns for such publications may be different from those for publications in the differing cultural and economic conditions of the Global South.

Pinfield engages with these issues in detail, examining the philosophical underpinnings of the case for open science and open access, and how broadly the

concept of ‘science’ may be defined, in order to allow open access to accommodate a variety of forms of knowledge, beyond the traditional Western positivist tradition to a more constructivist approach. The arguments are scholarly – relying, for example on Merton’s scientific norms, Popper’s philosophy of science, Gramsci’s and Foucault’s theories of power, and, in particular, Santos’s ecologies of knowledge – but are easy to follow for a reader without a philosophical background.

For those who have difficulty understanding what alternative forms of knowledge might be included, Pinfield gives helpful examples related to indigenous ecological knowledge integrated into environmental science. We might also mention similar points about the incorporation of indigenous knowledge into educational syllabi (Greathouse, 2025). The arguments are made convincingly; sensibly, in our view, Pinfield rejects a wholly constructivist and relativist approach to scientific and other knowledge. Nor does he shy away from the problems of incommensurability between, for example, Western medicine and indigenous knowledge systems. He recommends ‘critical realism’, a philosophical paradigm based on realist philosophy but accommodating elements of constructionism, as a helpful model for accommodating epistemic openness into global open access. (Although Pinfield does not elaborate on this, critical realism has been recommended as a foundation for library/information science research; see, for example, Wikgren [2005]). This paradigm, in Pinfield’s words, “allows for an understanding of reality that is multifaceted, with those facets acting upon each other, and one which requires ongoing discussion and testing, something I suggest is compatible with greater openness.” It could, in other words, provide a structure within which open access materials could be used for fruitful interaction between differing forms of knowledge, while avoiding the rather nihilistic idea that all forms of knowledge are of equal value. The argument seems convincing, although we may wonder how readily they will influence the practical activities of editors and peer reviewers, and indeed of librarians recommending open access sources. These considerations may seem rather remote from the practical concerns of librarians and information managers, but it is surely worthwhile to reflect upon the kind(s) of knowledge that we help to communicate.

Turning to issues of more immediate practical relevance to librarians, Pinfield then considers means of encouraging participatory openness, so that people from different contexts and regions can engage with open scientific communication. As Pinfield says, this is an area which has received much attention in recent debates, so we are given here another useful introduction, and primer for the newcomer: of business models for open access, so that everyone can read and publish without payment, and of innovative peer review processes and

measures of source esteem, such as the journal Impact Factor, to better support diverse contributions. The combination of diamond open access, where neither author nor reader pays for publication, with post-publication peer review processes is mentioned as a model currently gaining support. While this certainly seems attractive, we have to say that the long-term sustainability both of the former, dependent as it is on skilled volunteer labour, and of the latter, which has yet to demonstrate its viability in large-scale use, are still questionable.

The conclusion of the book is drawn out to be that “scientific openness (open access to research outputs, open data, and so on) is necessary but not sufficient to achieve more equitable and effective scholarly communication globally. Scientific openness needs to be accompanied by epistemic openness and participatory openness.” In this context, ‘scientific’ is to be understood very broadly. We suggest that this sentiment will be supported by many librarians and information specialists, but achieving it in practice will not be easy, as Pinfield acknowledges.

The book is well structured and clearly written, with an extensive set of relevant literature cited in support of its arguments. There is an effective index, of both proper names and subjects. Together with the reasonably detailed table of contents, this allows for easy navigation within the book.

Although readers may not agree with all the points made, the book is to be recommended for anyone seeking an insightful analysis of the current problems of global open access, and thoughts as to some future solutions. Those who enjoyed the papers in the open science issue of *Knjižnica* will find it a valuable follow-up.

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