

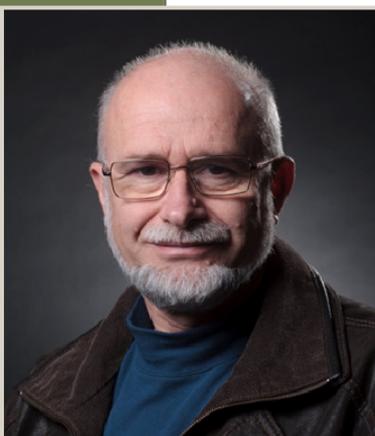
A2K: a critical reflection on access to knowledge for the growth of a knowledge society

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Abstract

In the hope of clarifying the role that libraries can play in serving humanity in a time of rapid innovation and change, this paper critically examines the notions of the "knowledge society" and "access to knowledge" to bring to the surface some assumptions underlying them. Whereas the term "knowledge economy" emphasizes the economic, strategic and competitive value of information and knowledge, the shift to "knowledge society" (or "knowledge societies") conceptualizes the phenomenon more holistically, as encompassing dimensions such as the social and cultural dimensions. In analyzing the "knowledge society" and "access to knowledge" it is critical to be clear about what we understand by "knowledge". In this paper we borrow from constructivist learning theory and argue that it is helpful to see knowledge as a process rather than as an outcome or state. In discussions of access to knowledge much emphasis has been placed on the physical dimension of access (connectivity, bandwidth and the digital divide) and on the legal, economic and political dimensions that form the embattled terrain of the A2K movement (the A2K Treaty, the WIPO Development Agenda, etc.). However, if knowledge is conceptualized as a process, the concept of "access" has to be extended to the epistemological dimension which takes into account the construction of knowledge in the mind of the individual in interaction with the community. This has important implications for libraries. In spite of warnings that the role of libraries will be eroded through disintermediation, we argue for a deployment of reskilled and remotivated information intermediaries working in and around libraries to motivate, teach, interpret and facilitate "access" to knowledge.



Prof Peter Johan Lor has been a practitioner, researcher, manager and teacher in libraries and library science schools in South Africa since 1968. When the National Library of South Africa was created in 1999 he became South Africa's first National Librarian. From February 2005 to August 2008 he was Secretary General of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA). He is currently a visiting professor in the School of Information Studies, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and an extraordinary professor in the Department of Information Science, University of Pretoria. Lor is the author of over 150 professional and research publications. His recent research focuses on library and information policy issues, international librarianship and international information flows.