ACCESS TO INFORMATION AND THE DEVELOPING WORLD

Subbiah Arunachalam [Arun]

M S Swaminathan Research Foundation
Chennai 600 113

<arun@mssrf.res.in>

I will ask and try to answer four questions:

- What is research?
- What is the role of information in research?
- What are the special problems of the developing world?
- How can we solve them using the new technologies

ULYSSES, the Greek hero: "To strive, to seek, to find and not to yield" and
"to follow knowledge like a sinking star, beyond the utmost bound of human thought"

All research takes place in information space.

Access to information is key to science development.

Researchers advance knowledge in a chosen research front – from a given level to a higher level.

We know more today than yesterday.

Research or knowledge production needs

People   Information   Laboratory

Bright   Current   Equipment

Dedicated   Knowledge   Samples

Focussed   Literature   Chemicals

And their interaction and coming together . Research is at once co-operative and competitive

Research is a community activity and researchers are members of a worldwide fraternity.
No man is an island, unless of course one is a

Ramanujan

"Let noble thoughts come to us from everywhere" –

Science has gone universal. Look at the number of MNCs having R&D labs in India and the number of Indian scientists and high tech professionals working in the USA and Europe. However, knowledge production is highly skewed. Even more skewed than the distribution of wealth among nations.

One needs to know what is already known before one can advance knowledge.

Information is central and it cuts across time and space

Time --- Current and past

Space --- Work done anywhere in the world;

The refereed journal is by far the most widely used vehicle for disseminating information.

Access to literature -- Not a level playing field

Library collections

Seun Ogunseitan

Costs soaring, budgets dwindling, serials crisis even in the West.

Unfortunately more and more knowledge is going out of the public domain.

Privatization of knowledge harms developing countries far more than the rich countries.

Most traditional societies are 'sharing' societies; many things are owned by the community.

How can we bring knowledge back into the public domain?

Look at Linux and the World Wide Web.

We should think out of the box. Conventional thinking has led us to invest too much money without much real benefit.

The case of the consortia subscriptions to journals.

Bringing knowledge back to public domain would have been pretty difficult 20 years ago!

Now we have the technologies that can help us realize the goal.

All we need to do is to act and act now!
Indian Institute of Science has acted.
Why not the rest of us?

Heads of institutions may persuade their staff and students to adopt OA Archiving.

Science managers and heads of donor agencies may insist that all publicly funded research be made available free on interoperable archives.

Concurrently, efforts should be made to augment technologies (powerful servers, decent Internet connections), training, etc. countrywide.

As Stevan Harnad says, India can be the first in the world to mandate open access.