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Review of "If Only We Knew: Increasing the Public Value of Social Science Research"

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Published version. Review of *If Only We Knew: Increasing the Public Value of Social Science Research* by John Willinsky, *College and Research Libraries*, Vol. 62, No. 3 (May 2001): 296-298. Permalink. © 2001 American Library Association (ALA). Used with permission.

The struggle to come to terms with technology seems to be disheartening to one of our leading professional bellwethers. David Levy, no longer with Xerox PARC, but now an independent digital libraries consultant, relates an existential sense of our own mortality and impermanence to the concept of a universal library—thus, the apocryphal title of his paper "Give Me Documents or Give Me Death." His basic conclusion is that "whether we think of libraries as collections of documents or storehouses of knowledge, we come to the same conclusion: libraries and death are intimately related." Many of us would come to the opposite conclusion—that a universal library, whether stored digitally or not, linking us with sounds, sights, and thoughts from the past—can only show the life everlasting of creative output. Can anyone listening to the music of Mozart or watching a Shakespeare play think anything but that those two great artists live on today?

Catherine Marshall's paper on the future of the annotated text addresses questions that many of us have been pondering, including the fate of annotations, both those already written and those perhaps never to be written or captured in a digital world. However, she neglects to discuss the hand-to-brain connection that helps our minds to actually commit these notes to memory. Other papers range from a discussion of the semantic issues inherent in digital libraries (Hsinchun Chen) to a retrospective on the Illinois Digital Library Project (Bruce Schwartz et al.). Edward Fox's paper on the "Networked Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations" seems remarkable for its lack of reference to the commercial database that already fills much of this need and forces the reader to wonder if we are reinventing the wheel. The editors, Susan Harum and Michael Twidale, are to be credited for providing a useful index and biographical notes on the contributors.

In sum, this collection of papers provides a historic marker on the laser beam path from yesterday to tomorrow, and such should be archived. However, there is little enlightenment for the practicing librarian dealing with these issues. Let us, indeed, consider ways to publish this kind of rapidly obsolescing content electronically. As a step in the right direction, the interested reader can find the introduction to this collection online at http://www.lis.uiuc.edu/puboff/, as well as in the table of contents.—*Gillian M. McCombs, Southern Methodist University.*

Willinsky, John. *If Only We Knew: Increasing the Public Value of Social Science Research*. New York: Routledge, 2000. 252p. $85 cloth (ISBN 0-415-92651-3), $22.95 paper (ISBN 0-415-92652-1). LC 00-035275.

From the acknowledgments at the very beginning of his new book, John Willinsky's view of public knowledge is evident. Regarding placement of footnotes in his book, Willinsky writes, "Following my interests in the public's engagement with scholarship, the publisher has agreed to place the footnotes at the bottom of the page, rather than use the more common endnotes that are placed at the back of the book." Willinsky, Pacific Press Professor of Literacy and Technology, Department of Language Education, Faculty of Education at the University of British Columbia, in Vancouver, wants a kind of scholarship—in this case, research produced in social science disciplines—that does more to engage the public. Such an engagement should affect every phase of research endeavors, from conceptualization through publication and distribution.

If Only We Knew continues Willinsky's thesis on the value of research to the general public explored in his previous book, *Technologies of Knowing: A Proposal for the Human Sciences* (1999). It is an obvious thesis at first glance, as Willinsky argues relentlessly, if not repetitively, for the importance of public knowledge of research produced by social scientists. Yet, from the very beginning, he is not so much a supporter of the popularization of research

by public intellectuals who write "reader-friendly articles and books," a pervasive publishing phenomenon fueling nonfiction best-sellers. Instead, Willinsky seeks greater public access to what he refers to as a "relatively cloistered body of knowledge that claims to have some bearing on each of our lives." In other words, he wants greater, more direct public access to social research, enabling the critical acumen of the public to take precedence over the interpretations of public intellectuals. More important, he calls for social researchers to understand the value of building in recognition of the public in their research projects, consequentially increasing public support for their research. He believes that the nexus between public knowledge and social research can be accomplished through "coordination and coherence among studies, as well as a greater connection between research and other forms of public understanding."

Willinsky divides *If Only We Knew* into three major sections: "Knowledge," "Social Science," and "Politics." Key to his presentation is the belief that researchers need to stem the tide of fragmentation in scholarship by redesigning scholarly communication so that it leads to greater connections not only between scholars, but also between scholarly communities and the general public. Willinsky defines *public knowledge* as knowledge that falls "somewhere between common sense and studied expertise." Turning to the concept of a knowledge-based economy, he argues the obvious, that "knowbiz" is the new engine of economic growth. He suggests that it is perhaps "the great irony of the age of information" that abundance in a knowledge-based social economy is driven by technology rather than intellectual desire, as demonstrated not only in the corporate sector, but also in higher education. An interesting subdiscussion is presented here on the role of the university in the knowledge economy. With a trend toward mission-oriented spending, rather than directing knowledge outward to the public, there is substantially more confusion as many universities' R&D growth appears to be toward proprietary knowledge rather than public knowledge, perhaps further eroding the public's trust in universities.

The chapter, "House Knowledge," is especially pertinent for the academic and research library community, as Willinsky explores what he refers to as a tension between "wanting completeness and compression in knowledge." Beginning with Peter the Lombard's insistence on citations for his commentaries on the Psalms, Francis Bacon's conceptual blueprint for knowledge, and Gottfried Leibniz's ideas on libraries and encyclopedias, Willinsky casts about in an interplay of past and present in organizing knowledge and specializations. His effort to argue for an intermediary ultimately falls short because—and without explanation—he does not link the past to present efforts among libraries to promote a kind of literacy among information users and to define librarians as intermediaries in the processes of information search and discovery.

Sections two and three are more robust in building the central argument for public knowledge as a basis for broadening access to social science information. To some degree, Willinsky's argument here rests on his perception of a social contract between researchers and the public, a contract that must be renewed for it is critical for democracy. Lack of cohesiveness and coordination poses problems for the public's effort to benefit from social research.

Willinsky also examines cases where social science research has had an impact, using examples such as the white-black doll studies of Kenneth Clark that were used in the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* school desegregation case to illustrate the consequences of research thrust into the public sphere. His attention in the chapters on politics relates the vitality of democratic processes to shaping new information and communication technologies that "extend the reach of public knowledge," asking "Is there a will to do

so?" Ensuing discussion explores this question by examining the role of knowledge in democracy.

If Only We Knew presents a justification for a public knowledge project. The next step, as Willinsky puts it, would be the "workable, engaging public space needed" to converge public knowledge and the social sciences. It will be an especially useful book to read for those individuals who are concerned about scholarly communication. Willinsky's book is an important counterpoint in the discussion of scholarly communication, which is typically treated as an economic rather than a sociopolitical or cultural issue. He argues that the crisis in scholarly communication is not just about cost but, rather, also is about the public's inability to gain access to research available in fewer libraries as a consequence of cost.

Moreover, there is a useful argument in this text for giving further attention to information literacy, perhaps to revisit the rationale for information literacy based on the nexus between new and emergent technologies and public knowledge. Willinsky's public knowledge project advocates smart usage of technologies through the creation of public knowledge sites, Web portals, and other online public spaces that make it easier for research communities to interact with one another and with the general public. This will be an especially useful book for librarians and other information professionals who are concerned with increasing public access to research.—*William C. Welburn*, University of Iowa.