

## OPEN MINDS – AN INTERVIEW WITH RUNE NILSEN, PROFESSOR OF INTERNATIONAL HEALTH, UNIVERSITY OF BERGEN

Ingrid Cutler

### Knowledge as a common good

Rune Nilsen starts out talking about the change in attitude within research in the last decades: "In the beginning of the 1970s many researchers and students had a burning engagement in society and politics. In this period there was a dramatic change in society; knowledge became a common good, and there was an expectation that everybody could and should have access to research. There was hope for changing the future, and African countries like Tanzania, Uganda and Sudan were building up infrastructures for education and research. A good example is Makerere University in Uganda, which in this period was called the Harvard of Africa."

He continues: "In the 1970s and 80s there was still some money in the system and some universities in African countries actually had access to many journals. Then the oil crisis came towards the end of the 1980s. Many African research institutions could no longer afford subscriptions to journals or buy books. The unstable political situation in many African countries, like Uganda, also led to stagnation in research development. The positive situation from the last decades suddenly changed."

"At the same time a paradigm shift within research with regards to the digital media took place. CERN developed the Internet, and ArXiv, the first open, research archive, for physics and related subject areas, was created. As a result researchers who cooperated with institutions and researchers from development countries started to ask why there should only be Open Access for subjects like physics. Why could there not be similar open and free access possibilities for other research areas as well?"

### Motivation for becoming a researcher

To the question why he first became interested in research and how his research background led to an involvement in the Open Access movement, Nilsen answers: "I guess there are basically two reasons for someone to become a researcher. Firstly, there is the need to have impact on one's own research field. And secondly, most researchers are concerned about interacting with society in a broader context. I have been concerned with the quality and the visibility of

my research output within my own research community, but I have at the same time seen the need to disseminate my research and cooperate with others as a part of larger, global society."

In the beginning of the 1980s Rune Nilsen worked as a researcher at the Armauer Hansen Research Institute in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Here he studied diagnostics and biological understanding for leprosy and tuberculosis. When he worked in Ethiopia he discovered that there was no access to research journals and books except where external partners like the University in Bergen were involved. "I saw that the students did not have access to the research results they needed. Most major publishers were not interested in sending articles to research institutions in African countries because they were afraid that the institutions would not pay. Because of this, a project was started where the University of Bergen paid for the journals that researchers at the institution needed. However, all the journals had to be sent to Bergen first because the publishers would not allow the journals to be sent directly to poor and "unstable" countries. Is this not what we call apartheid?"

### Access to research

When I ask him to elaborate what he means by apartheid to research, Nilsen answers: "When I talk about apartheid in this context I am referring to a situation where some parts of the global community do not have the same rights to knowledge and development as others have. Apparently the attitude amongst many researchers, institutions and publishers is that some countries do not need higher education, access to books and articles. An example that illustrates this is Tanzania where researchers that write about wildlife do not have access to their own publications. If they are lucky they have access to copies through research fellows at universities in Europe that subscribe to the journals."

So, what do you think about United Nations initiatives like HINARI and AGORA that support development countries access to research? Several publishers are a part of these projects, and would argue that this is examples of African institutions getting access to the research they need. "The problem of the

model where the United Nations and publishers support access to research is that they only support access to some types of research and not others. For example, they will support access to health research but not research within ecology. This is exactly what I would call apartheid thinking; that somebody decides what researchers and students in these countries should have access to.”

We have so far talked about access to research in development countries. What is the situation when it comes to access to research in Norway? “Even a research institution like the University of Bergen only has access to a small amount of research literature from around the world. Many researchers do not really reflect on this. As long as they have access to traditional journals like PNAS, the Lancet and New England Medical Journal they seem to be satisfied. I would almost describe this as a naive ghetto-mentality. What about access to research publications from a country like India? India is one of the countries in the world with most research output, but where are the journals from India in Norwegian libraries? It seems like Europe and the USA are more concerned about making own research Open Access than seeing access to research in a development perspective.”

### **Promoting Open Access**

In 1988 Rune Nilsen became professor of International Health at the University of Bergen, and in the 90ies he held the chair for the National programme for development research (NUFU), where he had the possibility to work with Open Access issues. Rune Nilsen explains that the problem in this period was that the Norwegian main donors as well as the United Nations were not interested in supporting aid in the form of so called luxury items, in particular if there were digital perspectives in it. In the beginning of the 1990s research access and digital infrastructure was considered luxury and internet connection in Africa was therefore not seen as a priority.

“Still, there was some groups in Norway that were concerned about these aspects in cooperation with development countries. The Norwegian Association of Higher Education Institutions (Norwegian Rectors conference) started to ask some critical questions about research access in development countries through The Norwegian Centre for International Cooperation in Higher Education (SIU). On the question of what to do about the unequal access to research in partnership with institutions from development countries, the answer was that researchers in development countries need equal access to knowledge, and not the apartheid-thinking that is provided through giving access to some research and not to other.”

In 1995 Rune Nilsen was asked by the Norwegian Association of Higher Education Institutions to write a report about digital communication in the third world together with professor Gunnar Slette, a world leading researcher on satellite communication. “The hope was that the issues that were raised in the report would gain interest and would result in a policy that would take knowledge management serious; but nothing really happened until the Ministry of Foreign Affairs came with a strategy for research and higher education in relation to development countries in the year 2000. The strategy expressed an understanding that research is important for development, and that there is a need for more equal discussion and interaction between rich and poor countries when it comes to research and access to knowledge.”

In the 1990ies something else happened that would have impact for the development of Open Access in Norway. The National Library Committee and the National Research Committee under the Norwegian Association of Higher Education Institutions started cooperating on Open Access issues. Until then it had been the university libraries that fronted the development towards Open Access. Nilsen elaborates on why this was such an important step: “Until now it had been the library directors that had the knowledge and the contacts. This connection within the higher education institutions meant that the Open Access issues were lifted to the level of the research community and their leaders, and were no longer just an issue for the libraries. Without this shift of responsibility towards the research community it would have been difficult to achieve any impact for policies promoting Open Access in Norway.”

### **The Open Access movement**

The Open Access movement was initiated by the conferences in Budapest, Bethesda and Berlin in the beginning of the 2000s. “The real Open Access activists first appeared towards the end of the 1990s. Earlier one could not talk about Open Access activism in this context. The exceptions where research communities within physics and nuclear physics where the need to disseminate research quickly created an electronic network and access to open research publications already in the beginning of the 1980s.”

Rune Nilsen says that he found it strange that so few people took interest in these issues before the Berlin Conference in 2003. In Norway there was nearly no one that was there to initiative the movement in Budapest and in later in Berlin, and there were very few people in Norway that took interest in Open Access issues. In this period Rune Nilsen was one of very few persons in Norway involved in this process, and one can ask why there still was such a lack of

interest towards these issues in Norway. He asks: "Was this because of attitude, age and conservatism within the research community, or just a lack of understanding? Today this attitude is changing, but I wonder why it took such a long time before the leadership at the universities and researchers themselves recognized the importance of these issues."

From about 2003 a change took place in Norway. The Norwegian Association of Higher Education Institutions started to work more actively to put Open Access on the agenda. In the same period the Research Council of Norway and the Ministry of Education and Research started to see Open Access as an important issue. Even if there was a movement in the Norwegian Association of Higher Education Institutions there was still not any change in the research community and leadership. "There was a lot of talk about a knowledge society within the research community, but no support in the knowledge institutions themselves."

### Latest development in Norway

In 2008 the Ministry of Education and Research asked the Norwegian Association of Higher Education Institutions and the Research Council of Norway to write a report with their recommendations for an Open Access policy on a national level. Both institutions responded to this request in January 2009. In the same month the Research Council of Norway stated that all research financed by them should be made available in Open Access repositories as long as this does not conflict with author and publishers rights. Several research institutions in Norway are also working towards individual Open Access policies. Internationally, as well as in Norway, there has so far been a concentration to support Open by building an infrastructure for self-archiving in repositories, with less focus on support towards publishing in Open Access-journals.

Relating to the last development in Norway - a move towards national and institutional policies for Open Access - do you think that self-archiving is the most efficient way to achieve Open Access? Rune Nilsen answers: "I think that the latest development is important for the future of Open Access in Norway. It is important that it now has become a responsibility for the leadership at the institutions. I also believe that eventually Open Access has to become obligatory as modelled by the National Institute of Health in USA (NIH), and not a voluntary option as it is now. In the future it should also be the published version of the articles that is self-archived, because most researchers will prefer making this version available. My view is that the institutional repositories are the best instrument for Open Access that we have now. However, these repositories should mainly consist of

peer-reviewed articles, and the published version when possible, together with quality controlled doctoral theses and peer-reviewed books. Consequently, a goal for the future must be mandatory self-archiving of the final version of articles, possibly after an embargo period of about 6 months in the cases where immediate deposit is not possible."

"Another aspect that I believe is of great importance when shaping an Open Access policy is that research institutions take responsibility for managing and archiving their own knowledge creation. Who remembers to take care of everything that they have published? One can not expect the publishers to take this responsibility. A good example is an ongoing project at the University of Bergen where as much as possible of the research output of Fredrick Barth is going to be archived in the institutional repository. By doing this the University ensures that the material is available for future generations of students and researchers."

"Another issue that has been important for me is the problem that research institutions or researchers themselves do not get any economic credit for publishing Open Access. Crediting Open Access publishing economically could make more researchers interested in publishing Open Access or self-archiving their research. Telemark University College is a good example of how this can work. There is a policy under way that will give researchers from the institution economic credit for self-archiving in the institutional repository, TEORA. This could also be done at a national level, where institutions or researchers would receive publication points for making their research Open Access in addition to points for publishing in highly ranked journals. However, for some reason this does not seem to be a popular instrument towards achieving Open Access."

So, what is the most important thing you feel that you have achieved as an Open Access advocate?

"Personally, I thought it was a victory when I managed to convince the European University Association to establish a working group for Open Access in 2007. The General Secretary in the EU displayed an interest in making knowledge available. The working group's conclusion was that research publications should be made Open Access, and the EUA adopted the principles from the report."

So, are you optimistic about the future? "Yes, I believe that there has been a dramatic change from about 2001 that gives reason for optimism. This even though a lot of the same persons are sitting in the same positions, so there has not yet been the generation shift that probably is necessary for real change. The Research Council of Norway now has a partly

mandatory policy for self-archiving. So, I believe we absolutely have come one step forward. I should think that within a period of about 5-6 years self-archiving will be mandatory in Norway. That is the way we have

to go if we wish to make our research Open Access. Workers of knowledge creation have an obligation to make knowledge available Open Access. This is the simple truth."

### Curriculum Vitae

Rune Nilsen

Professor and Director, Centre for International health, University of Bergen, Norway

Born 1948

#### Main steps in career:

2008 td	Director Centre for international health
2006	Director, Nile Basin Research programme, (UiB)
2001-2005	Deputy Rector University of Bergen, UiB
1991-1996	Director Centre for International health, UiB
1988 td	Professor International health, UiB
1981	PhD, experimental bone biology
1978 td	Consultant in diagnostic pathology (main field immune pathology)
1978	Associate professor Pathology, UiB
1975	Assistant professor General pathology, UiB
1973	DMD Dentistry, UiB

Research field: Immune pathology: Tuberculosis and leprosy, Oral cancer and tobacco, nutrition and immunology - 100 International peer reviewed articles

#### Other positions, selected:

- Head, HIV Aids research programme Tanzania, 1988-1996
- Researcher Armauer Hansen Research Institute, Addis Ababa, 1985-87
- Chair, National programme for development research (NUFU), Norway, 1991- 2002 (chair 1998-2002)
- Government committee for new PhD and Research schools in Norway, 2002-2005
- Government committee for strengthening Women in Science, 2004-2007
- Chair, ERA MORE (EURAXESS) Norway, EU mobility programme, 2005 td
- EUA doctoral programme, 2003-2004, Leader network on Innovation
- Leader PhD training programme and conferences in European University Association (EUA), Bologna process, EC and Norway, 2002-2006
- Executive leader group for Council Graduate Schools in USA, Canada, Australia, EUA, Banff, 2007
- Chair, Committee for Open Access and Institutional Publication archives, Council of Higher education Norway, 2002-2005
- Working group for Open Access, EUA, 2007-2008
- Last years many International lectures: Examples: "Open Access and the International Knowledge societies", "Knowledge societies -- only for the rich countries", "Doctoral education in a Global context"

