

YOUR FREE IB REVIEW UPDATE

Should knowledge be free?

John Sprague asks if some sorts of knowledge should be 'protected' or 'controlled', and on what grounds?

The May 2014 prescribed title captured a common type of investigation in TOK, having to do with the various *limitations* on the construction of knowledge and pointing towards its ethical limits. Commonly used examples included:

- artistic works like Rick Gibson's 1987 *Human Earrings* and Jill Greenberg's 2006 *End Times* series
- the 1932–72 Tuskegee syphilis experiment
- the 1971 Stanford prison experiment

As a TOK student, however, you must push beyond just finding examples that make sense of titles and try to uncover the deeper knowledge questions (KQs) that arise from the consideration of the titles. In this case, one KQ that underlies all these questionable experiments revolves around the *value* of knowledge: how important is it that we gain knowledge?

Elbakyan: hero or villain?

Falling squarely in to this TOK issue is Alexandra Elbakyan. She is a neuroscience researcher from Kazakhstan whose Sci-Hub website has been making

copyrighted material available to the public free of charge since 2011. Her point is that the human pursuit of scientific knowledge should not be controlled, and that it is a human right to have access to knowledge that others have developed, in order to test it, add to it, build on it or challenge it.



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Scientific claims are seen as reliable precisely because they go through a rigorous peer-review process. But, once it has been reviewed and published, much of this knowledge becomes a consumer good, being bought and sold by publishers. This knowledge is being controlled by market forces, a commodity to be bought and sold. Without access to premier university research libraries, researchers are forced to pay for access to the articles, sometimes when they only need quick glances at the details in order to proceed with their work. No doubt you come across this when trying to find scholarly research for your extended essay (EE).

Financial limits to knowledge

Elbakyan had to pirate research papers during her student days because the material she needed was simply too expensive. She felt that this *financial* limit to the progress of scientific knowledge was unjustified, so she began working with others in the scientific community to share research papers without paying for them. At the core of Elbakyan's concern is the limits to human knowledge imposed by publishing houses' fees, none of which make their way back to the authors, who have already sold their own copyright to the publishers

Elbakyan appeals to the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, Article 27:

Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.

Elbakyan says that 'knowledge should be common and not intellectual property'. In other words, scientific knowledge belongs to the human race as a whole and there should be no financial limit to its dissemination. To support her case, she points out that most of the downloads are coming from countries that have not been as involved historically in the great pursuit of scientific knowledge. To what extent has the progress of knowledge been disproportionately influenced by a limited number of voices? As the internet continues to challenge historical power structures what *new* voices and approaches can we expect to see in the future?

Activities

- 1 With a partner, decide on whether or not you agree with the following: 'limiting access to knowledge is not the same as limiting the *progress* of knowledge'. Can you think of real-life examples to support your argument? What areas of knowledge (AOKs) can you use to support your argument?
- 2 List the times when you have run into a paywall during your research for the EE and various internal assessments. Report back to your class on how this might limit the production of knowledge in an AOK.
- 3 Read through various media outlets' reporting of Elbakyan's case. Compare the ways in which the facts of the case are presented. What other political, economic, ethical and social perspectives are used to shape the tone of the story?

Consider:

 - a Is Elbakyan correct in her suggestion that scientific knowledge has become a consumer good? What exactly is it that is being bought and sold?
 - b Elbakyan also supports the abolishing of copyright in general. Do you think that copyright laws limit the progress of knowledge?

Useful sites

Read interviews with Elbakyan at

www.tinyurl.com/hwn2jrt and

www.tinyurl.com/hk6z5f4

How Sci-Hub works: www.tinyurl.com/hb23vqr

A Pirate Bay for science? www.tinyurl.com/hk9e87a

Find out more about our full range of magazines and online archives of back issues at www.hoddereducation.co.uk/magazines

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