

## **Open Access and the struggle for justice: The Maynooth University Ken Saro-Wiwa Collection**

By

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Publishing in its finest form is not merely the creation of a product for sale, distribution and consumption. It should be considered as an essential cultural process of encouraging collective reflection, thinking, deepening interactions, as well as stimulating organising for justice and dignity. It should enable us to enhance our understanding of the perspectives of different peoples, populations and classes, whether through narrative, literary, analytical, or artistic forms. Given the developments of new technologies of production and dissemination, there are immense possibilities for achieving this. But there are equally significant obstacles.

Publishing is dominated by a small number of large companies. In line with what has become a generalised phenomenon in the era of neoliberal capitalism, companies involved with publishing, especially of academic materials, have experienced a significant concentration. For example, the top five most prolific publishers account for more than 50% of all papers published in 2013, and 70% of papers in the social sciences (Larivière V, Haustein S, Mongeon P., 2015). The major publishing houses, based in the global North, are deriving substantial profits. For example, the UK based media group, Pearson, reported a revenue in excess of US\$7000 million in 2015 (Collyer, F. M., 2018). Most libraries in the global South are simply unable to pay the inflated prices for books and subscriptions to journals and magazines.

The profits made by publishing companies have escalated, while at the same time the actual cost of production — typesetting, printing, and diffusion — has declined, as the fabrication process is made much easier. The fact that much of the information that is published is based on research the public has already paid for (either directly through grants or indirectly through the provision of public education), makes the situation even more irksome and unjust. In the neoliberal era, the putative efficiency of the private sector is frequently lauded; but it is the substantial subsidy received by the companies from the public purse that makes their business appear efficacious.

The commodification of knowledge production and the monopolisation of publication has strongly affected academic practices, influencing the choice of content and even the creative processes required for the production of art and knowledge. Monopolisation allows subscription rates to be inflated, making costs particularly prohibitive for those in the global South (Collyer, F. M., 2018). But most importantly, commodification affects what is considered legitimate: the experiences of the global South, and in particular those of the “wretched of the earth”, have little or no exposure or influence on public discourse. Consequently, a Eurocentric and elite perspective dominates.

Moreover, the inheritance of the colonial relationship in academia is often perpetuated today in ways that parallel how the extractive industries (mining and agricultural) operate in the global South: they source raw materials / ‘primary products’ which are then processed in the global North. So, in academia, we see how data and information are collected from the global South as raw materials for articles, books and theses that are then processed / published in the

North. A glance at most journals will show how few articles refer to intellectual work undertaken in the global South.

While the emergence of open access initiatives is welcome, it does not necessarily resolve the problems faced by researchers and writers in the South. Materials published in open access journals are often paid for by the authors or their institutions, a system that effectively closes the door for those who are either unable or cannot afford to pay to have their work published. Some journals do make selected articles available on open access and libraries internationally are striving to make more content available through institutional and subject repositories. Sites such as [Open Doar](#) (Directory of Open Access Repositories), [Directory of Open Access Journals](#), [Core Open Access Research Papers](#), and the [Social Science Research Network](#) are valuable, but there are many other resources that incur prohibitive subscription costs. An informative interview with an Ethiopian researcher on the challenges of open access in Africa, sheds light on issues researchers in the Global South face (Cochrane, L. and Lemma, M.D, 2019).

The situation is perhaps worse in the case of books. While the cost of producing and printing books has dropped significantly over the last decade, this has not always been reflected in the changes in the retail price. The cost of printing in much of Africa, for example, is exorbitant both because of the predominance of the use of older technologies, but also because paper has to be imported. What is surprising is that the retail price of e-books is often little different from the price of the printed equivalent. While reproducing printed copies involves labour, costly technologies and paper, the cost of the production and reproduction of electronic books is much less. The establishment of sites such as [Directory of Open Access Books](#) and [Libgen](#) that make available electronic versions of books is a life-saver for many, especially those who work towards building societies based on justice, freedom and dignity.

In the current period of growing impoverishment of populations across the world associated with neoliberalism, finding ways to encourage open access to poetry, novels, music, song, art, literature, philosophy and all forms of publications is a challenge. However, open access offers potential opportunities for making the voices of the dispossessed accessible and is an intrinsic component of the discourse on freedom and justice. Publishing for the commons in this context can be a powerful act of solidarity, making knowledge, ideas and reflection more widely available and legitimising voices and perspectives that are currently silenced.

It is against this background and a strong commitment to the OA (Open Access) Movement, that Maynooth University Library decided to make [Silence Would Be Treason: Last Writings of Ken Saro-Wiwa](#) freely available on open access and also to organise events where the issues raised contribute to shaping the public discourse. Globally, there are a number of similar initiatives. In an effort to publish as part of the commons, when the author and / or co-publishers are agreeable, [Daraja Press](#) is making available for free online, the entire text of their recent books and ebooks.

The first edition of [Silence Would Be Treason: Last Writings of Ken Saro-Wiwa](#) (Corley, Fallon, Cox, 2013) was published by Daraja Press in 2013. The 2<sup>nd</sup> revised edition of the book was launched in 2018. It contains additional material including a preface written by Noo Saro-Wiwa, a chapter detailing PhD student Graham Kay's research on the historic links between government and the petrochemical industry, a chapter by Dr Anne O'Brien and

Helen Fallon on the open access [Ken Saro-Wiwa Audio Archive](#), and an afterword by Mark Dummett Business and Human Rights Researcher at Amnesty International. Both books are available in print format and on open access and can be downloaded from the MU institutional repository [MURAL](#) (Maynooth University Research Archive Library).

In a letter to McCarron, dated 1<sup>st</sup> December 1993, Saro-Wiwa wrote:

*Keep putting your thoughts on paper. Who knows how we can use them in future. The Ogoni story will have to be told.* (Saro-Wiwa, K. 1993)

Open Access is ensuring the story is told and is accessible to all.

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