

## ***Hinari and Agora:*** **free access to scientific information for poor countries**

**Elisabetta Tola**

ISC, Innovations in Science Communication, ISAS, Trieste, Italy

In the midst of a debate on access to information, the World Health Organization and the FAO have decided to develop a strategy to guarantee the right of poor countries to have free access to scientific publications. This right is often denied, mainly because of high subscription costs. For this reason, universities and research centres in southern countries must forego buying magazines, which are a valuable instrument for updating, and exchanging information on research and scientific issues.

This choice has been made in an historical period when the industrialized world is marked by a knowledge-based economy. The *2000 Millennium Summit* and the *2002 World Food Summit* have stated that the so-called “digital divide” - in other words the different degree of penetration of digital technologies and consequently of knowledge - is one of the major obstacles to development. Thus, several years ago a series of initiatives were launched within the scientific community in the attempt to bridge the digital divide. It is however very significant that these two UN agencies decided to tackle the issue of scientific information with a view to promoting economic and social growth in developing countries. This is why *Hinari* and *Agora* were created.

The *Hinari (Health InterNetwork Access to Research Initiative)* project was launched in January 2002 upon the recommendation of Gro Harlem Brundtland, Director General of the WHO. The project is part of an extensive strategy - the *Health*

*InterNetwork* - for the spreading of medical and pharmaceutical knowledge among scientists and politicians in poor countries. Thanks to the arbitration of Maurice Long of the *British Medical Journal* - a free magazine in its on-line version -, six of the main scientific publishers (Blackwell, Elsevier Science, Harcourt Worldwide STM Group, Wolters Kluwer International Health & Science, Springer Verlag and John Wiley) have reached an agreement with the WHO to grant developing countries free access to over 1500 magazines .

Immediately afterwards, another twenty-two publishers joined the initiative and today *Hinari* offers more than two thousand papers, some electronic books, bibliographical databases and continuing vocational training courses. The three-year project has been launched in collaboration with Cornell University and with the contribution of private foundations. The list of countries (of which the WHO is guarantor) which are entitled to access *Hinari* has been set up by the publishers on the basis of transparent and objective criteria, without any political restrictions or sympathies. The subscription is free for the first sixty-eight countries on the list, whose average annual per capita income is below one thousand dollars. A second list includes forty-two countries with an income ranging between one thousand and three thousand dollars. These countries can access the entire database for only one thousand dollars, equal to the standard cost of approximately three magazines. The publishers have decided to use this income for teaching librarians in the beneficiary countries how to use *Hinari*. Since the beginning of the project, over 450 institutions have registered and over 100 use the system regularly.

The following year, the *Agora* project (*Access to Global Online Research in Agriculture*) was launched. Promoted by the FAO, *Agora* grants approximately 70 poor countries free access to over 400 scientific magazines on agriculture, nutrition, social and biological research. Like *Hinari*, the project was developed in collaboration with Cornell University - that has fine-tuned the access system -, and with Maurice Long's arbitration. Indeed, the negotiations were extremely complex and required the maturing of mutual trust between publishers and the organisation.

However, the global project is much vaster and *Agora* is only one of the instruments which are deemed essential for the knowledge-based economic development of poor countries. Indeed, the high cost of magazines limiting the spreading of scientific information is matched by the uneven distribution of the digital technologies necessary for accessing it. Generally, the isolation of research centres is caused in the first place by the inability to access technology and in the second place by

the unavailability of data. This is why the FAO project aims at sharing technology and not only information. The success of the *Hinari* and *Agora* projects led Anton Mangstl, Director of the FAO's Library and Documentation Systems Division, to set up a negotiation project in cooperation with telecommunications companies. The initiative aims at convincing these companies to grant poor countries temporary free access to the infrastructures and instruments which are necessary to spread computer technologies and the use of the network. Once the technological framework has been created, the information can finally be conveyed

Negotiation is a precise choice. Anton Mangstl explains that open archives and magazines are aimed at complementary targets. Magazines guarantee quality through the peer review process. Researchers in southern countries must be able to access scientific information so that they can keep updated on the issues and methods currently under scrutiny by the scientific community. At the same time, these researchers cannot publish their work in major magazines, as the quality of their articles does not meet required standards. The open archives also give an opportunity to circulate research work and to gather opinions through an informal assessment system with a view to promoting publication.

The FAO expects the use of the network to increase the benefits of both communicative methods (subscription and open-access magazines) for the improvement of scientific knowledge in developing countries. Open archives depend upon the network, which enables rapid circulation of knowledge, regardless of its origin. The objective of such projects as *Hinari* and *Agora* is to relieve publishers of investments in printing and distribution.

However, the issue does not only concern the potential provided by the network to convey scientific information. Indeed, the two approaches are characterised by a significant distinction between the production of scientific data and their validation within the international community. In the open access philosophy, this validation is no longer based on peer review, but rather on a collective approach to the production of scientific knowledge. The above distinction might end up by hindering the efforts of international organizations.

*Translated by Eurologos-Trieste*