
COMMENTARIES

A Camera and a Click to Democratize Knowledge

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As researchers and universities try to continue their activities during the COVID-19 pandemic, academic events such as workshops, seminars, and conference talks that traditionally take place in-person and are usually attended by <100 people are being hosted online and recorded. All of a sudden, people who could never attend workshops or conferences abroad or take classes in prestigious universities around the planet now need only an electronic device with access to the Internet (and reasonable bandwidth) to access scientific knowledge and participate fully in the scientific community.

Recording content and putting it online make it permanently accessible to virtually anyone. If this same revolution had happened 170 years ago, perhaps today we could watch, for example, Curie, Darwin, or Einstein presenting ideas that changed science and society. We acknowledge that online academic events do not allow for the immediate, real, and serendipitous interpersonal interactions that add to the learning processes, and we do not advocate for the replacement of “live” events. Traditional conferences and lectures will always exist for those with the resources and interest to attend in person. We also recognize the potential economic impact on academic societies that rely on conference fees to run other activities, or universities that might attract fewer tuition-paying students. These impacts could be mitigated by new revenue streams from, for example, profit-sharing platforms, monetized videos, and commercial sponsorships.

However, making knowledge more democratically accessible requires few resources and little effort. Imagine living in a world where a student in a poor country can regularly attend classes and seminars at Harvard, while anyone can learn about cutting-edge advances in treating deadly diseases or ameliorating climatic change? A camera and a click will bring us closer to the revolutionary idea that knowledge will no longer be a product accessible only to those who can pay.