

The Economics of Access to Knowledge



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Intellectual “Property”

- The economics of *property* assumes scarcity, a bounded good
- Knowledge is unbounded: once disclosed, it can be reproduced infinitely at near-zero marginal cost
- Reproductions of knowledge are not scarce
- *The problem of infinity*: treating infinite supply as property poses problems



Economics of knowledge

- Knowledge itself (but not reproductions) *is* scarce, deserving returns, profit, etc.
- But charging for reproductions problematic, and relatively poorly accepted by the market (consumers)



Economics of access

- BSA: 151 million pirated software units in the US in 2004
- FBI: 10 million criminal acts in the US in 2004, including 1.5 million violent acts
- Treating “piracy” as a crime seems to have not much social legitimacy: reproductions are not seen as property!
- But politics of “property” drive maximalism



Access to what knowledge?

- Ways to treat knowledge as something other than property?
- Ways to create “useful knowledge” (innovate) without treating it as property?
- Ways to ensure equitable access while still allowing knowledge creators returns for their creations, if not for reproductions?