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## **Inaccessible or merely flexible?: BDMS students explore opportunities for academic publishing in Tanzania**

Wijngaarden, B. van

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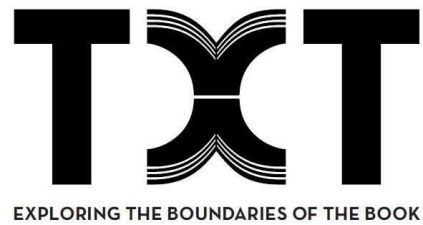
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## Inaccessible or merely flexible?

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### BDMS students explore opportunities for academic publishing in Tanzania

BIANCA  
VAN WIJNGAARDEN

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It's busy, it's dusty and clearly indicated street-names are rare. Yet this May Book and Digital Media Studies students Anne Bakker (26) and Floris Janssens-Andrejew (29) eagerly traded Dutch soil for the red earth of Africa to embark on a three month project researching academic publishing in Tanzania. The goal of this operation is twofold. Firstly they hope to create awareness about the possibilities of digitisation. Secondly the project is also a pilot aiming to explore the opportunities for a larger project to boost Tanzania's academic publishing. This line of business especially, is currently greatly underdeveloped. In Tanzania most government spending goes to publishing textbooks for primary and secondary education. The academic books available tend to come from abroad. Tanzanian publishers are often hesitant to try new business models; the majority has not even started considering digitisation yet. And then there is the issue of language; a lot of them want to publish in Swahili, which considerably narrows the market.

As Floris describes the approach to the project: "While the research of Anne and myself is largely related, I will mainly concentrate on the opportunities for academic publishing here; identifying research areas that could benefit from publication, exploring opportunities for open access and looking into new business models. Besides that I will perform market research to get an idea of the way the market for (academic) content functions in Tanzania." Anne's focus will be on the value that particular formats (p-books, e-books, audio-books, digital files, etc.) could add to the development of Tanzanian publishing industry. So far the team's research activities mostly involve talking to people

in the industry to see what they have to say about the current situation in the publishing industry and what their hopes for the future are. Anne: "In a while I will start to move towards 'secondary text research' to get a more complete picture of Tanzania in general and the publishing industry in particular. For instance, I will also have to take issues like Internet access into account. It's nice to try to transform the Tanzanian publishing industry into something we are familiar with, but in reality the overall majority of the country's population still lives in remote rural areas without Internet access or even electricity. So it's very important to investigate socioeconomical, cultural, political and historical influences as well."

Day-to-day communication in Tanzania is mainly done in Swahili. "Language is, however, rarely a problem with regard to the persons we interview," Floris explains. But even with the language barrier missing, at least in talking to their professional contacts, the cultural barrier is still very much present. Anne: "People are a lot less direct than we, Dutch people, are renowned to be. Which is very unpractical. It makes meetings rather laborious events, with everybody talking for a very long time without daring to say what they actually want to say." On the other hand, Floris indicates, "People are a lot more approachable here. Making themselves available for you on the very same day you contact them for an appointment is no exception. Whereas in the Netherlands trying to set up a meeting can often be a true test of patience."

The team started off in Dar es Salaam which, with over three million inhabitants, is by far the largest city of the country. "On the second of June we

will leave for Dodoma, do some more research there and prepare a seminar on digital publishing," notes Floris. "And in the beginning of July we will return to Dar es Salaam for two more weeks to do more interviews and research. After that we will go back to Dodoma to wrap up the project, hopefully successfully."

Although the trip already proved to be a very enlightening experience so far, both personally and professionally, the students also hope to explore the opportunities for a larger project to strengthen Tanzania's academic publishing. Anne: "I hope our advice will help both the publishers and the academic community see that some change is needed in order to keep up with the rest of the world. I hope I will get people to change things, not just because I say so, but because it makes sense to them too. Because, ultimately, if this development is going to work and last, it has to be understood and supported by the Tanzanians themselves."

*d.b.vanwijngaarden@gmail.com*

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