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The Role of African Academic Institutions in Promoting Open Access in Africa: Obstacles and Opportunities

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Introduction

When evaluating the Open Access Movement for Africa and in Africa, we need to go beyond the success discourse in order to scratch the surface layer and find out what is underneath. Although knowledge generation has increased, statistics point out that of the journals listed in the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), Africa contributes only 6% and no more than 133 African repositories (4.4% of all repositories) are listed in OpenDoar.

Open Access and Africa

Epistemologically, not only Open Access knowledge in Africa and for Africa is consumer knowledge, but also non-African, colonial, and methodologically challenged. Africa is mostly a consumer of knowledge generated from the North, Europe and the USA; knowledge generated in Africa is sporadic and lacks the African meaning, definition and content of open access scholarship. As a result, “traditionalists” despise Open Access as epistemologically unsound for Africa. On the one hand, the knowledge production is inclined towards reproducing the colonized mind, and therefore not Africa-empowering knowledge. On the other hand, the African knowledge production is methodologically weak and is felt to jeopardize knowledge production.

“Local Open Publishing”

This paper wants to contribute to the discussion about the importance of the role of an academic institution in the open access movement in Africa as well as address the representation and epistemological challenges of Africa benefiting from the Open Access Movement. The argument is that, strategically, academic institutions in Africa should get into processes of “Local Open Publishing” as a step towards being “Openly Accessed”. Local open publishing should create a firm culture of critical and constructive academic discussion, departing from local African problems.

The process begins with instituting mechanisms for discussion online. It is online that a number of people who can be managed in some form of a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) can be invited over to discuss an issue or problematic details. Different research areas, which are potentially different publication areas, are identified and allocated to the different participants. After a brief period destined for online discussions, out of which (from inputs of different participants) “discussion papers” are compiled by the prospective authors in the different research areas. At that moment an editorial team does the primary reviewing and if the team is content with the quality, the first publication online is a “Discussion Paper”. When the discussion paper is published, it is subjected to another discussion forum online. After considering the different contributions, a “Working Paper” is written and published online.

The next fundamental step in the process is peer reviewing of the “Working Paper”. An online discussion is prepared for each “Working Paper”, with two discussants, one giving the summary and the second one giving a critical review. This process involves two discussants and group comments. After a final review by the author, the article is published on the institution’s online publishing forum, with critical assessment of the responsible editor.

There is another version for this. A call for papers is done on a prior designed website. “Google sites” provides a great opportunity for this. There are ready-made templates for websites from which to choose; in order to create a website, the steps are easy; in case of learning further on how to prepare a website, there are quite a good number of tutorials on the Internet.

A general announcement for the call is made through emails to the potential authors. The contributors are requested to send in their abstracts within a very specific time period. The organizers screen the abstracts; comments are given to the prospective authors, who are requested to re-submit the abstracts within a given period of time. Once the reviewed abstracts are submitted, then they are distributed among the authors for a second deeper review. The reviewers at this stage are guided by a precise format. The reviews are then reverted to the authors, who are requested to consider the review comments and proceed with the writing of the draft paper, which can be published online as a Discussion Paper. The process continues to the Working paper till final publication of the paper.

There are three issues to consider in these two versions of Local Open Publishing. The first thing is that there should be clearly stipulated deadlines in all the steps. This facilitates management of the processes and maintains professionalism in terms of time management.

The second issue has to do with coordination. In order for authors to meet established deadlines, there is need for consistent reminders. Emails are good reminders, but they seem too official; many people have set their timing in responding to them at their convenience. A good option seems to be the use of Whatsapp application on smartphones. Many academicians still walk around with their smartphones. Creating a group on Whatsapp facilitates can tremendously facilitate coordination. With a group, it is one message sent and received by all in the group. This can save a lot of time, with messages being delivered instantly. Clarifications and discussions can easily be made and they can reach all the group members instantly.

The third issue is peer reviewing. Traditionally, peer reviewing has always been done anonymously. What is proposed here is a critical engagement of academicians and researchers who can know each other, and at the same time not only criticize each other, but also learn from each other; anonymity has enhanced distancing scientists in the name of objectivity; science, instead, needs to enhance human relations.

Usage of repositories and journals

There are several other possibilities to make the knowledge of African institutions available to the community at large, and at the same time make the institution itself better visible in the academic world. The most obvious possibilities are the usage of repositories (online archive of publications) and of academic journals. In December 2015, *OpenDoar* (Directory of Open Access Repositories) listed 2,991 repositories of which 133 (4.4%) were located in Africa. Repositories have two functions. (1) They offer a platform to researchers to make their publications available to the world scientific community. (2) They thereby give other researchers and the general public the chance to read the outcome of their findings. The opening up of their research also enhances their own visibility, and the visibility of their institution. This also means a better valorization of research, effect on the academic ranking of the institution involved and making social impact possible.

Importance of Metadata, Abstracts & TOCs

Taking part in the academic and social debate starts by making publications visible. Many researchers don't realize that this visibility is of crucial importance. Most important element is of course the *content* of the publication, but the visibility of an article is enlarged considerably by simply making an abstract of the publication available on a personal or institutional website, spreading the TOCs of a journal by discussion lists and other means,

and making the metadata (with a short intro) available either via the publisher, repository or website. And of course: blogs, announcements in newsletters and posts on FaceBook sometimes help to be noticed –and read.

Copyright Issues

Copyright has several issues. To begin with, it is clear that the author owns the copyright of the written texts. Authors have various choices in dealing with publishers and journal editors. “Handing over copyright” means that the copyright is transferred from the author to the publisher. “Right to publish” retains copyright with the author, and gives the publisher the right to publish the book or article. Other issues at stake are the possibilities to publish in Open Access, and under what license. Copyright acts differ from country to country. In most countries, copyright terms are based on the author’s death, plus 50 or 70 years.

Building a Digital Library in Africa

Many organizations and universities in the Global South complain about paywalls and other restricted access to scientific information. These complaints are based on realistic experiences. At the same time, there are many possibilities to build a digital library in Africa without having a large amount of CFA’s. To give some examples:

(1) Journals: research4life.org (60,000 peer reviewed journals), doaj.org (10,000 peer reviewed journals), JSTOR (2,000 journals), revues.org, ajol.info, PubMed (journal articles, 25M citations) and several more (discussed in the presentation).

(2) Books: archive.org, Google Books, RePec etc.

(3) Pictures: commons.wikimedia.org, europeana.eu, dp.la

During the presentation, theoretical and practical issues about digital libraries in Africa will be addressed.

Conclusion

Surely, there is quite a lot that is being offered with the Open Access. However, it lacks “Africanness”. The lack is not necessarily because of exclusion processes, but because of having less of quality to offer. It is for this matter that the idea is for academic institutions in Africa to begin by building muscles in science through promotion of “Local Open Publishing”. Not only will this create science that is locally based with local epistemological and hermeneutic insights, but also will enhance the capacity of African scientists in critically doing research and writing.

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Jos Damen is Director of the Library & ICT Department of the African Studies Centre, Leiden University. He publishes regularly about Open Access, electronic journals, libraries & archives. He organized a Dutch Wikipedians in Special Residence Project with 12 organizations, including the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, the Institute for Housing and Urban Development Studies and the African Studies Centre, Leiden.