Facilitating Scholarly Communication in African Studies

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Abstract

Web publishing and its technical possibilities, as well as the open access movement that has accompanied it, have resulted in a number of tendencies with mixed implications for scholarly communication. This article examines the impact of these changes in the field of the African studies, where the North-South divide in scientific publishing poses an additional challenge to the issues at stake. It looks at several initiatives taken by the Africanists community in the Netherlands to bridge the divide, in particular the establishment of a digital platform for African studies. It concludes that these initiatives are all geared towards redressing the balance and establishing open scholarly communication on an equal footing, but that true open access can only be achieved if practiced both ways (by North and South) and not at the expense of academic quality standards. In addition it requires the active commitment of each and every individual scholar. This commitment still needs to grow in Africanist circles.

Introduction

In the past ten years, research in progress has become more visible through web publishing. Academic research centres publish newsletters, research papers, working papers, pre-prints, seminar reports and conference proceedings, including digital video presentations. Individual researchers create their own personal web pages, listing overviews of their publications, research projects, teaching courses, presentations and talks. Technological
advances in web publishing make this happen. It serves individual researchers and research units to raise their profile and present themselves to the community on campus and beyond, but gradually, as web publishing becomes an accepted medium for information dissemination, it serves other goals as well. It serves to speed up the communication of research results and to reach specific target groups and larger audiences in an effective manner. It raises pertinent questions about access to scholarship and the business models of traditional publishing. It opens up new horizons for the advancement of free access to information and the availability of publications.

This article explores aspects of the transformation in academic publishing, looking at it from the perspective of the Africanist community in the Netherlands. It is based on experiences and insights gained during the course of an innovative project aimed at establishing a digital platform for scholarly communication in African studies.

North-South divide in scholarly publishing

Although the North-South divide in scholarly publishing is a recognized fact, most emphasis lies on stimulating the flow of information from the developed North to the developing South [Britz and Lor, 2003]. Library book donation programmes from all over the world ship millions of books a year to African libraries and schools. Negotiations with publishers have resulted in journals and databases being made available for free or at heavily discounted prices through programmes like AGORA¹, HINARI², eIFL³, and PERI⁴, concerning the major journal titles in medicine, agriculture, environmental and social sciences. Together with these programmes much training has taken place. In the field of African Studies, it is a matter of pride for research centres like Nordiska in Uppsala and Afrika-Studiecentrum in Leiden, to distribute their publications at no charge to organizations located in Africa. Notwithstanding these efforts to redress the imbalance between North and South, it appears many African libraries and research institutes have not benefited as much as they could, because they are not aware of the availability of such programmes and access deals [Gwynn, 2004].

What happens to the information flow from South to North? Small-scale programmes have been initiated and co-funded by western donors to stimulate the development of e-journals in Africa, like the African e-Journals Project⁵ and African Journals Online (AJOL)⁶. Even more promising are initiatives from within the African research community, such as CODESRIA (Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa)⁷. CODESRIA’s publication programme is geared towards developing outlets for African scholarship and publishes ten bilingual and multilingual journals, half of them freely available online [Nyamnjoh, 2004].

Self-publishing and the movement for open access⁸ to scholarly literature offer
unprecedented opportunities for academics from the developing world to disseminate their research results and to participate on an equal footing in the international scientific discourse. They can download content that would normally be unavailable to them had it not been subsidized, and they can upload content that would normally be excluded from prestigious journals and library collections. Scholars and students who join research institutes abroad for guest fellowships and Ph.D. programmes respectively, can publish their works online and share their findings with their home universities. Those who stay abroad to pursue an academic career can engage with their home-based scientific community in a more meaningful way, now that geographical barriers have been overcome by Internet technologies. It is not surprising then that Latin American and African academics in particular, rather than their North American and European counterparts, are embracing the new web publishing technology and its revolutionary opportunities for scholarly communication [Holdom, 2005].

This in turn gives rise to concerns regarding the equal participation in the free flow of information between North and South. If scholars in developing countries eagerly disseminate their work in the public domain whilst those in developed countries stay relatively reticent to do so, the established control mechanisms of academic publishing will remain in place and the free and uncontrolled dissemination of research results on the Web will become synonymous with unprofessional practice and bad quality output, exacerbating the imbalance in scholarly publishing between North and South.

**The Connecting-Africa initiative**

Against this background and from informal discussions between the Centre of Development Studies in Groningen and the African Studies Centre in Leiden about dissemination of grey literature, came the idea of creating a web platform facilitating scholarly communication in African studies. The requirements for such a platform were as follows:

- With the proliferation of freely available research reports and self-published work-in-progress, the platform would need to gather and filter online studies and materials relevant to research on Africa.
- Because scholarly communication is more than the publication and dissemination of research, the platform would also need to bring the academic experts on Africa together in a virtual community to facilitate the flow of ideas, to enable discussion, and to stimulate professional interactions and networking processes.

Starting from this set of requirements, the African Studies Centre in Leiden developed a pilot service and named it Connecting-Africa⁹.

During the past two years, the scope of the platform has been limited to
Africanist research in the Netherlands. The rationale behind this scoping is to ensure a critical mass of involvement from the Dutch research community of Africanists and to help enhance the visibility of African studies in the Netherlands. There are over 400 Africanists scattered across more than a hundred university departments and research institutes in the country, and it is assumed that bringing this scattered community together in a virtual environment will help to increase knowledge exchange and networking activity. It is expected that a critical mass of participation by Dutch Africanists will lead to spin-offs across Europe, Africa and the US.

At the same time it is hoped that this joint effort will lead to novel solutions to redress the imbalance between North and South and to stimulate the scientific dialogue between Africanists and their fellow African colleagues on an open and equal footing, unhampered by current impediments in scholarly publishing. It is believed this approach could be successful in the niche area of African studies, in which vested interests of the publishing industry are relatively low and the commitment of Africanists to support research and education in Africa is high.

Setting up a database with information about Africa experts and collecting information about their publications and other research content requires important investments in time and energy, and for the long term, a sustainable budget that cannot rely on project funds or voluntarily contributions. Sustained support from the network members and an administrative capacity to manage the network are essential. The proposed model is therefore to develop Connecting-Africa as a distributed effort with federated access to content from university repositories, library catalogues and other resources, including African studies contact databases with information on researchers and research-related institutes and projects. In this way the maintenance of Connecting-Africa lies with parties that already serve the African studies community and is a natural extension of their institutional tasks and responsibilities. To the researchers involved, the community would be without borders, but in reality it would be managed by various African studies centres situated in different countries across the world. In this way Connecting-Africa could grow to become a truly global network that is scalable and sustainable.

The Connecting-Africa pilot is based on existing and newly emerging building blocks. In 2003 the African Studies Centre in Leiden took over the database of Africanists that the Netherlands organization for international cooperation in higher education (Nuffic) had been keeping up-to-date from 1992 onwards, but that Nuffic had to discontinue due to lack of funding from donors. With rich information on the thematic and regional expertise of Africanists, this database forms the core of the Connecting-Africa community portal. Also in 2003, a new infrastructure of digital academic repositories was being set up in the Netherlands (DARE) and formed a potentially promising source of publications and research materials on Africa. It was therefore decided to base
the search module of Connecting-Africa on title information stored in these institutional repositories.

**Institutional repositories**

An institutional repository is like a digital 'treasure chest', containing the digitally recorded intellectual output of a particular research institution. The repository is a well-managed storage and archiving system. The principle is simple. Researchers place their year's research output with accompanying title information in the institutional repository and grant their university permission to distribute and preserve their work. The materials can consist of publications, research data and supporting materials, e.g., audio or video.

In order for their repository's content to be more visible and searchable worldwide, most repositories make the title information freely and easily available for re-use by third parties, enabling them to enrich their search services with these metadata. In practice, this means that anyone can find a work in a repository through a search service, for example via Google, without knowing which repositories exist, where they are located, or what they contain. In this way academic repositories make their content widely available and function as ubiquitous content providers. They can be seen as having the characteristics of a utility, providing a basic service like electricity or gas. In contrast, self-publishing by individual researchers on their personal web pages is of a more incidental nature, meant for instant wider dissemination only, and not for long lasting access and archiving purposes.

**Copyrights and publishers**

Researchers need to be the copyright holders to be able to grant permission to an institutional repository to distribute and preserve their works. However, in academic publishing it is common practice for authors to give away the entire copyright to the publisher who then takes care of the complete publishing process. This means that the publisher obtains the exclusive control over access to the content. It is important to know this in order to understand the paradoxic position in which libraries find themselves as access providers in the digital environment. Because publishers organize editorial boards and manage peer-reviews of the works as part of the publishing process, they also play an important role in structuring panels of academic experts and deciding on new marketable titles and themes for special journal issues. Over time, publishers have built strong trust relationships with authors and have succeeded in producing reputable journal titles and monograph series with strong branding effects. However, this has also led to a dependency relationship in which publishers effectively have control over the valuation of research output, as measured by journal rankings and impact factors, whilst authors perform the quality control through their refereeing duties.
In contrast, self-publishing on the Web basically enables the uncontrolled reproduction, distribution and availability of publications, mass usage instead of targeted usage and the growing problem of Internet plagiarism. As research enters the public arena, the research process and the valuation of research threaten to become everybody's business. For academia, the prospect that research is becoming a commodity at prey of the unchecked forces of consumption is alarming and threatening. Even though citation rates may well explode exponentially as a result of web publishing, what does that say about the value of scientific contributions to research? Who will be the gatekeepers of science, who will safeguard the credibility of academic authors? It becomes clear then that copyrights are not the only issue at stake; they are just one mechanism in a complex framework built to support the scientific process and instrumental to its institutionalization.

Researchers are just beginning to become aware of the forces at play and to analyze the drastic consequences of transformations taking place in scholarly communication.

**How changes in scholarly publishing affect African studies**

In social sciences research in particular, the transformations in the scholarly publications process will intensify the social appropriation of sociological concepts and interpretations. As sociology enters the public arena, intensified interactivity might blur the distinctions between observers and actors, and between science and ideology, and may affect human agency in unprecedented ways. What will be the effects on African studies, the study of African societal processes? How will openness and interactivity transform this research activity still dominated by western perspectives, as the African studies discipline moves into the African arena? Will it contribute to a greater participation of African scholars in Africanist circles? Will it lead to the disintegration of African studies and the full-fledged participation of African perspectives in the academic discourse? Will it accelerate cross-pollination between North and South? What will be the effects on the current development thinking? Will it lead to plurality and diversity? Will it reinforce the endorsement by African scholars of the dominating western social and cultural values, theories and methodologies, research themes and political agendas? These are tantalizing questions posed by the transformations taking place in scholarly communication. These transformations are triggered by technological innovations, but the direction these transformations take is ultimately in the hands of the stakeholders.

**Stakeholders in the open access debate**

There are several stakeholders in the open access debate. Earlier in this article
the academic publishers were mentioned as gatekeepers of science. Open access can result in serious economic consequences for them. They are therefore carefully weighing the risks and benefits of open access, and they have begun experimenting with different business models, at first in fields such as physics and the life sciences, but as pressure builds on publishers of research in other academic disciplines, experimentation in those areas will surely follow.

Research libraries are the safe keepers of science: they collect and preserve the records of science for academia, now and in the future. Their role is to ensure optimal access to and preservation of the published results of research. The pricing trend of journals from commercial publishers has forced many libraries to cut back on journal subscriptions. In the Netherlands, this trend has been exacerbated by the higher VAT on e-journals (19%) as compared to print journals (6%). With e-journals, publishers have introduced licensing models to replace subscription buying models, keeping ownership and control of digital materials in their own hands. In reaction to this trend libraries have started to form consortia to negotiate licensing conditions and access terms with publishers. At the same time libraries are experimenting with open access coupled with the setting up of institutional repositories. In the Netherlands, the development of academic repositories under the DARE programme is linked to the open access debate and to the long-term digital preservation programme of the national library.

Similarly, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) is investing in open sharing and open access technologies. Together with the Hewlett-Packard Company, MIT Libraries developed DSpace, a digital repository software platform with which MIT aims to store the institute’s entire intellectual output, including data and course materials. The DSpace system was officially released as open source at the end of 2002, to coincide with a symposium held at MIT on the problems of scholarly communication. By early 2005 more than a hundred DSpace repositories had been installed in 28 countries around the world. This shows how the forces behind these developments are technology driven. But mounting and maintaining publications online and developing new digital functionalities require substantial funds of libraries and research organizations, and publishers are also investing millions of euros in computer technology for their digital publishing platforms.

As we move into the digital environment where manuscripts become part of the search environment, references are linked to other electronic documents, access is regulated by rights management mechanisms, and preservation is driven by early warning software, the consecutive workflows characteristic of the print environment merge, and the distinctive tasks of publishers and libraries become blurred. As a result, huge commercial and public investments are competing to develop new solutions to old problems and to find new ways
of communicating science in the digital age.

In the midst of all this, many academics seem ill-informed about the issues at stake and unaware of the power play between publishers and libraries. This is somewhat surprising, as academics are the main stakeholders in scholarly communication, both as authors and readers. They frequently are not aware of the room for negotiation in the granting of rights to publishers. Basically, authors seem quite happy for the publishers to take charge of their copyrights as part of the publication process. Interestingly, it appears they are generally satisfied with the traditional information systems in place. As authors these academics place the most value on journals that target the key readers in their field and that carry the greatest authority, and as readers they are generally content with their (fully subsidised) access to the journal literature [Rowlands, 2004].

Authors of open access publications, on the other hand, have become aware of the issues at stake and indicate a strong desire to change current practices in the transfer of copyrights. They find the reuse situation in the traditional publishing model frustrating, a situation in which one third of the author population re-uses its own publications without asking permission to do so from their publisher [Hoorn and Graaf, 2005].

The position of the Africanists

Africanists in the Netherlands conform to the mainstream view of academics concerning the current publishing and access systems, but there are some striking additions to report [DARC workshop report15, 2005]. They regret that over-emphasis on impact factors is forcing them to publish in journals that are not read by their fellow African researchers, due to the inadequate North-South flow of scientific literature. If they were to target their preferred reader groups, they would have to publish in African journals, which have low citation impact.

Since 2003, CERES16, the national research school for resource studies for development, has operated a new journals ranking system in the social sciences. This system includes journals from developing countries that do not appear in the ISI17 journal rating and ranks them in the categories "other refereed journals", "non-refereed journals for academic readers" and "all others" [CERES ranking system, 2005]. The African Studies Centre in Leiden contributed a list of journal titles published in Africa to the CERES system. In this way, Africanists in the Netherlands who are evaluated on the basis of the CERES system are encouraged to publish in African journals.

Another interesting model to include African publications in the ranking systems dominated by the North is through cooperative publishing between African universities and the universities of the North. The collaboration
between the University of Ouagadougou and the University of Groningen, which started 25 years ago and has recently been evaluated [Bilan et perspectives, 2005], is a case in point. The most recent initiative in this collaborative framework is the co-publication of a new journal title, Journal Africain des sciences de l’environnement (JASE).18

Finally, another form of lifting barriers to the dissemination of African publications should be mentioned. The library of the African Studies Centre in Leiden has intensified its policy of subscribing to relevant African journals, discarding more general development studies titles available at most university libraries. The Centre's aim is to build a journal collection with 40% of the titles coming from Africa and to give priority to indexing and abstracting articles of those titles. The library's catalogue, with article level titles and abstracts, is freely available online, and its contents are aggregated and linked into bibliographical databases, such as Africa-Wide: NiPAD, thereby contributing to the wider dissemination of African scholarship.

Even if speedy delivery and pre-print versions of publications are not felt to be critical in many of the disciplines within African studies, Africanists sympathize with the concept of web publishing because they see in it interesting opportunities for reaching their target audience. On the other hand, they are very concerned that readers on the Internet are unable to distinguish between works of different quality and between different types of publications, such as peer-reviewed work, research-in-progress and dissertations, for example. In particular, students and inexperienced readers should be clear about the different quality levels in research and be able to recognize authoritative works from non-authoritative works. Most Africanists make some of their materials available from their home page or institutional web site. Learning materials and seminar presentations, however, are not always seen as suitable for dissemination, because they can easily be misinterpreted if not understood in the context of the full lecture or presentation. A handout, for example, with shorthand notes about specific African events or leaders becomes a politically sensitive document if used out of context. In 2005, a new research masters programme in African Studies was started at the University of Leiden. Lecturers from different universities across the Netherlands participate in this programme. The University of Leiden provides the digital learning environment for participating students and lecturers. Wageningen University will develop a controlled e-learning repository for the digital learning objects for the African Studies programme, to access copyright-cleared digital learning materials so that they can be re-used for other courses. This repository will be connected to the digital learning environments of the participating universities.

Filling the repositories with African studies

The strategy followed to fill the Connecting-Africa repository with African studies materials is time consuming but effective. Africanists are approached
by their colleagues and invited to participate. They hand over their publications list, and their major publications dating from before 1997 are collected in paper form and digitized. It is generally accepted that before 1997 authors did not sign away the rights of electronic publication, because until then publishers did not consider the future possibility of publishing articles electronically. For works published in 1997 and after, publishers are contacted and asked to grant permission to Connecting-Africa to archive a copy in the institutional repository. The publishers' responses and their copyright policies are recorded on a web page of the Connecting-Africa site, so as to inform fellow Africanists. Model agreements for researchers, to help them avoid signing away their entire rights to their works in the future, are also available on the website. All digital publications that have been scanned and cleared in this way are then entered into the repository.

Connecting-Africa harvests title information from 29 repositories on a weekly basis. To date it has harvested a total of 258,448 records and filtered 1,470 relevant records on Africa (0.56%). Of these 1,017 refer to full-text publications readable online.

**Enlarging and diversifying the communities**

Nearly half of those in the Dutch Africanist community have become members of the Connecting-Africa portal. Many more specialists on Africa from within and from outside the Netherlands indicate their desire to join, including researchers from Belgium and Germany, retired researchers, graduated Africans not affiliated with a university in the Netherlands but living there, NGO staff members, journalists, etc.

Connecting-Africa will implement open source forum software to accommodate the demand for additional virtual communities, and it will be interesting to follow the birth and livelihoods of those communities. Furthermore, CERES, the African Studies Centre, and the International Institute for Asian Studies in Leiden are now working on a new project proposal with the aim of duplicating the Connecting-Africa model for other area studies: Connecting-Asia, Connecting-LatinAmerica, Connecting-the-Caribbean, etc. To this end the Connecting-Africa platform will be based on a new architecture for web services delivery (SOAP[^19]), enabling the distributed maintenance of data stores with information about experts, organisations and publications. Finally, Connecting-Africa needs to be adopted by the African research community in the South, to become truly Africa-centred. Plans are underway to share the Connecting-Africa platform with the pan-African network of researchers affiliated with CODESRIA.

**Conclusion**

The Connecting-Africa initiative is a successful pilot project, and it holds
much promise for future expansion and enlargement of the Africanist community. It is too early, however, to assess how instrumental the project will prove to be in facilitating scholarly communication in the African studies. To date, most Africanists have not shown a pro-active attitude concerning changes in academic publishing and open access, but they do sympathize with the idea of increasing access to their own publications in Africa and reaching scholars in Africa. Will this be enough incentive to fill the repositories? Looking at the heavily institutionalized scientific process in the North, with its age old traditions and vested interests, it is understandable that transformation and adaptation take time. But it also raises questions. Is the print tradition a barrier or a pre-requisite for developing digital publishing models? Can Africa leap-frog into the digital age and by-pass the development stages of the print-based knowledge economy?

It is undeniable that there is a North-South divide in scholarly publishing and an imbalance of information flows, but this should not be redressed at the expense of academic quality standards. There are concerns that the open access movement, because it is so eagerly embraced by developing countries in contrast to the reticence in developed countries, will exacerbate the imbalance in scholarly publishing between the North and the South. It may be too early for open access on an equal basis, but there are other ways to achieve more equity, as demonstrated by efforts to stimulate good publishing practices from within Africa, by the incorporation of African journals in European and American systems of research valuation, by cooperative publishing between universities across the Northern and Southern continents and by increased dissemination of African scholarship through indexing and abstracting services.

The African Studies platform, Connecting-Africa, is a new initiative that fits into this framework. It is based on technologies designed to facilitate open communication and transparency of knowledge interactions between experts. Connecting-Africa is a platform designed to support the 'visible college' in African studies as opposed to the 'invisible college'.

Notes


4. PERI - Programme for the Enhancement of Research Information


11. The metadata is made available through the Open Archives Initiative Protocol for Metadata Harvesting (OAI-PMH).


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