OPEN ACCESS: IS IT A FUTILE OPTION FOR DEVELOPING COUNTRIES?

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On a daily basis, in Africa the basic needs of a family are important. Food, Health, Shelter…..are foremost on the mind of the head of any African household, while children in the West have grown up living with a computer and seeing it as a pen. The child in Africa sometimes does not even have a pen.

Expressing this kind of scenario, Kenyan historian professor Ali Mazrui paraphrases the words of the Late Julius Nyerere, the former president of Tanzania who once lamented the situation of inequality:

> while the great powers are trying to get to the moon, we are trying to get to the village. Well, the great powers have been to the moon and back, and are now even communicating with the stars. In Africa, however, we are still trying to reach the village. And the village is getting even more remote, receding with worsening communications even further into the distance. (Mazrui: in Murphy, 1993)
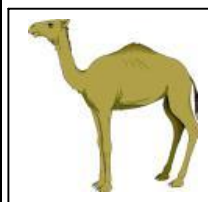
Libraries and access are sometimes a rarity in the rural areas. Some of the towns apart from the capital cities have libraries which are under funded since they are not considered a priority but fall under social services. A few attempts are now being made to provide some access and bridge the gap, as shown in the two cases below.

Camel Library in Kenya
An innovative library in Kenya called the Camel Library service (CLS), which is offered by the Kenya National Library Services in the arid North.
The camel being the ship of the desert it provides communities in the arid areas with a reliable means of transport. It targets temporary settlements mainly occupied by nomadic communities since the infrastructure is bad.
The impact has been good because it has enhanced access to information for local communities and has greatly supported the adult literacy programmes.(Anyenda, 2003)

Donkey Library in Zimbabwe
In Zimbabwe, donkeys have provided extensions for libraries, which, as a result, have provided many multi-media services to remote communities throughout Zimbabwe. This has been a welcome project in Nkayi district, an area north-west of Zimbabwe. The donkey mobile units use electro-communication carts, which have solar units on the roof. As a result of these solar units, solar energy charges a battery, which provides the electric power. Many residents in this area re served by these donkey libraries and can now read (Prince Rupert Library, 2003).

As the rest of the world continues to seek more information technology development, the developing countries are also catching up. It may not be evenly distributed. Such alternatives are coming up in order to bridge the gap.

Currently there is the Open Access movement, which according to Peter Suber means "open-access (OA) literature is digital, online, free of charge, and free of most copyright and licensing restrictions. What makes it possible is the internet and the consent of the author or copyright-holder."

The movement is currently catching on in Africa as exemplified in the homegrown attempt by the African Journals Online (AJOL). The main intention of AJOL is to bridge the gap that academic institutions may face in accessing information etc

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The African Journals Online case

Some of the key points of are:

- ✓ Provision of access to African published research, and increase worldwide knowledge of indigenous scholarship, these therefore is a good contribution to indigenous African research in terms of greater visibility.
- ✓ AJOL although not a publisher, provides a service to the journals by hosting their content online, and actively promoting the website to encourage discovery of their titles and their articles.
- ✓ As a means of encouraging usability, all the material is free to view, search and browse, however copyright of all content is retained by the journals or authors – each journal will need to give permission for any use or re-use of the content that falls outside Fair Use. However on the plus side, which would be a full advantage in view of connectivity contracts. Users may be able to receive the full text documents can be ordered (in print or by email)
- ✓ Journals are not charged to participate in AJOL. Journals need to supply AJOL with the full text (either as a printed subscription, or access to the online full text journal).
- ✓ AJOL is actively promoted worldwide, to encourage use.

In the African context, Open Access is very important in the context of Africa, where issues of book availability is a key issue, especially in the training sector.

Training institutions such as MS-Training Centre for Development Cooperation have heavily invested in information technology in order to augment their efforts in providing materials to the participants. Participants attend short courses, and during this period they are required to research on various current topics to supplement their work. While in these institutions this is the only opportunity they have to get free access to materials via the internet without having to pay money in internet cafes. MS-TCDC provides free internet service to all the participants.

Due to the prohibitive price of books it is not possible to purchase all the available books on certain topics. Therefore Open Access on the internet would be a good option since the internet is able to provide updated materials on topics. For example, a book that is essential reading for students costs up to USD 100, not withstanding the postage costs. Very few organizations are able to afford that kind of money.

In MS-TCDC the courses are for development practitioners. Although the methodology is highly participatory, it is important that participants are able to seek more material on the internet to supplement what is in the resource centre.

For instance one of the courses that are designed to building the capacities of community based organizations and non-governmental organizations is the Resource Centre Management Course which provides participants on a "hands-on" introduction to managing resource centers. In this course an element of information on the web had to be introduced to enable organizations that are unable to afford books and related materials to at least have access to materials. Open Access would be a very good option for such organization.

In Africa, more participants are taking up open learning modules where participants do not attend classes, but are able to study at a long distance. The University of South Africa distance classes have given many African students an opportunity to study while they can still hold their jobs. Due to this opportunity, open learning is a good viable option for citizens of developing countries.

Furthermore, more traditional courses are also supplement by IT based session. For instance, e-learning is gaining ground in Kenya and Tanzania. Open Access will be able to close the gap for the people who are unable to purchase materials. In a recent article, in the Daily Nation (a Kenyan daily newspaper) it was indicated that a spot check in 30 cyber cafes in and around Nairobi, online courses were second to pornography sites as registered in search engines.

But it has also posed some challenges for Internet café owners. In the article, and example is given of a German Ph.D. candidate visiting Nairobi who was unable to download e-books from his home university library due to the lack of sufficient hard disk space, high connection speed and lack of the downloading software. Eventually he got a cyber café with the prerequisite programme, which saved him a lot of money that he could have bought a hard copy book and original CD.

Currently, MS-TCDC has launched flexible learning where the in-class sessions are supplemented with e-learning. The common complaint is the lack of internet connectivity, leave alone the fact that some of the organizations have few or no computers. Where the computers are available they are used for administrative tasks!

It is a good choice but as mentioned in Africa, the digital divide keeps billions of people, including millions of serious scholars, offline. The development organizations are more busy with the development agenda of water, food security but ICT infrastructure will be one of the few such as International Institute for Communication and Development in the

Netherlands that have IT and development projects in Tanzania, Zambia and Uganda among others.

Current statistics indicate that the estimated population is Africa, 915,210,928 and there are 23,649,000 Internet users. This is also due to lack of infrastructure, lack of necessary skills and literacy (Internet World statistics 2006).

In a survey done in South Africa in Johannesburg Internet cafes, it was the cost factor that made people of low-income groups unable to access the services (Hyde-Clarke, 2006). It was a survey made in an affluent area and another area of low income residents. Therefore, the willingness to access could be there but the "what's in the pocket" factor could influence.

For readers in Africa, language barriers are an issue Open Access enthusiasts should look into. Most online literature is in English, but many people for instance in Tanzania are not well versed in English. This is because of the widespread use in Kiswahili in school and in the country. In Tanzania there are 126 languages while in Kenya 42 tribes have their own different dialects. Would the web-based browsers provide journals in appropriate languages? For instance in Northern Tanzania, some of the Masaai people do not speak Swahili. Would this be suitable? A rather rhetorical question!

Due to positive trade arrangements, some people are able to purchase second hand computers, but the unreliable connections to telephone and electricity networks and expensive connections can be a deterrent. Downloading some of these materials can take an awfully long time, which is very expensive in an Internet café as mentioned before.

I think governments have to come up with realistic ICT policies first to assist their citizens so that Open Access can be a reality. Otherwise, as long as the governments do not prioritise this issue, it will remain a "merry-go-round" agenda: always appearing, but never getting solved.

Therefore, advocacy is needed for good libraries, money for infrastructure to enable ordinary citizens to enjoy the fruits of Open Access. This will enable Africans to bridge the distance.

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