

Chapter 44

Digitize or Perish: Strategies for Improving Access to Indigenous Intellectual Resources in Sub-Saharan Africa

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ABSTRACT

In today's knowledge and technology driven society, most scholarly information is increasingly being produced and distributed in digital formats. Yet, in Sub-Saharan Africa, academic libraries have been very slow at joining this digital movement, and hence stand the risk of losing their relevance, particularly with regard to locally generated intellectual material. To better serve the knowledge and information seeking needs of their patrons, librarians need to reinvent services. The challenges are discussed as well as prescriptions of workable strategies that librarians, information scientists, and other stakeholders can adopt to overcome these barriers. Such strategies mostly involve appropriately leveraging the existing Information and Communication Technology (ICT) tools and resources to make library resources more accessible. Consequently, digitizing indigenous intellectual resources may keep libraries from perishing and respond to user needs and information seeking habits in Sub-Saharan Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Decades after several African states had gained their political independence, many Sub-Saharan African academic and research libraries still depended on foreign (mostly European and American) partners and benefactors for access to most intellectual material (books and journals). With such privileges, and given the fact that these libraries operated within poor economies, they largely failed to develop the capacity to provide

the resident African user easy access to indigenous and locally generated intellectual material. Thus, even in today's technology driven society, it is fairly easier for information seekers within Africa to locate and access relevant and Africa-related material from foreign sources than from sources within Africa. Meanwhile knowledge generated within Africa, and which might better satisfy the needs of knowledge and information seekers, remain relatively inaccessible, as most of it does not make it into books and scholarly journals.

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To the higher education student and researcher, the culminating result of this conundrum is two-fold:

1. There is massive unintentional duplication of research with the attendant wastage of time and financial resources, and
2. Research findings and scholarly writings that can potentially benefit society go unnoticed as they are tucked away in archives with non-existent or poorly managed records.

It is therefore imperative that the African scholarly community begin to evolve common, structured, and cost-effective mechanisms for procuring, storing, organizing, delivering, and sharing indigenous scholarly content in ways that will make them readily accessible, particularly to Africa-based students and scholars. As academic librarians and information scientists are the professionals better equipped to provide leadership in this direction, it behooves them to explore every possible opportunity to do so, now that advances in computer and Internet technologies are offering limitless opportunities.

Indeed, many African institutions, universities, and colleges are already engaged in individual and collaborative activities aimed at facilitating the capture, development, preservation, and dissemination of local scholarly material in digital formats. Such initiatives include online (virtual) libraries, digital repositories, networked information resource centers, and so forth.

However, for these (and similar) initiatives to have the desired impact--which includes making indigenous African scholarly material readily accessible to information seekers in the sub-region--some crucial issues need to be taken into consideration as the Sub-Saharan African socio-cultural terrain has its own peculiarities.

It is against this backdrop that this chapter:

1. Highlights and provides insights into the current situation with regard to indigenous

academic resource availability and use in Sub-Saharan Africa.

2. Uses this as a context to evolve best-practice frameworks and strategies that librarians and information science professionals within the sub-continent can adopt to enable them to facilitate the accessibility and usability of digital academic resources in general, and indigenous scholarly output in particular.

THE SUB-SAHARAN AFRICAN INFORMATION RESOURCE AND DIGITAL LITERACY LANDSCAPE

Challenges of the Sub-Saharan African Academic Library

Academic libraries have the task of ensuring that scholars and researchers gain access to whatever material is relevant to their needs whenever they need it (Papin-Ramcharan & Dawe, 2012). Over the past few decades, however, university libraries in many Sub-Saharan African countries have declined in value to academics and students, as they are confronted with limited financial resources, inefficient management practices, and lukewarm attitudes of various governments and stakeholders (Kavulya, 2007; UNESCO, 1995). Additionally, since the establishment of most of these libraries was based on the western model, with little consideration for the needs of African users (Rosenberg, 1993), they have largely failed to re-invent themselves so they can be of better service to scholars, especially when it comes to locally produced intellectual material. Most scholars and researchers have therefore largely lost faith in these libraries as capable of satisfying their intellectual needs, especially with regard to indigenous knowledge (Echezona & Ugwuanyi, 2010), and hence are in a continual and quiet struggle for knowledge and information (Sturges & Neill, 1990). Thus, in Ghana for instance, scholars mostly turn to specialized research libraries such as

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