Manufacturing and consuming knowledge
African libraries and publishing

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The article examines the problems facing African scholars and publishers, in the context of rapid developments in information technology and a deepening economic gulf between industrialised and Third World countries. Many of these problems, and conventional responses to them from libraries, publishers, and donors, are themselves a legacy of colonial relations, the most significant of which is the deepening dependence on Western forms of knowledge and systems to validate all forms of intellectual activity. Questioning the terms ‘information-rich’ and ‘information-poor’, the author stresses the need for Africans to develop the means to generate, value, and disseminate their own forms of knowledge.

Global village or feudal estate?
We live in the information age, so we are always told, in which information is apparently as vital as agriculture and industry once were. It is an age of infinite possibilities in education and scholarship, teaching and research, economic growth and political freedom; a brave new world blessed with the open intimacies of the village, where the boundaries of national isolation and intellectual provincialism are withering away, as knowledge explodes in its relentless march towards human enlightenment. Extravagant claims, no doubt. Knowledge, as creed and commodity, as a proprietary privilege, reflects and reproduces the spatial and social divisions of power, old and new, material and ideological, between and within societies. The ‘information highway’ is a dangerous place for those on foot or riding rickety bicycles. It is designed for, and dominated by, those travelling courtesy of powerful and prestigious publishing systems and academic enterprises of the industrialised North, who churn out the bulk of the world’s books, journals, databases, computers and software and other information technologies, and dictate laws on international copyright and intellectual property to the information-poor world. A harmonious global village it is not. A feudal estate, hierarchical and unequal, it may be.

What is Africa’s position on this feudal estate? Where does it fit in the international political economy of knowledge production, dissemination, and consumption? To answer these questions we need to assess the development and state of the continent’s basic infrastructures for creating and distributing knowledge: namely, the availability of publishing houses, technical expertise, printing facilities, electronic technologies, libraries, and capable writers. It is not enough, however, to bemoan the regional and social disparities in access to information, or to chronicle the unequal patterns of information acquisition, outreach, and infrastructure. We need to unravel the content, the value, of the information. What social good has it generated? To what extent has the explosion of information led to more enlightened human relations within and among nations? Is the ‘information highway’ all speed, noise, and fury leading nowhere, and leaving behind only data-glut and confusion? In short, we must interrogate the ethics of information, the social and political morality of
knowledge creation, consumption and content, and assess its record in bettering the human condition, not just materially, but in ennobling social relations, in uplifting the human spirit.

These are the issues discussed in this article. The first part offers an overview of the challenges facing African academic and research libraries, crucial centres for the consumption and production of knowledge; and examines the band-aid solutions that have been tried, only to reinforce the continent’s external dependency. The second part argues that the plight of African research libraries as a crisis of scholarly communication cannot be adequately tackled without developing and improving local academic publishing and information-production capacities, to ensure the dissemination of knowledge that better reflects African realities. But we must avoid the pitfalls of either romanticising indigenous knowledge or turning library holdings into a fetish — for neither guarantees accessibility or enlightenment. Thus the challenges of producing and disseminating knowledge and information ultimately centre on questions of cultural democratisation and social responsibility. And these are not peculiarly African problems. They are universal.

The struggle for the bookshelves

African libraries carry a heavy colonial imprint, even in those regions with long traditions of literacy and libraries, such as Northern Africa, Ethiopia, and parts of Western and Eastern Africa, partly because virtually the whole continent (including Ethiopia between 1935 and 1941) was under colonial rule. After independence — a period that witnessed the fastest expansion of libraries in the continent’s history — colonial traditions were reinforced by a scramble for modernisation that assumed a concomitant need for Westernisation. African libraries heedlessly borrowed their architecture, collections, bibliographic and classification systems, training and staffing structures from the North, without adequately tethering them to the stubborn local realities of poverty and illiteracy, on the one hand, and the rich media of oral culture and the voracious appetite for education, on the other.

Research and academic libraries were the least domesticated, much like the universities themselves, whose institutional lineages and intellectual loyalties lay overseas. All was well in the heady years immediately following independence, when healthy commodity prices and booming economies kept modernisation hopes alive. The tentacles of information-dependency grew tighter and thicker, despite the inchoate nationalist yearning for cultural decolonisation. Then from the mid-1970s many African countries fell into a spiral of recurrent recessions, which wreaked havoc on development ambitions, and left a trail of economic decline, social dislocation, and political disaffection — problems that were exacerbated by the disastrous programmes of structural maladjustment. The bookshelves grew empty. ‘Book hunger’ joined the litany of Africa’s other famines of development, democracy, and self-determination.

The impact of structural adjustment

The prevailing library and information system was in a crisis of self-reproduction and relevance. This is amply borne out by the 1993 survey of 31 university and research libraries in 13 African countries conducted by the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS). All but three of the libraries reported a sharp drop in their subscriptions to journals from the mid-1980s. Among the worst-hit were the libraries of Addis Ababa University and the University of Nigeria and the University of Yaoundé Medical Library, which in the late 1980s and early 1990s cancelled subscriptions to some 1,200, 824, and 107 journals respectively, owing to shortage of foreign exchange (Levey, 1993: 2-3). Currency devaluation, one of the linchpins of structural adjustment programmes, also took its toll on the buying power of libraries. As the Librarian of Abubakar Tafawa University said in 1993: ‘at the current rate of 25 naira to the dollar, I should have about $229,000 for books. Ten years ago, I would have been swimming in dollars — for at $1.50 to N1, the same naira would have equalled over $8 million’ (ibid., 9). Compounding matters were unpredictable currency fluctuations which imposed further and unanticipated expenditures.
It was a fatal concoction, this combination of currency devaluations and fluctuations, together with the escalating cost in the price of journals and books. Today, it is common to find journals with annual subscriptions costing $1,000, especially in the sciences. One study estimates that serial costs in North America, from where African research libraries import many materials, increased 115 per cent between 1986 and 1994, and monograph costs rose by 55 per cent. As a result, serial acquisitions among members of the US-based Association of Research Libraries dropped by four per cent and monographs by 22 per cent (Birenbaum, 1995). If research libraries in the North were feeling the chill, those in Africa caught pneumonia. The case of the University of Ibadan Library is all too typical. Its subscriptions plummeted from over 6,000 serials in 1983 to less than a tenth of that a decade later (Levey, 1993:3).

The three fortunate libraries that reported increases in the number of subscriptions — the University of Nairobi Medical Library, the National Mathematical Centre of Nigeria, and Abubakar Tafawa Balewa University — subscribed to no more than 200 journals each. Indeed, only seven libraries in the AAAS survey subscribed to more than 200 journals with internal funding. Of these, only three, led by the University of Zimbabwe Library with 1,578 journals paid through the library’s budget, could boast more than 500 subscriptions. But even the latter saw its foreign-currency allocation decline from 65 per cent of the funds requested in 1989 to less than 40 per cent in 1991 (Levey, 1993:4-5).

Aggravating the dire financial conditions in which the libraries found themselves were the ill-advised government taxes on imports of books and journals. Bureaucratic red tape often makes matters worse: getting imported books out of customs can often take weeks, even months. The universities themselves are also to blame. Their expenditure patterns are usually skewed in favour of salaries and privileges for the administrative elite, with their fleets of official cars, heavily subsidised housing, and numerous allowances: self-indulgent practices reminiscent of the corrupt political class. And so the universities seek to reproduce themselves, not as intellectual ivory towers, nor as locomotives of progress, but as the inert apparatus of the State, a mission that leaves little room for serious commitment to scholarly communication and critical pedagogy.

The dubious benefits of library aid

One response been growing reliance on donations of books and journals from charitable organisations and foreign governments and their agencies. The AAAS survey found that only five of the libraries subscribing to journals in 1993 did so exclusively with internal funding. The rest depended to varying degrees on donor support. Five were dependent for as much as 100 per cent, and another five for 80 per cent and more. Four had neither donor support nor their own funding. ‘Thus without external funding,’ the AAAS report states, ‘many libraries would have few current journals on their shelves. But donor support’, it notes correctly, ‘raises its own set of dilemmas, which revolve around the dreaded term “sustainability”’ (Levey, 1993:19). The donors do not underwrite projects indefinitely, which makes it difficult to pursue a rational programme of journal acquisitions. For example, the University of Makerere Library reduced its number of subscriptions from 700 to 200 serials when grants from the Overseas Development Agency (ODA) and the European Community expired in 1991.

Another problem is that library aid, like all aid, has strings attached. ‘Book presentations’, Clow (1986:87) writes, ‘are usually restricted to items published in the donor country ... training usually involves donor-country citizens as teachers; if a scholarship is awarded, the scholar usually travels to and spends most of the money in the donor country.’ African libraries rarely choose the journals and books that they receive from the donors. Predictable, also, is the fact that most of the journals donated are North American and European, not African. In short, book aid tends to reinforce Africa’s dependency on Western values, languages, discourses, and institutions. Reluctant to bite the hand that feeds them, many librarians keep quiet, even when the donations are irrelevant and inappropriate. In the process, the culture of silence and submission to imperialism, which is
partly responsible for the African crisis in the first place, deepens. And so they meekly receive, and fill their shelves with, or quietly dispose of, propaganda materials from embassies, the discarded miscellanea of Western libraries, grimy, out-of-date texts, and publishers' remainders. By filling the bare shelves of African libraries, well-meaning, but sometimes misguided, philanthropists can display their altruism; and hard-nosed publishers can dispose of their unsold tomes, and thus save themselves warehouse charges and earn welcome tax relief.

From the 1970s, donors and international agencies, especially UNESCO, produced a series of training and information-development programmes. But most of these, Sturges and Neill (1990:97) contend, 'failed to produce results commensurate with the attention that the information professions have paid to them'. They attribute the failure of UNESCO's national programmes of library and information development to erroneous assumptions, inadequate planning, and poor design, problems often exacerbated by the lack of State support, sparse infrastructures, and excessive duplication and rivalry among the donor agencies themselves. Similar challenges have hampered efforts by Africa-based organisations to develop regional information systems. The most well-known is the Pan African Documentation and Information System (PADIS), begun in 1980 and administered by the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA). Its broad aims are to help African countries to strengthen their own internal information systems, and to set up a decentralised information network for the continent. While PADIS has made considerable progress, and publishes useful bibliographic indexes, especially concerning development, it certainly achieved far less in its first ten years than the investment of $160 million warranted, partly due to misguided emphasis on expensive information technologies for countries with poor telecommunications infrastructures.

The role of information technology

This is not to suggest that the latest information technologies should not be acquired, for not to do so would be to reinforce Africa's marginalisation. It is simply to point out that basic infrastructural development is essential, and that in themselves the advanced technologies offer no magic solution to the challenges of information dissemination and scholarly communication facing Africa. Many African research libraries, usually with donor support, are investing heavily in computer and CD-ROM capability, and electronic networking (AAS and AAAS, 1992).

To its champions, the CD-ROM is a wonder-technology that is universally appropriate: not only can it hold huge amounts of data, it is durable, cheap to mail, requires no special handling, storage space, or telecommunication facilities, and can withstand climatic extremes, power cuts, and the ravages of insects and fungi. The potentialities of advanced technologies for liberation and repression are in serious dispute (Kagan, 1992; Buschman, 1992). Lancaster (1978) urged developing countries to seize on the new technologies and leapfrog to electronic libraries, by-passing the book. His critics have argued that electronic information service in Africa benefits only a small, already privileged elite. African librarians, they assert, ought to be concentrating on helping the illiterate majority to learn to read and write (Mchombu, 1982; Olden, 1987; IFLA, 1995). Others argue for an integrated approach that combines improved information delivery to both the poor and the elites (Tiamiyu, 1989; Sturges and Neill, 1990).

The 1993 AAAS report found that all but five of the 31 libraries surveyed had computers, about half of them purchased locally, and most of them acquired through donor support. Nineteen libraries had CD-ROM capability, and two were expecting to acquire it by the end of 1993. African librarians have been keen to acquire CD-ROM technology 'for fear of being left behind', in the words of John Newa (1993:82), the Director of Library Services at the University of Dar es Salaam. At a 1993 workshop in Harare on new technologies for librarians from 17 libraries in 11 countries in eastern and southern Africa (including South Africa), 16 of whom were equipped with CD-ROMs, there was universal agreement on the importance of this technology, despite some of its perceived shortcomings. With a few exceptions, many of the libraries reported
extensive use of the CD-ROM facilities. The University of Zambia Medical Library was even forced to ration time to 30 minutes per person. Most of the libraries in the AAAS report subscribed to databases in agriculture and medicine, mainly because of the interest of donors, who largely pay for the subscriptions in these fields. The notable exception was the library of Cheikh Anta Diop, which had a significant number of CD-ROM databases in the social sciences (Levey, 1993: 13-16).

Computers and CD-ROM technologies have breathed new life into Africa’s ailing research library systems, although they pose their own problems, and reinforce some old ones. Lack of relevant technical expertise locally and among librarians often leads to poor choice of product, and installation and maintenance difficulties. One study reports, for example, that ‘the librarian of the University of Ghana Medical School had no one in Ghana to whom to turn when he had trouble installing his CD-ROM drive, for his is the first library with CD-ROM in the country. Ultimately he called New York to receive instructions over the phone’ (Levey, 1991:12). But long-distance advice can be costly and inappropriate, as the librarian of the University of Zimbabwe Medical School discovered after buying a non-compatible CD drive ‘on the basis of advice from our New York software vendors’ (Levey, 1991:12).

These technologies of course do not come cheap, so the question of funding remains. Besides the one-off equipment costs, which rise each time local currencies are devalued, there is the high recurrent cost of subscription to databases. Training costs can also be high and recurrent, especially since the technology is growing and changing rapidly. It is essential to budget for CD-ROM subscriptions for the long run, because subscribers are usually allowed to use the databases only for the duration of the subscription and may be requested to return the disks should their subscriptions run out — unlike journals, which a library keeps when its subscription lapses (Levey, 1992). Not surprisingly, there is reportedly a handful of libraries with CD-ROMs who do not use them because they have no funds to purchase subscriptions. Of the 16 libraries with CD-ROMs surveyed by the AAAS in 1991, only four indicated they had funding for subscriptions in the future. Nor do literature searches guarantee the users access to the documents identified. Given the inadequacy of many African research libraries’ serials collections, bibliographic databases that do not contain abstracts are virtually useless (Patrikios, 1992: 30-7). Few donors include document delivery as an integral part of their grants for database subscriptions, and supplying photocopies from Europe and North America, as is sometimes done, is costly and cumbersome. The document-delivery barriers may ease as full-text literature is routinely published on disk as well as in print form.

The struggle for knowledge

African librarians are fully aware of these problems, and many realise the importance of national and regional cooperation, although declared intentions tend to predominate over concrete action. But even if the question of access to citations and documents were resolved, Africa’s knowledge base would not necessarily improve, for these databases — like the bulk of the journals and books imported into most of the continent’s libraries — primarily contain Northern scholarship. Production costs for CD-ROM databases are still prohibitive for any aspiring African publisher, although efforts are being made to create local databases. Besides, the publisher would have to develop extensive scholarly, marketing, and support networks. Northern database publishers are still largely unwilling or unable to incorporate bibliographic records from the South. By the mid-1980s there were an estimated 700 databases of direct concern to Africa located outside the continent; the figure has most probably risen with the explosion in electronic communications since then (Seeley, 1986). Not only are these databases difficult to access within Africa itself, but their input of African research and publications is abysmal. For example, fewer than one per cent of more than 36,000 items on Africa contained in the FRANCIS data file (with one million items altogether), produced by the French Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique as of...
March 1986, were published in Africa (Sturges and Neill, 1990: 64-5). In the case of even the best of these databases, FAO’s Agricultural Information system (AGRIS), only 25 per cent of the content derives from the developing countries.

The need to reclaim African studies

The marginality of African knowledge is evident even in scholarly communication networks that call themselves Africanist. Overseen by gatekeepers located in well-endowed universities, the Africanist intellectual system, which is firmly rooted in a Western epistemological order and an academic culture driven by a ruthless ethos of ‘publish or perish’, and consisting of multinational publishing houses, university presses, journals, peer-review networks, citation and bibliographic conventions, has little room for the alien views, voices, and visions emanating from Africa itself. On this scholarly treadmill, Africa appears nothing more than a research object to verify faddish theories that emerge with predictable regularity in the channel-surfing intellectualism of Northern academies. Research on five leading Africanist social science and humanities journals published in Britain, Canada, and the USA showed that between 1982 and 1992 only 15 per cent of their articles and 10 per cent of their book reviews were by Africans based in Africa. African authors based in the West accounted for a further 9 per cent of the articles and 5 per cent of the reviews (Zeleza, forthcoming).

Detailed analysis of the contents of Africanist publications would be revealing. To what extent do their themes and topics engage the realities and priorities of the communities studied and the genuine research interest of the scholars from those communities, as opposed to research orientations dictated by the consultancy syndrome or by careerist calculations in situations where publishing in Western scholarly media carries more weight than publishing within Africa? There is some evidence to suggest that the agendas of African and Africanist research communities have grown more divergent over the years — a trend which is attributable to the changing conditions for African studies in the North and the scholarly enterprise in Africa. On the one hand, Africanist scholars spend less time than they used to in Africa, whether doing research or teaching, partly because of funding difficulties, reduced salaries in African universities, and fewer teaching opportunities resulting from the successful Africanisation of faculties. On the other hand, the proportion of African scholars studying for higher degrees in the North, especially in the social sciences and humanities, has also fallen, because of declining need, financial resources, and attractiveness of academic careers, and growing immigration restrictions. Contacts are especially poor for what Mkandawire (1995) calls the ‘third generation’ of African scholars, a point echoed by Guyer (1995) with reference to the younger crop of aspiring North American Africanists.

Mkandawire, CODESRIA’s executive secretary and a keen observer of the two scholarly communities, has noted, for example (1995:4), that in the 1980s, while many Africanists were fashionably bemoaning or applauding the ‘exit’ of peasants and other exploited social classes from arenas dominated by the authoritarian post-colonial State, ‘African social scientists moved in a different direction, casting attention more towards the study of social movements and democracy’. Currently, post-modernism is casting its spell on many in the Africanist fraternity, and some are anxiously covering their mouldy African data with its ephemeral fragrance, forgetting proclamations they made in the 1960s that Africa was modernising, in the 1970s that it was under-developing, and later that modes of production were being articulated. Sleeping its way through the lost 1980s, Africa somehow woke up in the 1990s to find itself in a post-modernist universe — or it should have, we are told (Parpart, 1995). To many African scholars on the continent, such arcane preoccupations seem the nadir of intellectual solipsism and decadence. According to Aina (1995:2), the crisis of African Studies in North America and Europe is creating a process of intellectual reproduction about Africa that is characterized by sterility, outdated facts and information, casual and ad hoc observation, name-calling and sometimes wild speculation. It is our argument here that for an up to date,
realistic, correct and appropriate ... understanding of Africa, the most appropriate and relevant source is that scholarship and production emanating from or still directly linked to the continent in terms of research experience and reflection; from this living and challenging source and expression, no amount of post-modernist, post-industrialist, post-Marxist or ‘post-Nativist’ conceptualization or discourse can take away the relevance, immediacy and centrality.

The inescapable conclusion is that importing knowledge from abroad is no panacea. And for Africa to depend on external sources for knowledge about itself is a cultural and an economic travesty of monumental proportions. To use a phrase from the under-development paradigm, African libraries may grow from buying or receiving donations of tons of journals and books, and they may acquire the latest information technologies and the largest databases; but without actually developing, without expanding and strengthening the continent’s capacities for authentic and sustainable knowledge-creation, information-generation, and data-collection. More often than not, knowledge produced about Africa from elsewhere is distorted or irrelevant, and importing databases or receiving donations serves to strengthen the ties of intellectual dependency. Sturges and Neill (1990:79) irreverently suggest that ‘many of the donations that do arrive would be far better if they were pulped. This might at least provide some new paper, a basic resource which Africa needs more urgently than other countries’ cast-off books’.

The real challenge, then, is not simply to fill empty library shelves and acquire gadgets for faster information-retrieval, but to produce the knowledge in the first place; for Africa to study, read, and know itself, to define itself to itself and to the rest of the world, and to see that world through its own eyes and not the warped lenses of others. There is no substitute for a vigorous intellectual system, of which publishing is an integral part. As I have noted elsewhere (Zeleza, 1994:238):

Only by developing and sustaining our own publishing outlets can there emerge truly African intellectual traditions and communities capable of directing and controlling the study of Africa, of defining African problems and solutions, realities and aspirations, of assessing our achievements and failures, our pasts and futures, and of seeing ourselves in our own image, not through the distortions and fantasies of others. Publishing is critical not only for the cultural identities of nations, peoples, classes, and groups. It provides the material basis for producing, codifying, circulating and consuming ideas, which, in turn, shape the organisation of productive activities and relations in society.

African publishing: constraints and opportunities

The challenges of publishing in Africa and other Third World regions are well known. They include poor infrastructure (in particular shortages of skilled editors, designers, distribution experts, and readily available and cheap supplies of printing equipment and paper), as well as low literacy rates, language problems, and meagre incomes and purchasing power — problems which have been exacerbated by the recurrent recessions. Promotion and marketing, at home and abroad, remains a critical hurdle for many African publishers (Zell, 1995: 16-18). For instance, Nyariki and Makotsi (1995:11) found that the promotional and marketing activities undertaken by many Kenyan publishers are ineffective and unprofessional, because they lack trained staff. Moreover, widespread government intolerance and censorship in many countries only make matters worse. Nor does the existence of relatively small and fragile academic communities help, especially for scholarly publishing. And poorly capitalised indigenous publishers must often compete with large multinational publishing companies, and heavily subsidised State-owned publishing houses.

These constraints are real and serious, but they are not insurmountable. Literacy rates have risen remarkably in many countries, and ‘the much publicised myth that the African mind is orally-oriented and therefore Africans do not read’ is becoming more threadbare as evidence mounts that a lot of people actually read for pleasure:
Nyariki and Makotsi (1995:11) demonstrate that ‘a majority 39% of consumers buy books because of a love of reading’. They also show that the number of indigenous publishers in Kenya doubled to 72 between 1974 and 1994 and that local publishers were producing 60 per cent of the books on the local market. These trends are confirmed by Hans Zell (1993:373), a seasoned observer of the African publishing scene, who states that ‘despite the overall gloomy picture ... new indigenous imprints continue to mushroom all over Africa, and some privately owned firms have shown a great deal of imaginative entrepreneurial skill in the midst of adversity’. And the formation of the African Books Collective (ABC) by African publishers in 1989 to undertake the joint promotion and distribution of African books outside the continent, and of the African Publishers’ Network (APNET) in 1992 to encourage intra-African publishing and trade in books, underscores the determination of African publishers to forge ahead.

Libraries must do their part. They constitute the backbone of scholarly publishing. In many parts of the world, including the industrialised countries, libraries provide the major market for scholarly products. In fact, in the USA, despite relatively high academic salaries and a large professorate, it is library purchases, not subscriptions by individuals, that sustain journals. Often libraries generate up to 90 per cent or more of the income of journals, especially in the medical and scientific areas. Having fed for so long on Western imports and donations of information materials and technologies, African libraries have not always ventured with enough appetite to acquire local publications. For their part, publishers bred on the captive school-textbook market are not always aggressive enough in promoting their wares. At the Harare workshop mentioned above, publishers and librarians took each other to task (Patrikios and Levey, 1993:3):

> Several publishers stated that few African imprints can be found in African libraries because librarians are reluctant to order materials, preferring instead to purchase books from England or the United States. Nana Tau (librarian of Fort Hare University) countered by telling of her experience in attempting to obtain information on African imprints in order to place an order for her library. The lack of response from the African publishers whom she wrote requesting catalogues forced her to place orders overseas.

On another occasion the Librarian at the University of Makerere pointed out that ‘most of the African journals are possibly not known by teaching staff who recommend titles to be subscribed by the library’ (quoted in Levey, 1993:11). Unfortunately, he may have been correct. It is a sad fact that in many African universities the processes of hiring and promoting staff and allocating research grants are firmly tied to the legitimation structures of Western scholarship. Familiarity with Western intellectual fads, and publication in the restricted Western scholarly media, bestow upon the lucky few precious reputational capital that can be traded for lucrative consultancies and overseas visiting professorships and conferences. Local journals become publication outlets of last resort, repositories of second-rate scholarship.

This must change. African intellectuals need to shed their inferiority complexes about their own work by publishing, without apologies, in journals they control; by reading and citing each other; by demonstrating a greater faith in their own understanding of their complex and fast-changing societies — for no one else will do that for them. They cannot continue being unwelcome guests at other people’s intellectual tables. Through their reward structures, facilities, and ethos, universities should provide the major sources for intellectual production and markets for scholarly products. Where the scholarly communities are small, cooperative ventures in regional journal publication should be encouraged. The mission, always, must be to promote the highest standards of research and scholarly exchange, to repossess the study of Africa, to define African realities, to understand and appreciate the African world with all the intensity, intelligence, and integrity it deserves.
Conclusion

The manufacturing and distribution of scholarly knowledge and information is a major commercial and technological enterprise involving publishers, libraries, educational institutions, and communications companies, linked in elaborate networks requiring vast resources. While the news that we have entered a post-material age in which words matter more than goods is exaggerated, the importance of information technologies in the development process cannot be denied. But what kind of information, produced by and for whom?

One of the factors behind the information explosion in the Western countries, especially in North America, is the pressure to publish, the centrality of publications and citations in the academic enterprise. Publications have become screening mechanisms for hiring, promotion, tenure, and granting procedures. The system rewards those who generate large amounts of scholarly literature, however insignificant its intellectual contribution. Indeed, piles of paper are churned out to be listed and indexed rather than read. And so scholarly information doubles in volume every seven years. A decade and a half ago it was doubling every 15 years (Birenbaum, 1995). Information becomes an absolute good, an end itself, an intolerant, insatiable god that constantly spews data, ‘hyperfacts’ that require more powerful databases to keep track of the existing databases (Roszak, 1993:4). In the process, knowledge becomes incidental, a forgotten atavism. As the information glut grows, there is ever more pressure for excessive specialisation. Meanwhile, as the high priests of the Information Age pray at the altar of citations and chant ‘jargons of an almost unimaginable rebarbativeness ... society as a whole drifts without direction or coherence. Racism, poverty, ecological ravages, disease, and an appallingly widespread ignorance: these are left to the media and the odd political candidate during an election campaign’ (Said, 1993:303).

Thus beneath the apparent munificence of the Western academy, behind the spiralling mountains of information, lies a profound shift away from human connectedness, from meaningful social conversation; there is a yawning alienation from the gravity of human existence, from history. An almost infantile fascination with the innate and quantifiable, not the poetry of life, of words, seems to have taken over. The availability of more information is not in itself a guarantee of a better society. As Olden (1987:301) reminds us:

the availability of information does not mean that use can be or will be made of it; that those who do use it are capable or willing to learn from it; or that what they learn will be used for the benefit of others. Taken together, United States libraries house what is probably the most comprehensive collection of recorded information and knowledge about other countries held by any nation in the world. Has the increase in the size of this collection since World War II been paralleled by an increase in the number of better foreign-policy decisions made by various administrations over the same period?

And one could add: are North Americans much better informed about the rest of the world? Indeed, has more information helped them significantly to transcend their own racial, ethnic, class, and gender divisions? Will access to the Internet in every home and to a 500 TV-channel universe do it? Or will that simply lead to more fragmentation, to further descent into the abyss of cultural banality so evident in North American popular television today?

What, in short, do the terms ‘information-rich’ and ‘information-poor’, which are so carelessly bandied about, actually mean in terms of the content of human relationships, the quality of social life, as embodied in the information being manufactured and consumed? To be sure, Africa needs to produce more information; its academic institutions need to reorganise themselves to encourage and reward scholarly production and productivity; and its libraries need to collect and make this information more accessible within and outside the continent. But the processes of production, acquisition, retrieval, and outreach cannot be ends in themselves, if the dangers of information over-production and overload, currently engulfing the Western world, are to be
avoided. Africa must indeed repossess the word. But whose word, and to what ultimate purpose? It must be to elevate, not debase, our humanity.

Notes

1 This is a revised version of a paper originally presented at the International Book Fair and Library Conference, Göteborg, Sweden, 26-29 October 1995. My thanks to Al Kagan (Africana Librarian, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign), Dr John Newa (Librarian at the University of Dar es Salaam), and Karin von Schlesbriigge of the Swedish International Development Agency for their comments, and to Tunde Brimah for research assistance.

2 The wider questions of the creation of knowledge and the provision of information for the popular classes in the urban or rural areas are not addressed here. For a detailed study of the provision of information to rural African communities, see IFLA (1995).

3 An interesting example is that of Côte d’Ivoire, where the Telecommunications and Postal Ministry was privatised. The AAAS stopped sending free journals to the university library, because the latter could not afford to pay the ministry the levies charged on the journals! (Levey, 1993:9).

4 Many of those concerned about book dumping in the Third World have suggested that donations schemes should be request-led. See Abid (1992).

5 A remarkable exception is the programme initiated by the International African Institute, which in the early 1990s launched a project to distribute 12 African serials, which were selected after consultations with African publishers and research libraries.

6 Only in South Africa do the efforts to integrate library systems and resources seem serious, for instance the Western Cape Cooperative Project and the Committee on Library Cooperation in Natal.

7 The Zimbabwe and Zambia Medical libraries, for example, in collaboration with other countries in Africa, are producing an African Index Medicus, while the Bunda College of Agriculture in Malawi has created a bibliographic database of Malawi’s maize research.

8 The multinational publishing companies can be quite opportunistic. For example, they all closed their businesses in Tanzania during the 1980s financial crisis and ‘returned in the 1990s when they heard that there would be an allocation of US$60 million from the World Bank for educational suppliers’! (Mcharazo 1995:245)

9 For a discussion of these organisations and their activities, see Zeleza 1994; and the 1993-95 issues of the Bellagio Publishing Network Newsletter, published on behalf of the donors which support African publishing; APNET’s organ, African Publishing Review; and The African Book Publishing Review.

References


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