

African research journals: Challenges and opportunitiesTenywa, J.S.¹¹African Crop Science Journal, College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences,
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Abstract

The need for scholarly journals as a means of dissemination of outputs from African research efforts, particularly the problems and innovations unique to African and related conditions, is overwhelming; yet the operational environment is quite increasingly disenabling. A range of factors can be blamed for the prevailing scenario, but the existence of springboard opportunities, spearheaded by the research and publication enthusiasm among experts on the continent, provide a major entry-point for any agency that would wish to intervene. This abstract presents the status of journal publishing in Africa, with a thrust on the major challenges and opportunities available for bolstering this pertinent research component. Emphasis is directed towards utilisation of the trendy Open Access Journal (OAJ) systems to lower operational costs, increase author and journal visibility and achieve timely publishing, which are some of the key criteria used by authors to choose journals to which to submit their manuscripts.

Key words: Open Access Journals, Scholarly journals

Résumé

La nécessité pour les revues savantes comme moyen de diffusion des résultats de travaux de recherche africaines, en particulier les problèmes et les innovations uniques aux conditions africaines et connexes, est écrasante; encore l'environnement opérationnel est de plus en plus exigeant. Une gamme de facteurs peut être blâmée pour le scénario qui prévaut, mais l'existence d'opportunités qui servent de tremplin, menées par d'enthousiasmes recherches et publication parmi les experts sur le continent, fournissent un point d'entrée important pour tout organisme qui voudrait intervenir. Ce résumé présente l'état de l'édition des revues en Afrique, avec une poussée sur les principaux défis et opportunités disponibles pour renforcer cette composante pertinente de la recherche. L'accent est dirigée vers l'utilisation des systèmes de « Open Access Journal (OAJ) » à la mode pour réduire les coûts opérationnels, augmenter la visibilité de l'auteur et de la revue et faire la publication à, qui sont parmi les principaux critères utilisés par les auteurs de choisir les revues auxquelles ils doivent soumettre leurs manuscrits.

Mots clés: Journaux d'accès Ouvert, revues savantes

Introduction

Creation and promotion of research journals in Africa have been part and parcel of the researchers' dreams of achievement. Various reasons are advanced regarding the need for multiple existence of research based journals on the continent, some of which include making money and becoming rich quickly, perceived biased rejection of manuscripts from developing countries by western journals, difference in focus of work done in Africa, from that of developed countries, less discovery types of research from Africa, high impact factor considerations, high publication fees in international journals, etc. Whatever the reason may be, existence of journal outlets in Africa is well justified to capture issues that may be unique news to Africa or environments shared with communities elsewhere. This abstract is intended to present some of the challenges and success cases related to the performance of journals based in Africa, as well as provide a way forward to bolster the progress and prosperity of the journal sub-sector.

Sustainability of journals

By far, this is the biggest challenge to journal existence and prosperity in Africa. Journals tend to die as soon as they are launched, hence the syndrome increasingly known as "The first volume and first Issue" that characterises many journals on the continent. Perhaps to say that journals "die" is to overstate the situation! It might be more appropriate to say that they "Go to deep sleep" and occasionally receive shock waves that wake them up, for instance when funds become next available; or when manuscripts from some esteemed folks are available for immediate. This is typical of government institution based journals which are largely driven by fiscal budgets, that are increasingly slashed as the priority ranking labels them less pertinent, or as administration leadership changes along with focus of priority interests. Institutional journal decisions are mainly riddled with political biases and are catalysed sometimes by "orders from above" with conditions difficult to arm-twist by editors appointed by the administrators themselves. Moreover, editorial capacity invariably grows with cumulative years of service on the job, yet institutional transfers of staff are part of the routine. Hence, editorial capacity building becomes adhoc and non-effective.

Challenges to journals in Africa

Lack of experienced editors. Journal management requires editors with great experience and a high level of transparency and integrity. Unfortunately, the required human capacity to manage journals is by and large a fundamental problem on the continent. Journal editorial capacity is almost exclusively acquired intuitively by persons endurance to read, understand the messages in almost all manuscripts submitted, and retain a trail of good quality practices. Equally important is that the editor does careful identification of actively publishing technical experts in relevant disciplines and establishes a rare rapport with them to serve as voluntary reviewers of manuscripts. This is indeed a painstaking task that demands a certain degree of disengagement from various tempting activities some of which are of income generating nature. Moreover, income generation has become a priority next to none among communities in African, researchers inclusive, to the extent that activities such voluntary reviews have

suffered the most. To a large extent, lack of serving as editors can be blamed for the high death rate of journals in Africa, since one day, the editor will be forced by nature or otherwise, to quit the job.

Given the circumstance, creation of platforms for journal editors' routine meetings in the form of the topical Innovation Platforms (IP) as is done in other spheres of life, may be one way forward to editorial capacity generation and sustenance. The IP dialogues will permit editors share knowledge and best practices leading to synergized operations and utilization of limited resources effectively and efficiently. Take the example of the African Journals Partnership Project which was designed to support Journals of medicine and health to partner with leading journals in the US and UK. The outcome of this project has been resounding as reported at <http://www.ajpp-online.org/>

Rising costs of publishing. A major constraint to journal production in Africa is the escalating costs of journal production; moreover, publishing journals is not a lucrative money-making business. This has dragged some journals to remain constantly behind their calendars even up to two years. One major revolutionary intervention is enrolment of the journal on the open journal access (OPJ) systems (Bo-Christer Björk and David Solomon, 2012). Unfortunately, a lot of apathy still prevails among researchers and some policy makers in Africa, about publication on OPJs regarding "quality and other ethical considerations". This is very unfortunate because the irreversible drive is towards increasing author and journal visibility, and timely publication with minimum or no drudgery caused by printers and associated non-editor caused errors. Besides, our experience with African Crop Science Journal (ACSJ) is that the cost of publishing is reduced to less than 30% of the original all-inclusive traditional publication costs. It was quite a challenge for ACSJ too to cross the bridge early in the 2000s, but the magical trigger was the quick realization that "No body misses you unless they know about you". One of the spillover effects is that the ACSJ's secretariat presents receive 2-5 manuscripts daily from different parts of the globe. The downside of it is the challenge with engaging swift and effective reviewers.

Of course, another perceived major disadvantage often cited with OAJs is that of forfeiting subscription fees. Again our experience shows that the is a non-starter reason because the amount collected through subscription may not finance production and distribution of even one issue of the journal. Hence, shifting to charging the authors a non-prohibitive fee to facilitate publication of their papers could be the more viable option, which is working well for ACSJ. As a result of membership to the OAJs, ACSJ is benefiting from publicity by international service providers like BIOLINE International (www.bioline.org.br/cs) (Tables 1 and 2) and African Journals on Line (www.ajol.infor), to whom ACSJ is indebted for the great services.

Peer review. This is yet the other striking constraint to journal publishing in Africa. The continent is by no doubt rich in highly trained and publication experienced researchers from the best institutions in the world. Unfortunately, time for reviewing manuscripts is increasingly a scarce commodity, to the extent that the editor will have to endure for up to on average 6 months to receive a report or never at all. The only contradiction is that those who cannot

Table 1. The ten journals with the most number of articles and their respective hits from 2002 to 2004. Sample Bioline usage statistics.

Journal name	Year		
	2002	2003	2004
Memorias do Instituto Oswaldo Cruz (2068 articles)	11526	33001	116971
Neurology India (583 articles)	0	13295	41836
Journal of Postgraduate Medicine (500 articles)	2635	28187	43392
African Crop Science Journal (368 articles)	6319	18556	37716
Agricultura Tecnica (263 articles)	856	9946	27621
Indian Journal of Dermatology, Venereology and Leprology (253 articles)	0	1489	14997
Indian Journal of Surgery (237 articles)	0	11256	38389
African Journal of Biotechnology (212 articles)	249	11948	45732
Electronic Journal of Biotechnology (203 articles)	0	9169	37502
Indian Journal of Medicinal Sciences (157 articles)	0	7894	46358

Source: Dr. Lesilie Chan, Associate Director, Bioline International, University of Toronto, Scarborough. www.bioline.org.br

Table 2. African Crop Science Journal usage statistics for the month of October 2009.

Item	Number of hits
Requests to view particular abstracts	11616
Requests for full-text articles	14193
Requests for information for authors/about this journal	604
Number of users looking at the list of issues available on Bioline	442
Number of users that have looked at lists of article titles	2186
Number of times this journal appeared in search results	104
Total hits	18824

Source: Bioline International. www.bioline.org.br/cs and http://www.sascp.org.za/downloads/ACSS_No22.pdf

review other folks' manuscripts promptly expect their own to be published as soon as possible. Again the experience of the ACSJ is that of expanding the reviewer hinterland to utilising persons with current publications on the subject on Google Scholar. The response has been pretty encouraging and the turnaround time quite incredible compared to the African scenarios. On the other hand, part of the delay in receiving review reports is the lack of clarity of what the editors need from the reviewers. Ideally, editors need to specify the technical concerns that the reviewer should look out for, not to spend valuable time on grammar, etc., which should be the concern of the editors and colleagues in their docket. For instance, one of the instructions could be "Please let us know whether the targeted readership will badly miss the contents of this manuscript when not published in the journal". "Please briefly substantiate your view".

One other scaring scenario, especially for young scientists is that some reviewers to raise defeatist questions at levels they themselves cannot answer. The fair approach would be to raise a question and then provide possible clues or options for sorting out the situation. Some supportive reviewers go an extra mile to even suggest relevant literature sources for improvement of manuscripts, even after recommending their rejection.

Donors disinterest in supporting journals. It is largely evident that while donors are eager to fund research and extension delivery activities, support for journal efforts has not been part of their agenda. As such, efforts by journal editors to mobilise resources for sustenance of journal publications are rarely productive. Of course, the research projects they support often bear a budget component publication and associated fees; but journals in African rarely access these funds since the act of publication often occurs long after the projects have ended and financial accountability is long completed. I wish to implore upon relevant development partners to consider support for journals in Africa so that the thrust is more on achieving good quality publications and not editors looking for funds, the latter of which disadvantages good science and can easily compromise the integrity of the journal. ACSJ has been represented at different fora Africa (courtesy RUFORUM which has often provided logistical support).

Plagiarism issues. Plagiarism and other different forms of cheating have plagued the publication sector (Martin, 1994), yet they are often very difficult to detect. The best practice is to utilize plagiarism software tools; unfortunately, they are too costly for a non-money making journal. Again, taking lessons from ACSJ, one software company offers a testing period of their product (not disclosed for confidentiality reasons). This was in an attempt to slump down the volume of papers received against the limited review capacity available. Two papers were detected, one with 98 and the other with 96% “similarity index. The former was from outside of African and the latter from within the continent. Otherwise, most papers from Africa ranked below 30% similarity index, though still high. One suggestion is for research and possibly training institutions to procure robust plagiarism software tools for their stakeholders pre-testing their works before being embossed with plagiarism reports from editors.

Lack of readership feedback. It is important that editors receive readership feedback on the performance of the journal and advice to the best way forward. Of course a few people are able to send occasional “thank yous” and others even after their papers are rejected. However, journals need to adopt a more formal mechanism for attracting feedback in the form of “Letters to the editor”, and possibly dialogue platforms as suggested earlier (IPs) in this abstract.

I end with a quote from Dr. Lesilie Chan “Journals from developing countries are tough to sell - no matter the quality”. What is the viable way forward? Dr. Lesilie is the Associate Director, Bioline International, University of Toronto, Scarborough, which hosts many journals from developing countries. Access the presentation at www.bioline.org.br

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