

Commentary

The North-South Information Highway, African Scientific Productivity, and Publication: A plea to African scholars for a new perspective for African development



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The academic expectation to publish is how we have made intellectual and human progress for the last century. The tradition of “publish or perish” may seem harsh, but it is also a screening process to ensure that the best minds, and the most motivated and productive scientists, do their work within academic institutions where next-generation students can be directly affected and influenced. The academy should be a place where one can ask questions, take intellectual risks, pursue high quality research, and publish truth. No equivalent social institution offers such promise.

Developed and industrialized nations, primarily in the northern hemisphere, have dominated the world of scientific scholarship, often with scientists who migrate to northern hemispheric institutions to do their work. The North-South divide, measured by economics, publications, scientific or industrial productivity, health status, or nearly any other variable, reflects accidents of history and exploitation that tapped the South for the advantage of the North; this is nothing new.

Joanna Adcock and Edward Fottrell (2008) reiterated the disturbing realities of scientific and academic publishing by African scholars. Within the larger context of global disparities in scientific research, publication opportunities, and published research, African efforts and colleagues are, once again, more removed from the global

community than other developing regions. One clear example from the article is that unlike all other regions, respondents from Africa preferred print journals to online journals. Although this paper was published over six years ago, it still is true that the world's scientists usually see African efforts in their rear view mirrors. Preference for print journals is symptomatic of the lagging state of much African scholarship and many academic expectations.

The majority of African universities have significant limits for library spending and subscriptions, either to individual journals or to search engines for online access. Adcock and Fottrell reported this as a factor in African scientific productivity, along with insecurities about writing scientific papers in English. Although international aid has eased some of these financial constraints, the African preference for printed journal issues seriously restricts Africans' use of the global, online information resources that have dramatically reduced the information access disparity for most of the world's scholars. Access to high quality science in nearly any field is instantly available to most of the global community; "access" limited to printed publications or books can no longer be a valid excuse for failed, avoided, or delayed scholarly pursuits.

Adcock and Fottrell also discussed the relative scarcity of original research conducted in Africa by Africans. Research questions and analyses that are developed, pursued and published on the ground in Africa are too rare. This reflects more than just the disparity of publication; it is also a disparity of ideas and inquiry. It is here that I would like to offer my own observations.

As an Africanist for much of my career, and having a connection to Africa dating back to 1966, I have observed that, especially in areas of public health, nutrition, food security, inter-generational relationships, and community medicine, the fields that I understand best, Africa's problems are seldom likely to be solved by research conducted in Europe, North America, or based on work conducted with Asian or South American populations. Surely occasional studies have trans-regional validity; but that is determined only when indigenous work is conducted, validated and published in a peer-reviewed journal, whether online or in print.

Anyone who has conducted field research knows that the degree of difficulty increases dramatically when the population to be studied is in Africa. Ethnicity, regional and political boundaries, language and cultural diversity, poverty, transportation and communications infrastructures, and all other issues that rarely threaten field research in North America or Europe are predictable in most of Africa. Representative and replicable survey sampling, for example, is very difficult in places with poorly documented populations, vague political or jurisdiction boundaries, and variously defined social units, such as the meaning of "family." These and other difficulties face survey sampling efforts every day throughout Africa. Lack of proper census data, social migration, civil wars, environmental barriers, and regional conflicts discourages many research efforts and encourages African academics to leave. Moreover, such difficulties may cause research sponsors to hesitate making grants or direct investments. Thus, the transplanted African scholars' careers blossom in other regions, usually the Americas or Europe. Africa is less, far less, for their departure.

But using the degree of difficulty as an excuse for either low scientific productivity or an excuse to emigrate simply means that the most critical issues that face African development will not be addressed by competent scientific inquiry, or the work will be defaulted to scientists in developed nations whose careers will thrive on the African-specific questions and research that they produce. I, myself, am an example of a visiting academic whose career in the U.S. was enhanced by my work in Africa. It would have been better if the work had been done by African scholars for application by African health and development workers.

Another issue raised by Adcock and Fottrell's article is the stated desire by African scholars for international recognition. Traditionally this has meant that only journals with global reputations are sought as vehicles for publication. Although there may be some screening merit to the chauvinism associated with this pecking order, it is also true that the information highway that is available via online publication gives international recognition new meaning. Journals whose global reputations were earned after a century of hard copy print were underwritten by national and professional interests in Europe and America; their resources permitted global distribution and subscription. Now it is a new day. A scientific paper of good quality, published online, now can be read by a much larger readership, with more international interest, than ever before. This creates an opportunity for African scholars to take advantage of journals, such as *AJFAND* for the global recognition that they seek; usually with a readership that is more attuned to issues in developing nations, with emerging economic and social situations, and practitioners who need local answers to local questions. Publishing African research in African journals makes sense and, with time and rigorous attention to high quality peer review and scientific standards, the world will recognize and seek out a new generation of African scholarship and discovery.