The paradoxes of research audiences in sub-Saharan Africa

Las paradojas del público investigador en el África subsahariana

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed at interrogating the puzzles that are encountered by research audiences in the consumption of knowledge in the sub-Saharan community. A systematic literature review study was employed as the methodology for this study. The study found out that despite the fact that the research audiences and the sub-Saharan community at large have the right to access and know the findings of the research to which they are the targeted recipients, they rarely access the scholarly work. Some of the challenges that were examined in this study are language, literacy, funding, and poverty, duration of research, scholarly communication, cultural imperialism, digital divide and predatory publishing. The study recommended that there is need for sub Saharan countries to mobilise and raise more funding to revamp the library operations, boost ICTs infrastructure, and market African research for better visibility and consumption by the intended recipients and community.

Keywords: Community engagement; knowledge consumption; paradoxes; research audiences; sub-Saharan community.

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RESUMEN

El objetivo de este estudio es analizar los enigmas que encuentran los investigadores en el consumo de cono-cimientos en la comunidad subsahariana. Para ello se empleó como metodología un estudio sistemático de revisión bibliográfica. El estudio puso de manifiesto que, a pesar de que el público investigador y la comunidad subsahariana en general tienen derecho a acceder y conocer los resultados de las investigaciones de las que son destinatarios, rara vez acceden a los trabajos académicos. Algunos de los retos que se examinaron en este estu-dio son la lengua, la alfabetización, la financiación y la pobreza, la duración de la investigación, la comunicación académica, el imperialismo cultural, la brecha digital y la publicación depredadora. El estudio recomienda que los países subsaharianos movilicen y recauden más fondos para modernizar el funcionamiento de las bibliote-cas, impulsar la infraestructura de las TIC y comercializar la investigación africana para mejorar su visibilidad y su consumo por parte de los destinatarios y la comunidad.

Palabras clave: Compromiso de la comunidad; consumo de conocimientos; paradojas; públicos de la investi-gación; comunidad subsahariana.

Introduction

Research is the heart and soul of development in any given society. Peter (2003, p. 2) hints that "countries that place premium on research have developed faster than those that have re-legated research to the background". Apparently, Wilson, Kiuna, Lamptey, Veldsman, …, and Ozaygen, (2020, p. 1) report that "analysis of research output in Africa is constrained by the do-minance of the Global North in this sphere, and the limited inclusion of Global South sources in publication databases". Research publications depend on the country's response to the dictates of the digital dispensation. Tar (2010, p. 2) append that "it is equally altruistic that the global South is at the receiving end of a western dominated technology and ideology". Digital technology has transformed research in light of knowledge production, dissemination and consumption. Global research seems to be skewed in favour of the North while debilitated in the global South due to the digital divide, cultural imperialism, linguicism, and funding among other factors.

For academicians to be relevant in the 21st century, "their works must be able to be appre-ciated and understood by sizeable sections of society in which the research problem addressed is valuable" (Mushemeza, 2016, p. 238). Mfutso-Bengo, Ndebele and Masiye (2008, p. 64) aver that "there is wide acknowledgement of the need for community engagement in research, particularly in developing countries. Today, engaging communities has become a critical aspect of planning and implementing research". Most communities in which research is carried out have little or no access to the research they participate in or that purports to serve them. Rotich (2011, p. 138) laments that "published scholarly materials from African scholars have been largely invisible to the global audience, except from works emanating from South African Universities. Though some universities produce large quantities of research materials (in terms of theses and dissertations), there is no evidence (in terms of visibility outside the gates of those universities". Such research is not fully serving the intended audiences or community.

No matter how good one's research may appear, it is useless if does not get to intended audience whose problems it purports to address. Enshrined in the ethical principles of research is the consideration that the researcher should disseminate research results to participants after the research is over. The participants have the right to know the results as soon as they are published (Daus et al., 2023). Literature is awash with the complaint that most researchers do not engage communities in which they conduct research particularly when they get the results (Mertler, 2023; Yeung, & Denicolo, 2022). It was the pith of this study to interrogate the puzzle that are encountered by the audiences as the intended recepients of scholarly work in sub-Saharan Africa.

The problem

Mfutso-Bengo et al. (2008, p. 64), inform that "the current international research ethics guidelines talk of community engagement as an ethical requirement for research involving human subjects, particularly marginalized populations". Apparently, African research and researchers are not meeting their ethical obligations to engage the participants, inform adequately and give access to the knowledge produced in their societies. Rotich (2011, p. 135) alerts that "universities in Africa are contributing an insignificant amount of scholarly writing in comparison to developing countries. The number of journals and books produced annually by African researchers are still very low". In this situation, the research audience in the sub-Saharan community are short-changed. More so, there is limited published research on experiences of research audiences and community engagement hence this study aimed to interrogate their challenges in the consumption of knowledge.

The paradoxes of research audience in sub-Saharan Africa

This section examines the puzzles that are experienced by the research audiences in knowledge consumption. The factors like language, literacy and technical jargon, poverty, duration of research, scholarly communication, cultural imperialism, digital divide and predatory publishing are interrogated.

Language of publication

The language of publication has for long been a stumbling block in the communication of findings to the sub- Saharan African community. Africa's contribution to academic knowledge production in its region (Siundu, 2020), has long been suppressed by the infrastructures of international publishing, which supports and excludes particular languages. Ngulube (2012, p. 15) notes that "many writers and publishers in the world and indeed in Africa use the language of power to communicate their literary messages". Maikaba and Msughter (2019, p. 214) remind us that "it is a fresh phase of recolonization of African societies which attempts to continue the promotion of western linguistic heritage and literacy canons at the expense of African indigenous languages

and literature". This is a typical form of linguicism in which Ezema (2010, p. 18) warned that "indigenous languages which are the most effective method of transmitting culture are increasingly becoming endangered". This means that those languages that are at the periphery and are not recognised as official are marginalised and faced with certain extinction. Africa's contribution to academic knowledge production in its region has long been suppressed by the infrastructures of international publishing (Siundu, 2020), which supports and excludes particular languages. Ngulube (2012, p. 15) detected that "many indigenous languages around the globe are struggling to survive due to a lack of systemic support".

The problem of language in the consumption of knowledge has detrimental exclusionary effects on the role of the African researcher to inform the community. Vurayai and Ndofirepi (2020, p. 8) elaborate that "publishing in a foreign language would mean further alienation and default responsibility of academics to their immediate society. They cease to inform and will be irresponsive to the needs of the society they". Apparently, Kamwendo (2014, p. 209) noted that most foreign journals that publish in foreign journals are monolingual. Monolingual journals are restricted in nature given that only those academics who are proficient in the stipulated language(s) have the opportunity to publish". On the other hand, the sub-Saharan community find it difficult to consume the knowledge that is published in the language they do not understand. They are excluded. Recognition of local languages would imply empowering African academics and restoring their identity. Relegating the local languages would mean their extinction and alienation. The knowledge needs to be preserved in the language of its culture to avoid exclusion and extinction. The use of local languages would also imply that the community would be included. Research in a foreign language would imply the exclusion of the wider community who are still an important stakeholder (Vurayai, 2023).

There is no doubt that the challenges that the African academics face are also cascaded to the audiences who are the intended consumers of their scholarly work. Carter and Aulette (2016, p. 2) affix that "many academics in the periphery writing in a second language, face other serious issues such as lack of resources and difficulties accessing scholarly networks". For example, they need to pay for the services of language experts in editing from their strained coffers. More so, the journal editors and the reviewers are the first audiences in the publication process. Vurayai and Ndofirepi (2020), captured the plight of academics who write in the second language and inform that;

> Finding multilingual reviewers who are also conversant with language and content or going through the translation task has far-reaching implications. The article may take time to be published thereby creating unnecessary stress and anxiety in academics. The translation process may result in cultural and knowledge distortions and contradictions since some important elements of culture are best conveyed in its language. We theorize that the contradictions and distortions associated with a translation may contaminate knowledge and meaning resulting in higher chances of rejection.(p. 7)

The delay in the time of publication due to language issues is almost knowledge denied on the part of the audiences and the recipient community. Moreover, the distortions that are associated with translations can be misleading on the part of the audience since they contaminate knowledge.

Literacy and technical jargon

Scholarly publishing and knowledge consumption in Africa is hindered by low literacy levels. Rotich (2011, p. 136) reports that "in some countries, literacy levels are as low as 10%". Apparently, it is from this low percentage of literate population that we expect the scholarly work to be purchased and consumed. The consumption of research by the targeted audience is also dependent on the language, and the jargon involved, among other impediments (Vurayai, 2023). In a further observation, Mushemeza (2016), detected that "quite often, academic intellectuals write in sophisticated language making it difficult for those outside the university and in some cases even those inside the university to read and understand what has been communicated" (p. 238). Besides being able to read and write, the audience or consumers of scholarly work need to be conversant with the jargon that is used by the researcher. In this respect, quantitative research methods have produced knowledge that is communicated in a way that the audience find far-fetched and unintelligible. Quantitative research entails a research strategy that focuses on gathering and analysing numerical data with the aim of generalizing it across groups of people or to explain a particular phenomenon (Peter, 2003; Thrane, 2022). The numerical data is presented using techniques that are generally complex and require the use of specialized statistical software (Queirós et al., 2017). "Critical to the problem is the phobia for anything numeric, which is the focus of quantitative method of research" (Peter, 2003, p. 1). Research results that are communicated in numerical data may not be understood by other researchers and the community to which the research intends to serve. In this respect the research audience, which research should serve, are excluded.

Besides the hurdles posed by the statistical jargon, the technical language that is used in other disciplines is unintelligible to other researchers and the sub-Saharan community at large. Disciplines like biology, Chemistry, Computer science, Physics, Psychology, and Economics among others use the technical jargon that laypersons in the sub-Saharan community can hardly comprehend. This is a typical indicator of exclusion of the intended audience. Chisenga (2019), laments that;

> it's an open secret that academics/researchers write for other academics or other such experts. The languages we use, the complexity thereof, the formats in which our work is presented, the privilege one needs to access some of our work—much about our current knowledge systems serves to reinforce the proverbial ivory tower, separating the academic from the ordinary man. The entire knowledge value-chain is fraught with broken links that even the intended recipients of the research output are sometimes unaware of the existence of such research. (p. 6)

The anecdotes above encapsulate the explicit exclusion of the community to which research intends to serve. When disseminating research findings, the academics write for their fellow academics and experts while excluding the intended recipients and community. The language, jargon, length of thesis and dissertations, and format of presentation all work to exclude the Sub-Saharan community which the intended research should serve.

Poverty, funding and infrastructure

Ezema (2010, p. 16), decries that "poverty and ignorance, as twin products of economic imperialism dehumanize the mind and lead to exclusion socially, economically, politically and culturally. The dissemination of scholarly work needs vibrant funding and supporting infrastructure to at least reach to the intended audience or consumers. Vurayai and Ndofirepi (2020, p. 5), inform that "in the neo-liberal era, global education has been captured by the private sector in the interest of making profit and research has not been spared of this wave". Knowledge has become a commodity to be bought and sold to those who can afford it and this has serious implications to research consumption. In most cases one needs funds or data to purchase, and access the scholarly work for consumption.

Poverty in the sub-Saharan community has been a stumbling block to the dissemination and consumption of scholarly work. The intended consumers of scholarly work are overwhelmed by their needs and that of their dependants that they may not have enough time to purchase scholarly works. Rotich (2011) reports that;

> Poverty is, perhaps, a much more serious factor, as most of the people live below the poverty line. Even the minority that live above the poverty line use most of their income to purchase the basic needs of life – food, shelter, clothing and basic education. Consequently, the market for scholarly works is very small. (p. 136)

The disposable income for most people in sub-Saharan Africa is pitiful. Rotich (2011, p. 137), elaborates that "it is not uncommon that in Africa even academicians/university lecturers/scholars, who rank near the top of the income scale, have difficulty in purchasing scholarly books and journals. A sizeable amount of their income is devoted to meeting other pressing personal and social needs within their extended family circles".

Anderson (2018), avers that the library is the nerve centre of research dissemination so that it reaches the intended audiences. The library is the custodian, sanctuary and reservoir for knowledge. The librarians decide what scholarly work has to be purchased and made available to the audience depending on the market they command for example some indigenous titles and languages are perceived to have a small market, and many rural people are thought to have limited disposable income (Ngulube, 2012). In more elaborate terms, Ngulube (2012), reports that;

Authors may write whatever they want, but the eventual dissemination of their ideas is largely determined by publishers and librarians. By determining what should appear in print, the publishers control access to information and the means of knowledge distribution. The librarians also have control over access to information. They decide what is to be acquired and made accessible to whom and in what format. (p. 15)

In addition, the local economic troubles and general underfunding of education and research in Africa has not spared the operation of the library in the sub-Saharan community. Rotich (2011), noted that;

Poor funding has affected most areas of library operations, including: acquisition, preservation and maintenance of scholarly information materials. Another casualty of this reduction in allocation of funds to libraries has been training of library personnel, so as to remain informed and knowledgeable of new technologies developments within the library world. (p. 137)

The anecdotes above synopsize the threats that are posed by poor funding on the library as it attempts to execute its role as the storehouse and repository of knowledge.

Duration of research and researcher commitments

Reporting the findings to the participants ensures that the research audience consume the produced scholarly work. Vast literature reports that this is indeed a missing link in the research chain process (Yeung & Denicolo, 2022; Romolini et al., 2017). A study by Mfutso-Bengo et al. (2008), in Malawi revealed that the community felt short-changed by the researchers who ask them to participated during in the study but would not furnish them with the findings that should be meant to benefit them. Bengo et al. (2008), expound that the participants;

…felt it was indeed necessary to disseminate results to research participants after completion of a study. However, they observed that it was sometimes difficult to trace research participants after the study is over because some studies take a long time to complete and by the time the study is completed, the participants might have relocated to other townships. They also noted that some results might not be of immediate benefit to research participants. All in all, it was agreed that research participants have the right to know the results of a study they participate in. (p. 65)

The length of research prolongs and eventually denies the time and the right of the researcher to have access to knowledge they deserve. In most cases, the participants may never meet the researcher nor the scholarly work to which they are entitled.

Scholarly communication

The consumption of scholarly work rests on the mode of knowledge dissemination and communication. Rotich (2011, p. 131) states that "the scholarly journal has, for many years, been a means of disseminating and communicating information and knowledge. Scholarly publishing in Africa is still struggling to keep pace with the rest of the world". The control of global commercial publishing is domiciled in the powerful capitalist states in the world (Lynch, 2006). Due to global competition, Nyamnjoh (2004, p. 14) reminds us that "the reality that those who have most resources and access to global capitalist publication networks are likely to be able to globalise their ideas". In the wake of hegemonic journals outside Africa (Vurayai & Ndofirepi, 2020), African journals have been debilitated and denigrated hence they have also lost moral and financial support to disseminate their ideas to the intended recipients.

The African journals are under siege due to global publishing standards, operating procedures, quality and funding demands that are defined by the global North. The greatest hope is that the African journals are the avenue for disseminating the scholarly work to the audiences, consumers or the user system in the sub-Saharan community. "There is little doubt that African journals can be more receptive to academics who wish to publish about Africa and for Africans. The questions that are to be asked are; how many are they? How are they rated in terms of reputation?" (Vurayai & Ndofirepi, 2020, p. 8). The challenges that the African journals face adversely affect the dissemination and consumption of scholarly work. In a detailed account, Rotich (2011), narrates that;

> Available scholarly works in Africa are poorly distributed, barely marketed and hardly accessible. For example, it is easier for a librarian in Africa to find out what books have been published, on a given topic in Britain, than it is to locate relevant titles published in the African continent. Bibliographic resources have not been developed well to enable access to African materials. Scholarly materials published in the University Presses of African Universities are hardly marketed beyond their parent institutions. This has contributed to the poor visibility of such publication, hence the inaccessibility of scholarly work in Africa. The contributing factor to this is the poor funding and prioritisation of University Presses when allocating funds within the university. (Rotich, 2011, p. 137)

The poor funding of African journals has triggered multitudinous challenges in respect of the final consumption of scholarly work by the audience. The scholarly work has been poorly disseminated, marketed thereby rendering it inaccessible and invisible for consumption by the intended audiences.

Cultural imperialism

In line with research, Maikaba and Msughter (2019, p. 214) inform that "an important feature of digital media and globalization is the interchange of ideas symbolized by the internet. However, the concern involves the clash of cultures". This may translate to cultural imperialism which has been another factor that blocks the flow of scholarly work from the researcher to the intended audience. Ekeanyanwu (2022, p. 133) conceptualises cultural imperialism as "the process through which the predominant Western influence stifles the cultures and traditions of the developing world". Cultural imperialism in research circles translates to the global stratification of knowledge in which knowledge from the global North is perceived as superior. Rotich (2011, p. 135) reports that "the biggest obstacle is that there is a one-way transmission of cultural ideas that are from the West to the global south thereby limiting opportunities for African researchers. African universities are essentially consumers of knowledge produced in developed countries. The former are the producers and the latter are the consumers of knowledge, which seriously undermines the fostering of the multicultural nature of Higher Education, as virtually all partnerships are one-sided".

In the global stratification of knowledge, some knowledges that are regarded as more powerful hegemonize the global publication space (Vurayai & Ndofirepi, 2020). The subjugation of African cultures is expressed by high rejection of manuscripts in foreign owned journals. African academics have established that the high rejection of their work particularly in arts and humanities is not because of uninformed discourse they may be turned down for questioning orthodoxies and stereotypes about their society. The African culture is normally produced and stored in arts and humanities. This explains why African arts and humanities are losing market in foreign owned journals. Lynch (2006), avers that arts, humanities and critical sciences pose a threat to Western-owned or controlled journals because they challenge the assumptions the west hold on African knowledges, cultures, and languages.

Cultural imperialism has also manifested in epistemological xenophilia (obsession with foreign knowledges) and brain drain. Cultural and technological imperialism has aggravated the challenge of brain drain in Africa which is yielding its supreme brains. Ezema (2010, p. 17) hints that "African indigenous knowledge which have be very useful in solving our problem in medicine, housing, education, science and technology become highly underdeveloped as African is robbed of their intellectuals through brain drain". Nyamnjoh (2004, p. 14) observed that "because of the indifference of scholars who have successfully broken into Western publishers, very little scholarly publishing of relevance is undertaken on the [African] continent". Apart from the African academics who physically left the continent for the institutions in the global North, those who were left behind still perceive Western knowledges and their journals superior. Owing to this, African academics still believe they gain accreditation when their work is published in foreign owned journals. Cultural imperialism has brain-washed them to believe that (Tarkang & Bain, 2019). This makes the scholarly work by African academics more difficulty to access by the local audience and the community it should serve.

Digital divide

The effects of the revolution in information and communication technology (ICTs) on modern global information flows are overwhelming. Ekeanyanwu (2022, p. 133), avers that ICTs "guarantee accuracy, efficiency, prompt and instantaneous transmission or distribution of information". The current ICTs have made knowledge production, dissemination and consumption trouble-free to those who can afford them. On the other hand, ICTs have been manipulated by the powerful countries to consolidate their ideological and epistemological hegemony over the weaker ones. Tar (2010, p. 2), observed that "technology has been rooted in, and appropriated by, the dominant centres of global power. Such appropriation takes place at the levels of knowledge, ideology and politics". The differences in access to and use of information and communication technology among demographic groups of the same society or countries of the globe amount to digital divide.

Digital divide has abysmal effects on knowledge production, dissemination and consumption. In sub-Saharan Africa, internet availability and accessibility is acutely low. Owing to this, Africa is lagging behind in terms of production, dissemination and consumption of knowledge. Tar (2010, p. 2), discerns that "it is commonly accepted that technology in general and information technology in particular are controlled, manipulated and dominated by certain regions and countries of the world. For instance, Europe and North America (perhaps with the exception of some South East Asian countries) are technologically far ahead of the rest the world and are known as the bastions of technology". In a study in Kenya, Rotich (2011), captures how digital divide affects research audiences and elaborates that;

> Access to ICT facilities is a pressing need for most institutions. The cost of internet connectivity is still slightly high and slow in most African countries, hence the low content generated in Africa on the World Wide Web. Though fibre optic connection is now in Kenya, the cost of connectivity is still high and connections to universities are very unstable. (p. 136)

This study infers that the compromised ICT facilities militate against the consumption of scholarly work as the audience find it difficult to access it. The low income of the audiences in the sub-Saharan community also prohibits them from affording the cost of data and internet connectivity.

Predatory publishing

Due to pressure to publish and blocked opportunities among a myriad of factors, most researchers in sub-Saharan Africa resort to predatory publishing. Forero et al. (2018, para. 1), view predatory journals as those that "exploit the open-access model promising high acceptance rate and fast track publishing without proper peer review". Predatory publishing is toxic to the audience and the community at large in multifarious ways and the major one being that they lead to spreading false, deceptive and junk science. They can spread inaccurate or false information about

a topic (Zamani & Ebadi, 2023), that other researchers may cite, further misinforming the community. This practice undermines the credibility of the research enterprise with potentially damaging public policy consequences (Zamani & Ebadi, 2023; Xia, 2021). Predatory journals do not archive their content and this makes it hard for the audience to retrieve it later. The malpractices by the predatory journals lead to undermining of public confidence the audience and community have in research. This is an academic and public sin since most predatory publishers deliberately harm the society for selfish gains.

Conclusions and recommendations

The study interrogated the contradictions and puzzles that are encountered by research audiences in the sub-Saharan community in the consumption of knowledge and scholarly work. The major stumbling block is the foreign language through which scholarly work is communicated. Scholarly publishing has denigrated African indigenous languages since it is not done in the languages that the sub-Saharan community understands. Closely related to the problem of language is the challenge of literacy and technical jargon. The complex numerical jargon in quantitative research reports, the length of theses and dissertations, and the exigent technical language used in some research add to the social exclusion of the intended research recipients. Poverty has not spared research consumption. The sub-Saharan community has limited disposable income, hence they find it unaffordable to purchase scholarly work. The libraries as gateways to the world information have been hard-hit by funding crisis to the point that they are failing to meet the current and best practices in information dissemination.

Like linguicism, cultural imperialism in sub-Saharan Africa obliterates the smooth flow and consumption of knowledge by the audience. The global North researchers and publishers dominate the publishing industry as the avenue for scholarly communication. They set the standards for the ideal and best practices in publishing on the basis of their culture. As a result, African culture and knowledges are denigrated and excluded for consumption through high rejections. Digital divide has also worked hand in glove with cultural imperialism to facilitate unequal production, dissemination and consumption of knowledge due to differential access and use of information and communication technology. The pressure to publish and the fraudulent publishing that promote predatory publishing have led to the publishing and consumption of toxic and contaminated research that is not subjected to rigorous peer review.

This study asserts that the audiences, and the sub-Saharan community at large have the right to access and consume safe scholarly work to which they are intended recipients. The library as the sanctuary of knowledge has a key role in the dissemination of knowledge for consumption by the community (Tar, 2010). The government and key players in research in sub-Saharan Africa need to increase funding of library operations in line with the best practices in the digital dispensation. Rotich (2011, p. 136) suggests that "a deliberate effort should be made to increase internet connectivity, with high bandwidth, in universities in Africa and upload published works to increase

visibility. The use of internet postings will reduce the amount of money required for the dissemination of research findings". The local publishers need to revamp their knowledge marketing approaches, so as to improve their visibility. Online Access System can be an avenue to improve the visibility of African academics hence the need to expand technological infrastructure for its use. Regular conferences and workshops where research findings are disseminated should be organised by the African higher education institutions.

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Statement