



ELEPHANT

IN THE LAB

INTERVIEW

Increasing visibility of African research

Short title	Increasing visibility of African research
Long title	Open Access can help making African research more visible on an international scale.
Authors	Heather Ford ¹
Author affiliation	¹ University of New South Wales Sydney
Author bios	Heather Ford is a Senior Lecturer at UNSW researching how platform rules influence the diversity, quality and reach of global public knowledge. Before returning to academia, she worked as the Executive Director of iCommons, co-founded Creative Commons South Africa and acted on the Advisory Board of the Wikimedia Foundation.
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The scientific community in some African countries is seeking for closer ties to the Western European and North American communities. What are the main challenges in this context?

I think there are many challenges and many of them are felt by the scientific community everywhere around the world, but they become more pronounced in many African institutions where there are fewer resources and also less knowledge about Open Access and its benefits among management of universities. From the perspective of an academic, I know that actually one of the key challenges of Open Access is the incentives system in research. For example, if you have a university that values the research success of its academics according to particular criteria and demand publications in closed access journals; Open Access is going to start out on a very difficult footing.

These are the basic challenges that often get overlooked by the Open Access community. As activists, we try to connect with one another across regions, but we don't think about the institutional challenges around incentives for publishing that are being imposed on academics who have less time to conduct research, and fewer of the resources that play a crucial role when it comes to publishing. You can publish your work either in a closed access high ranked journal, in which case the institution that you work for is going to reward you heavily. Or you can publish it Open Access, where it won't bring much of that kind of success. Those institutional incentives are the biggest challenges; and if you don't have a university system that rewards publishing in Open Access journals, therefore making science more accessible, you are not going to have many researchers participating in Open Access initiatives.

In the African context the problem is just greater. It's the case that institutions and management in universities have even fewer resources and less knowledge about the benefits of Open Access. The academic system does not reward Open Access in the same way that universities in Europe and North America are doing.

Why is it important to support Open Access in the African region? What role can it play?

In first place, it is important for science generally, because it removes the high rents that are being paid by authors and readers of science to access knowledge that is being produced; so it facilitates the distribution of new knowledge effectively. And in the African context getting science out there and distributing it is even more difficult, because of the low-resourced environment, where paying for access to scientific research is critically expensive in terms of the

resources that are available. Scientists from many countries have a big problem with getting their research out there and making it visible, so Open Access can do good things in terms of that kind of distribution. Of course, just because your work is available, doesn't mean that people are actually willing to read your work. There are definitely benefits if science is accessible, but not all problems are solved by that.

What kind of work have Wikipedians been trying to do in order to foster OA?

One of the initiatives that we are trying to do at the moment is trying to find out whether, if scientific research is included in a Wikipedia article, will that mean that citations to that article improve over time? I think the trend is that including references to research in Wikipedia has a positive effect on readership; and if those scientific records are available as Open Access - and not behind paywalls - that will increase the chance that the articles will be included in Wikipedia articles and the extent to which they are cited. In that sense, it is relevant to say to academics: it makes sense to participate in summarizing recent research by including citations in Wikipedia articles, because it's likely that your citations are going to increase and more people are going to read your work generally.

There is also one model that I became interested in while doing some work for Wikipedia in South Africa. It has been used by Nature and is about a Wikipedian scientific journal. It's basically a model, where a few scientists write an article together according to the Wikipedian structure, so an encyclopedia structure. Then they publish it and their authors names, include a DOI, so it is indexed and has a version number etc. Now, the benefit of this is that you have the scientific author for academic credit - for the article on Nature or whatever journal they are publishing in; and a lot of people - thousands of people are going to potentially read this article and you also have the Wikipedian version that can be edited, translated and changed over time.

Not so long ago Africa was hardly on the radar of the big international journal publishers. Recently, Elsevier launched the "Scientific African" - a new megajournal to boost African research and collaboration. How do you evaluate this development?

I read it with absolute scepticism. And I think everyone should regard these attempts by large publishing corporations to incorporate or use Open Access in some way with scepticism, because Open Access is more than just making a certain sum, and it's also not only a license. Especially when it comes to research in different African countries or other regions that are not well represented in the scientific system you have to do much more than just launch a journal. You have to invest in overcoming cultural and institutional challenges and challenges of a systematic

bias that can't be actually overcome just by licences or publishing. It's about attention, and lots of things that are not really covered just by making something freely available.

How can the contribution of African universities to regional and global knowledge production be improved? What role could open access play?

Open Access has a positive effect on the quality of research, because researchers can get access to high quality research in very poorly resourced institutions. At the same time, another crucial problem still remains - the one of recognition of knowledge coming from countries in Africa. This will be overcome to some extent by Open Access, but again not entirely.

What can be done to improve recognition of African science? That depends on the environment. From the Wikipedia point of view, I'm trying for example, to improve the coverage of topics related to Africa in the Wikipedian context. By making research outputs visible - through Wikipedia or through other ways - we can show that there's good research happening on African topics and that they are as worthwhile as the subjects relevant to the rest of the world. What else can be done? Policies have to be changed in order to improve recognition, acceptance of and attention towards African research. Only a part of these things can be answered by providing Open Access. It's not as easy as just saying - well, slap on a licence that means that your work is really available. It's a harder question to solve, but a very important one.