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Abstract

Roughly speaking, over a thousand journals on African studies are available online. Many of these e-journals are available either on the websites of commercial publishers or via not-for-profit organizations. Regular publishers distribute most e-journals that are commercially interesting. In the field of African Studies, they take care of approx. half of the published journals. At the same time, there are many non-commercial organizations who try to make e-journals (partly or completely) available via open access. In this paper I will try to give a complete overview of all initiatives in this field, including the number of e-journals available, their scope, the accessibility, the availability of full text and/or abstracts and the “subscription” method. Initiatives to be mentioned will be (a.o.): AGORA (FAO), AJOL, Aluka, Archive of African Journals (MSU), CAJOL (CODESRIA), DOAJ, Hinari (WHO), JSTOR, OARE (UNEP), Persee and Sabinet.
Introduction

Many commercial and non-commercial initiatives regarding electronic journals have started in the last decade. They are, however, so widespread and ad hoc that a complete overview of all online journals is not possible. This paper offers a brief description of the current state of affairs concerning electronic journals from and about Africa and highlights some of the trends.

History

Paper journals have existed since 1665 when the Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society appeared in London and Le Journal des Scavans in Paris. A hundred years later more than 10 scientific journals were available, mostly published by learned societies in Europe. And by 1850, there were well over a thousand journals with articles specializing in all different scientific fields from ethnology to medicine and geology to philosophy. By 1980 there were well over 180,000 different scientific journals: (http://www.ulrichsweb.com)

The first electronic journals appeared in the 1970s. At first they were limited to the medical and physical sciences but with their obvious advantages, they developed quickly. Today, in 2008, well over 50,000 are available (http://rzblx1.uni-regensburg.de/ezeit/about.phtml). A small but significant number of these e-journals are about Africa or originate from Africa. My (not very wild) guess is that approximately 2,000 e-journals are produced in Africa and about 2,500 e-journals contain articles about Africa.

Why did electronic journals become so popular so rapidly? There are several reasons. The advantages of e-journals are their easy access (via a PC on your desk or in your library), fast access (in theory from the moment the article is published), quick distribution and a rapid production process. There are of course also some disadvantages. A user of an e-journal has to buy access to it (in theory even temporary access). Also in many cases the library does not get a paper copy of the journal that can be stored and kept, and many journals have no permanent URLs. As a result, URLs can change over a period of a few years due to company takeovers or administrative changes, although luckily many publishers have given journal articles permanent URLs (DOI, Digital Object Identifier). Another disadvantage of e-journals is the difficulty many African users experience when trying to access online journals: the bandwidth is insufficient, too many users have to use the same connection at the same time or there is no electricity available. A way around this could be to download articles so that the information can be used even when an Internet connection is not working.

Trends in availability

I see three trends in the availability and open access of electronic journals. The first is increased efforts by international organizations (the UN, the FAO, the WHO), national organizations (of science or health) and universities to make more scientific information open to the general public. However, some publishers are feeling threatened and in September 2008, the Professional and Scholarly Publishing Division of the Association of American Publishers (PSP) welcomed the introduction of legislation to protect the rights of authors and publishers of copyrighted, peer-reviewed scientific journal articles.
Other publishers use open access as a kind of advertisement for printed copies or other books or products. Google has signed contracts with 20 large libraries and numerous publishers to make (parts of) millions of books available online.

The third trend is a limited one, but still important. Many commercial (like Elsevier) and non-commercial (like JSTOR) organizations are making information freely available to some countries where the population has a low annual income but want access to online information and would normally not be able to afford costly subscriptions to e-journals and databases.

One important point is the visibility of research, with researchers wanting their articles to be published in the best journals. They know that if their research is invisible, the results of their scientific work will remain unknown and unread. They will never be quoted and don’t ‘exist’ in the eyes of the scientific world. Some people see this dissemination gap as creating a kind of ‘technological apartheid’ (Daniela Katzenstein Hart 2000). There might be some truth in this but I think it is more important to look at the problem from another angle. One should use all the instruments available to promote one’s academic research and try to publish in the journal best-suited to the research being undertaken. Ensure that publications are deposited in a repository and thus promoted worldwide via search engines such as Google. Look at the possibility of having ‘your’ journal included in AJOL. In short: make your information as widely available as possible.

With over 300 peer-reviewed journals from Africa in its database, AJOL is an excellent initiative from Africa that is making research from Africa more visible. One of the other contributors at this conference will talk about AJOL in depth but it is important to note here that one of the most interesting aspects of AJOL is its business model. AJOL is a kind of broker of information, and a very nice one at that. It facilitates and makes information public, with full texts available on demand. AJOL maintains that information is not free: ‘at the end, there is always someone who pays the bill’.

SABINET is another example of a very good African initiative. In its database there are over 260 journals, of which 44 are open access journals. The range of subjects is, as with AJOL, very broad.

From the point of view of an African customer, there are three interesting initiatives from the FAO, the WHO and the UN with their AGORA, Hinari and OARE databases that are in a way related. In total, they cover over 7,000 journals in three fields: agriculture, medicine and the biological sciences respectively. These international institutions are working with partners like Yale University and commercial publishers such as Elsevier, who are making the content of many of their journals in these databases available free of charge. Of course there are many other initiatives. Free information is abundant if you know where to look. I will mention here some of the best-known initiatives and ignore some of the small, although interesting, ones like PloS (Public Library of Science). PloS has a completely different business model: the author pays to be refereed and published.

The databases I would like to now tell you about mostly originate from universities or national science organizations.

Medics: PubMed (>5,000 journals) and Freemedicaljournals (.com!, >400 journals).

The Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) originates from Lund University in Sweden and is a successful and heavily used database with >200,000 articles on a wise range of subjects.
I should also mention three interesting initiatives from France. The first is the upcoming electronic library of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BNF) which has just started but looks extremely promising. **Persée** with >50 online journals on the social sciences and humanities. **HAL** with >50,000 publications of which >10,000 are dissertations. These cover subjects like physics, mathematics and the environmental sciences.

Two years ago the American-based **JSTOR** developed an **Africa Initiative** that allows free access to the complete databases of JSTOR and Aluka, with >750 online journals on all subjects. (Although unfortunately not the most interesting last three years of all journals: JSTOR has a ‘moving wall’ for all journals.) Still, JSTOR is a very helpful database that will be mentioned again later on in this conference.

Small but interesting for those interested in **research on Africa** is Edinburgh University Press’s famous journal *Africa* that is freely available to many African users. Sign up!

Have you lost the overview? Let’s talk again briefly about e-journals. Two long lists of **e-journals on Africa** have been put together by librarians in Michigan (US) and Leiden (the Netherlands) covering approximately 1,500 journals. If you know of more, please tell them to contact us.

Everyone knows **Google**. Google knows and indexes everyone and everything. Google is popular because it’s big, clever, quick and innovative. And rich, so they can just buy what’s new or good. Google understands that this century will be about content. Google knows where to get content: from the stacks in the large libraries all over the world and it has signed contracts with 20 libraries (in New York, Stanford, Barcelona, Germany and Japan but not, as yet, with a library in Africa!). Google’s vans drive up and down university lanes crammed with old and new books. Every book is scanned from cover to cover, indexed and put online. If there’s no copyright, it is put online in its entirety. If the author is still alive or died less than 70 years ago, only parts (‘snippets’) are to be found online. Google has now more than 1 million books online, thereby, in my view, violating copyright laws in many cases.

To address this copyright problem and avoid problems and negotiations with publishers, many universities in Europe have signed the **Berlin Declaration on Open Access**, in which they promise to strive for free access to publications on research conducted by researchers they employ.

But again: it’s the content, stupid! Researchers don’t read journals, they read articles. They look for information on a certain subject. If they look for free online publications, they shouldn’t miss three databases:

**Scientific Commons** (>22 million publications from >1,000 repositories). A repository is an electronic box containing publications and many universities maintain a **repository** to make their researchers’ publications more widely available. Three things are important in repositories: permanent URLs, fixed and open structures, and correct and standardized metadata. **Scientific Commons** collects the publications of more than a thousand repositories and brings them together.
In the last Directory of Repositories there was one outstanding repository: Arxiv.org. That’s no wonder, as Cornell University has over half a million e-prints on the science in this repository. Small but beautiful is Connecting-Africa from Leiden, a web service with >15,000 titles about Africa from >50 repositories. Connecting-Africa also includes the personal information of a few hundred European specialists on Africa.

To conclude: what can you, as an African(a) information specialist, do?

1. Use all the available free information and ensure that researchers know where to find it.
2. Subscribe to free Africa initiatives like JSTOR.
3. Make research from Africa more visible by creating a repository, adding your institution’s publications to a repository or to initiatives like AJOL.
Some helpful URLs:

**Electronic sources available in and from Africa**

Electronic journals from Africa:
http://www.ajol.org
http://journals.sabinet.co.za

International organizations:
Agriculture:
http://www.aginternetwork.org/en/
Health:
http://www.who.int/hinari/en/
Environment:
http://www.oaresciences.org/en/

**Other initiatives :**

Medicine :
http://www.pubmed.gov
http://www.freemedicaljournals.com

Directory of Open Access Journals:
http://www.doaj.org

Francophone:
http://www.revues.org
http://www.persee.fr
http://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/
http://gallica.bnf.fr/
http://www.auf.org

Repositories
http://www.scientificcommons.org
http://www.arxiv.org
http://www.connecting-africa.net
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JSTOR:
http://www.jstor.org
http://www.aluka.org

Both: free access from Africa (Africa Initiative):
http://www.jstor.org/page/info/participate/new/fees/africanAccess.jsp

Africa (Journal of the International Africa Institute)
http://www.eupjournals.com/journal/afr

Lists of e-journals:
http://africa.msu.edu/AEJP/
http://www.ascleiden.nl/Library/Journals.aspx

Lists of all journals:
http://www.ulrichsweb.com
http://rzblx1.uni-regensburg.de/ezeit/about.phtml

Google Book Initiative:
http://books.google.com

Hathi Trust (forthcoming)
http://www.hathitrust.org/