Social Justice Driving Open Access Publishing: An African Perspective

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Introduction

It is generally accepted that the open access (OA) movement was founded with the truly philanthropic purpose to advance the sharing of scholarship for the sake of inquiry and knowledge. The commitment, via the Budapest Declaration,[1] was for the bidirectional flow of information from the rich to the poor and from the poor to the rich. Furthermore, this bidirectional flow of information underscores the principles of inclusivity and gave hope for the acceleration of research through opening of the scholarly ecosystem. For Africans, free access to scholarly literature and the open sharing of research were viewed as stimuli for the socioeconomic growth and development of the continent.

There are three significant statements from different parts of the globe that corroborate the assertion of the authors that the open access movement has deviated from its underpinning philanthropic purpose. The first statement is by two Australians, Ginny Barbour and Scott Nicholls (2019, 7), who assert that "*OA was never intended to simply challenge the cost of publishing through subscriptions. In fact, focusing only on the cost of access to knowledge misses the many advantages there are to making research freely available and reusable*." The second statement is from England, by Richard Poynder (2019), who says that "*since the 2002 Budapest Open Access Initiative, . . . the OA movement has had unintended consequences and . . . the way in which open content is likely to be monetised by commercial publishers, . . . suggest that the [global] South needs to develop its own (alternative) strategy*." The third statement brings into focus the limitations in forums for the dissemination of African scholarship. According to the Frenchman Joachim Schöpfel (2017), "*Open access is not only access and consumption but also and above all, production and dissemination. . . [and] has the potential to contribute to and foster local research and development*." This statement alludes to the importance of access to local research for communities to address local challenges.

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1. The Budapest Declaration was the founding declaration for the initiation of the open access movement.

The deviation from the founding philanthropic principles consolidates a skewed research landscape, further marginalizing an already marginalized African research community. The interventions, conceptualized and driven by the Global North, to accelerate the growth of the openness movement contribute to the disenfranchisement of the African research community. What Africa seeks is the deconstruction of this debilitating scholarly ecosystem and to develop an ecosystem that is inclusive and underpinned by social justice principles.

This article will examine the foundations for a redefined and reimagined African open access model within a social justice paradigm. The authors will also examine the systemic inequalities that are currently shaping the scholarly ecosystem. There are many interventions that support the growth of an African social justice open access movement. Building on the assertion by Kate Meagher (2021) that there is a need for a disruptor to unjust knowledge hierarchies, the University of Cape Town (UCT) developed the continental platform as one such intervention for the growth and development of African scholarship. This article will also briefly discuss the tenant model which is at the epicenter of the continental platform.

Understanding of social justice and open access

Social justice

Social justice refers to the promotion and protection of equity and equality in access to liberties, rights, and opportunities, as well as taking care of the least advantaged members of society (Follesdal 2015). While inclusivity is central to social justice, so, too, is the dismantling of structures that perpetuate inequalities. The theory of social justice is centered on the notion that a society cannot be just until there is equity, which includes equitable access to scholarly literature. Furthermore, as much as access is critical for the openness movement, so, too, is the dissemination of scholarship. The principles of social justice open opportunities for the dissemination of African scholarship.

Africa needs to take ownership in correcting a skewed research landscape. There has to be significant effort in promoting a social justice–driven African open access movement committed to the following:

- Greater opportunities or forums for the dissemination of the scholarship of African authors.
- Improved access to relevant scholarship for African researchers.
- An African research agenda shaped by local challenges in the quest for equity and inclusion.

- An African research agenda shaped by an economic and social development agenda.
- The advancement of a decolonized and democratized research landscape.
- Contributing to the nurturing and growing of the next generation of African researchers.

Redefinition and reimagining of African open access

The basic philosophy of the African open access movement is to accentuate social justice principles resulting in the transformation of access and distribution of scholarship for the growth and development of Africa's research agenda and to nurture and grow a culture of civil society accessing and manipulating accessed scholarly content to achieve economic and social emancipation. Furthermore, the African research landscape needs to be transformed to address local research imperatives while contributing to bridging the "research-exchange divide" between the Global South and Global North. This transformation can be achieved through the adoption of progressive open access practices and policies that enhance sharing of African scholarly output for the generation of new knowledge for use by Africa and the rest of the world.

The African open access movement must be driven by social justice imperatives for economic and social emancipation through opening of channels for the free and broad distribution and access of scholarly literature.

African open access and social justice driving African development

As mentioned above, the open access movement is being hailed in Africa as one of many solutions that can contribute to its development, as it opens access to scholarly literature which is critical for development. To fast-track a positive development trajectory, Africa needs access to scholarly content to generate new knowledge, which provides solutions, at an exponential rate, to local challenges. Hence, there is growing reliance on freely accessible scholarly content as well as free and open channels for the dissemination of scholarly information generated from the Global South. Driving these free access and open dissemination channels is the social justice principle that researched and published solutions need to be equitably shared. As much as there is strong advocacy for free access, there has to be equal support for inclusive participation by Global South researchers in knowledge creation and the free and equitable dissemination of this knowledge.

The open access movement must embrace the social justice elements embedded in the movement and robustly advance the liberation of marginalized voices. These "*new*

voices [need] to find their way into disciplinary conversations, reach new audiences, both academic and public, and impact existing and emerging fields of scholarship and practice in a transformative way" (Roh 2016, 83). Open access services must become mainstream for academic and research institutions in Africa as open access is one of the most significant conduits for inclusive and free access to scholarship for the marginalized and has the mandate and potential to strongly promote unhindered participation in knowledge production.

The open access movement in Africa and its advocates must be challenged to be underpinned by social justice principles as it has the capacity to usher in equity and equal opportunity. The open access movement must facilitate full participation of new African voices in the scholarly communication landscape. The creation and dissemination of Global South research will convert the one directional flow of information to a facilitated process of equitable knowledge exchange.

The social justice principles of the openness movement must underscore the need for equitable dissemination of marginalized research and to improve access to content in support of liberating repressed African scholarly content.

Systemic inequalities in the scholarly ecosystem

Two streams of systemic inequities significantly influence the publishing ecosystem. First, there are well meaning interventions that have unintended consequences. The situatedness of the interventions conceptualized by founders of the open access movement compounds/consolidates the information divide. The second stream are the conscious and unconscious biases that have similar consequences—the marginalization of Global South scholarship.

Systemic inequalities embedded in the current scholarly ecosystem (Tennant et al. 2016; Creaser 2011) consolidate the Northernization of the publishing landscape. This Northernization is a significant contributor to the marginalization of research voices from Africa and other parts of the Global South. In the terms of the current knowledge hierarchies, the Global North research will always be the outer layers of the onion with small chances of the deep inner layers (that is, the research content from the Global South) ever seeing the light of day. This assertion of layers of inequalities is highlighted by Kwasi Boahene, who says that science still bears the imprint of colonialism. He goes on to share that titles such as "*Lancet, New England Journal of Medicine, The Journal of the American Medical Association, BMJ are meant to serve a particular purpose and audience and, therefore, select researchers and research writings that fit that perspective*" (quoted in Kokutse 2021). Unfortunately, such a practice does not

augur well for upholding the philanthropic principles of open access or for promoting diversity and inclusivity.

The following example corroborates the assertion of conscious and unconscious biases that African researchers need navigate to get published.

One of Africa's leading horticulturalists shares that when she tried to publish her research in well-recognized international journals, she continuously received rejections. She states that "*they did not accept it (the submissions)—not because the research was not good, but because they regarded the crops I was writing about as weeds*" (Electronic Information for Libraries 2017).

The researcher found an African open access journal and published her findings. Her research on African indigenous vegetables addressed three major problems in Africa: poverty, malnutrition, and food insecurity. The significance of the research for Africa is substantial, but it may not have the same significance for the Global North, hence the rejection of good science. We submit that the gatekeepers of the science (editors and reviewers) have a very situated interpretation of excellence in science. Furthermore, the determining factor for the rejection is profit, that is, the acceptance of that which will sell to a Global North audience.

It is these systemic inequalities that the continental platform attempts to address. The platform was developed around the principle that the scholarly communication process is still governed by the voluntary labor of academics and that the library needs to support the academy in the dissemination of that scholarship. The continental platform is no silver bullet, but it aspires to disrupt the unjust knowledge hierarchies and break down the Global North–dominated publishing ecosystem.

A platform for inclusivity

The continental platform was born within a progressive UCT open access policy. The policy states that the library provides "*a platform and support for the publication of open monographs and open textbooks. This diamond open[2] access journals and monograph option will complement current publishing processes to meet the need for more local and decolonised content: such content will be accessible globally*" (University of Cape Town 2020). The policy demonstrates a commitment to reclaiming the fundamental purpose of an African openness movement.

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2. Diamond open access: there is no payment to read (no subscription) and no payment to publish (no article processing charges).

Tenant model

The continental platform was developed around the concept of a tenant model. This model was introduced to the UCT Library by the university's information technology department. The library took elements of the information technology definition of a multi-tenant model and applied social justice principles. In this multi-tenant architecture, a single instance of the software (and its underlying database and hardware) serves multiple tenants (or institutions). In the continental platform, a tenant is more than an institution—it includes all research communities within the institution.

A real estate analogy is useful to unpack this multi-tenant model. Tenants live in different apartments inside a single apartment building. They share the same outer structure, the same security system, and other communal facilities, but each tenant has a key to their respective apartments. This individuality ensures privacy within their apartment and also accommodates each apartment's unique interior look and feel. Fellow tenants are likely to come together to look at improving the overall building. Equally important is the development of the playground outside the building, which is enjoyed by all the tenants. A feature of this playground is that people outside the apartment building have access to the playground and will be able to appreciate the lushness of the grounds (Thakur 2021; Brook 2020; IBM Cloud Education 2020).

What UCT has done is taken a well-structured IT model and applied social justice, inclusivity, and equity to make it fit to host African scholarship at one central point. The adapted model facilitates the building of communities of practice with like-minded participants coming together to advance the sharing of African scholarship. A typical example would be developing a community in support of the publication process, for example, developing a template for layout editing. Some of the other challenges that the platform addresses are that of capacity, that is, the ability to manipulate the software for the delivery of a service. Infrastructural challenges have always been a thorn to the dissemination of African scholarship and so, too, are issues of affordability, sustainability, and future proofing. The platform was developed as a possible solution to these challenges.

A solution: Development of a continental platform

Leveraging a progressive institutional open access policy, UCT Libraries began its library publishing service. Between December 2016 and November 2021, UCT Libraries has published 19 books and publishes 6 journals. It was anticipated that two more books

would be added before the end of the year. The platform uses the open source software: Open Journal Systems and Open Monograph Press.

The success of the publishing program at UCT had given the library colleagues the confidence to expand its local platform to allow any African university or research institution to publish a journal or book. The growth of the platform was progressive with one South African institution (Durban University of Technology) adopting the platform to publish its journals (https://journals.dut.ac.za). The next phase in the development of the platform was to bring on board an institution from another country. The staff at the University of Namibia were trained on the use of the platform and are currently publishing five journal titles (http://journals.unam.edu.na). Subsequent to the University of Namibia adopting the continental platform, three universities from Zimbabwe have adopted the platform. Staff from the University of Botswana have been trained on the system as they have committed to adopting the continental platform.

UCT is currently preparing for the adoption of the platform by a French-speaking country (Cameroon). Historical content is being digitized for publication on the platform. UCT is also in discussions with institutions in Kenya (University of Nairobi) and Ghana (University of Ghana).

Future plans for the platform

The Association of African Universities[3] (AAU) has endorsed the platform. In September 2021, the AAU co-hosted a webinar with UCT to consolidate their endorsement of the platform. The AAU recognizes that one of the major challenges is that of skills shortage. Hence, plans are being constructed for a "train-the-trainer" program. The roll-out of the program would entail face-to-face training in four regions, namely North Africa, East Africa, Central Africa, and Sub-Saharan Africa, with Nigeria being treated as an independent region given the number of academic institutions in Nigeria.

UCT is cognizant of South Africa carrying the "big brother" tag. To ensure that there is no misconception of the purpose of the platform, UCT is in engagement with the West and Central African Regional Network to host the platform. Moving the platform to a "neutral" institution is deemed important to promote greater adoption across the continent.

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3. The AAU is an association representing most of the universities on the continent.

Conclusion

The founding philanthropic principles core to a social justice–driven OA movement are improving access to and opening channels of dissemination to contribute to the generation of local research to support local development. When open access is driven by social justice principles, driven by commitment to grow research, only then can OA be inclusive and previously marginalized research voices be given a place in mainstream knowledge production.

There are many challenges that the Global South needs to address in transitioning from being a marginalized research community to being an included one. There has to be a deliberate strategy to deconstruct the current dominant exclusionary research landscape and reconstruct a fit-for-purpose landscape that is driven by social justice principles. The example of UCT Libraries demonstrates collaborative possibilities to drive diamond open access publishing to strengthen a social justice–driven scholarly ecosystem that will be inclusive of African research voices.

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