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## **ilissAfrica's European and African outreach: state of affairs, prospects and commercial alternatives**

### **Introduction**

Let us celebrate today the second birthday of the internet portal, the "internet library sub-saharan Africa" (ilissAfrica): Two years ago at ECAS 3 in Leipzig ("Respacing Africa", 4–7 June 2009) we could announce the birth of this one-stop resource center for the African Studies. Today it is time to take stock of the gains and losses. ilissAfrica offers orientation in the internet, makes searching literature more time efficient, and references both conventional printed materials as well as new electronic and online media. Leaving the basic features of ilissAfrica aside, first I will discuss the usage of the portal, second the African outreach, third the website database, fourth some drawbacks and the position compared to commercial alternatives, and finally, I would like to elaborate some ideas about the future of the project.

### **1.) Usage of the portal**

Let us start with some statistics about the usage of the portal: The logfile analysis tells us about 32.907 visits in 2010, with a peak during the soccer world championship in South Africa in June. The figures seem low in numbers; usage did not skyrocket. Most of the visitors come from Germany, but also from the US and other European countries. If you look at the URLs where the visitors come from, it is notable that many come from Wikipedia – and especially the French and German versions not so much from the English. Also other German library portals (DBIS, WEBIS, Vascoda) do generate a significant usage. Therefore it is advisable to keep an eye on these links and Wikipedia entries. If you look on IPs, where our visitors come from, the large centers of African Studies. However, we were also accessed by the German development agencies, United Nations Office at Geneva, Swiss Federal Government, Foreign Ministries of Germany, France and Argentina, the Ministry of Defence in Austria; and the World Council of Churches.

What can we do with the numbers? Especially in Germany the target group of the portal is very small. „African Studies“ are labeled as a so called "small subject". The German African Studies Association (VAD) in 2009 had around 250 members. So the potential academic usage is limited. Additionally the sub-disciplines of African studies often have their own subject gateway like EVIFA for Ethnology.

We deliberately offer the subject gateway ilissAfrica in French, English, and German. This is to reduce language barriers and to improve the contact between francophone and anglophone academia (see panel 34). Websites, books, etc. of one group are often not known to the other. The multi-lingual set up of ilissAfrica might help in this regard. Another purpose is to serve guest researchers in Germany and local research partners in Africa.

This also made possible that links on ilissAfrica can be found on nearly all important institutional websites from Bayreuth to Mainz in Germany, from Lisbon to Uppsala in Europe, from New York to Urbana-Champaign in the US. The hyperlinks together with our old fashioned marketing activities like papers, posters, booths, leaflets, press announcements, post cards, trainings for students, etc. led also to some positive reviews. Our evaluation activities confirmed that we achieved our aim to keep ilissAfrica simple and smart.

So we did a lot to make it public. However, it is not a portal which lots of people use every day. It is a special tool which helps in a certain point of the academic work, but not more. It offers no daily news; it is not fashionable. Against this background we are very happy with the gains and numbers.

## **2.) African Outreach**

Let us focus on the usage from Africa – and this leads me to my second part. You see here the geographic locations of the visitor's IPs and the hits accumulated from 2009 to the end of May 2011. Under the TOP 50 one can find 15 African countries. In total visitors from 38 African countries visited ilissAfrica at least once. "Unknown" and "Satellite Access" might also come from Africa. The numbers are not stunning, however, users come from a wide variety of countries with sometimes difficult internet access. And again one has to consider that not every "African" is interested in "African Studies" as we understand it. Many of them are just studying economics, politics etc.

What benefits might our colleagues in Africa have from using ilissAfrica?

It is a free bibliographic resource. Its cross search combines catalogues of strong Africa collections at Frankfurt University Library, at the GIGA Hamburg, the African Studies Centre in Leiden, the Nordic Africa Institute in Uppsala, and the Department of Anthropology and African Studies at Mainz University; further, it includes the Africa sections of the "World Affairs Online" database and the Swets "Online Contents" database. The latter normally is with costs, but the Africa section on ilissAfrica is free of charge - with information on articles in 180 journals. Against the assertion of the panel abstract at Frankfurt University Library we still buy many books from Africa. Beyond that, since May 2009, the tables of contents of all

acquired foreign books are scanned and added to the library catalogue to allow users a quick preview.

Again, usage is free of charge and no registration is required. To have short load times the technical appearance of the user interface is kept simple. Again, the portal is offered in English and French.

An "Open Access Guide" lists projects that disseminate free or affordable scholarly journals and databases in developing countries like HINARI, INASP or JSTOR.

Another benefit for scholars in Africa might be the possible restriction of the search to full text documents (via the advanced search). ASC, NAI, GIGA and Frankfurt spend some effort to catalogue and even archive selected electronic documents about and from Africa.

### **3.) Database of "Internet Resources"**

One distinct feature of ilissAfrica is a collection of more than 4,400 websites, mostly from Africa. These websites are deeply indexed via keywords, abstracts, and classifications. The metadata is oriented on a Dublin Core metadata standard. Websites are not only searchable but also one can browse through the country, subject, and resource type classifications. The fact that the websites are quality-tested and indexed gives ilissAfrica added value compared to conventional search engines and regional portals. A human being - not a machine - looks at the website and describes its content with common keywords. You will not find any "trash"-results or results from "link farms" trying to sell something etc. Though the data base is different (only metadata), the technical organization uses a search engine with relevance ranking.

The indexing is made in a special union catalogue for websites, which is called Academic LinkShare located at Hamburg State and University Library. In this catalogue nearly 10 % of the indexed websites initially were catalogued by other subject gateways, especially the ViFaPol (politics). For these records only the subject indexing for ilissAfrica was added.

While the classifications of location and resource types are standardized by the union catalogue, the subject classification is self-made serving the special needs of this portal with a very broad disciplinary scope. It is much more pragmatic than sophisticated, and it is simple and short. Do not be too harsh with your critique. By the way, in the advanced search you can combine the faceted classifications (e.g. "Languages of African origin" & "Mali").

The websites relevant for the social sciences are indexed with the multilingual "European Thesaurus on International Relations and Area Studies", all others with the German authority file for subject headings (SWD) and free translations of these into English and French.

Abstracts are made in the three main languages German, English and French, at least in the language of the website.

#### **4.) Challenges**

From the bright side of the internet resources let me shift the focus to the dark side: the heterogeneity in the cross search of ilissAfrica. Even the formal description differs: German cataloguing rules include only the first editor of a collected edition and authors of articles are not indexed. In Frankfurt we have no English abstracts like the ASC Leiden library, only comparable meager subject headings in German. This means that one finds books from Leiden, that seem not to be available in Frankfurt. However, they are available, but have to be searched differently. E.g. in a search for "Brian Chikwava" Leiden has two anthologies of literature, which Frankfurt also has. Try the "UnionCats" button as a diversion route for this problem. Both the button to the German library union catalogues and to the WorldCat for international users lead to the nearest library holding a copy.

Should ilissAfrica strive to get a competitor to commercial alternatives like Africa-Wide Information? In my opinion no: In the moment ilissAfrica's great advantages are that it is free of charge, that its interface is simple and easy to use, that its website database is a unique feature and that the cross search already comprises some strong catalogues and databases.

Africa-Wide Information on the other hand has many, many advantages and ilissAfrica cannot compete anyhow. However, as one tiny example, if you are not interested in full text articles of the database MediaAfrica you need to have a very special knowledge on how to exclude results from individual data contributors. Additionally, the subject indexing differs from data contributor to data contributor. Therefore, one has to have user trainings, tutorials, help sheets and help texts (which we do not have). Finally, some of the included databases are available for free – but in Africa-Wide Information you have to pay for it.

At the beginning of ilissAfrica we thought that in the future it is necessary to include many more catalogues and databases. However, you come to the point that it might be too much. You have to scroll down to see the all databases included (like e.g. Medien-Bühne-Film). You get many more duplicates in the results. The problem of heterogeneity increases. So in my opinion ilissAfrica should not just become bigger.

With the included catalogues and databases you definitely will not miss any important book and you will find any article from the more important African Studies journals. And you will find a few websites on a given subject as an entry point to a guided web search. Any student working on a paper or even a bachelor or master thesis might find the relevant literature with

using ilissAfrica only. And for a doctoral dissertation then one should use Africa-Wide Information and other databases. Do not get me wrong, it is not a question of over-dimensioned self-confidence, no, it is a question of the strategy for the future of our project. The effort to include more catalogues in the cross search is very large, while the results improve only a little. And we do not have adequate resources to become a serious competitor for Africa-Wide Information anyhow.

## **5.) Prospects**

If we will not become bigger, what else do we plan for the next two years?

We might integrate some German picture archives (Frankfurt, DEVA, Frobenius Institute). So the cross search will be broadened on pictures, which is also a first attempt to include primary data.

The second idea is to strengthen the service of full text e-documents through the integration of a section of BASE (Bielefeld Academic Search Engine), which is an OAI service provider. The Africa section would comprise 14 institutional repositories from African universities.

The third and last point is the broadening of our marketing activities to the so called web2.0. While the first two are still in its planning stage, the third has already become a reality: In October 2010 a special blog, a twitter-account and a Facebook page for ilissAfrica were set up. With this we want to achieve three aims: First to get new users, especially those, who grew up with these social networks. Therefore, ilissAfrica should be present at these social tools to meet the user where he spends most of his time. He can find us, can become a fan, point others to us, make a search in ilissAfrica via a Facebook app etc. This is also the reason why we do not offer a similar service (e.g. a blog) on the ilissAfrica-website, because the WordPress blog-world is inter-connected as well – mainly via common tags. The second aim is simply to generate links to ilissAfrica which improves the ranking in Google. The third aim is the international networking: On Twitter someone asked for „African Studies“-Institutes in Asia. Then I answered with a link to the internet resources in ilissAfrica. Actually the question came from a Japanese political scientist working on Africa who wanted to set up an “Asian Africanists Network”. With our help, he got contact to an institute in India – so in the Web2.0 the way from Japan to India leads via Germany. The only problem with these new marketing tools is that I have to do it on my own – and no other of my former tasks will disappear.

In spring 2012 this will become even more serious, because third-party funding will expire. So we have to integrate the project into the daily life and the normal funding of the university

library. To keep it running I have to do it, only the website database will be maintained by a student worker. Our library plans to install a computer specialist on a permanent contract – however, one specialist has to maintain four subject gateways. By the way, our project partner the GIGA Information Centre in Hamburg already secured the maintenance of the website database of the social sciences part for the next two years.

Also the general political climate for the concept of portals like ilissAfrica worsens. We have to realize a change of the funding strategy of the German Research Foundation. ilissAfrica and some 40 other portals were specifically funded to transform the national special collection scheme (a collaborative acquisition plan) into the internet. Today they are much more keen on funding virtual research environments and portals for primary data. On the long run the subject gateways are expected to transform somehow.

This is the more general motivation behind our strategy for the next years. However, these moderate expansions are still library driven steps. Much more sense would make a research driven process integrating primary data and secondary data – where ilissAfrica is one part of. This process also should be fostered by the German African Studies Association and/or the AEGIS group. Researchers should engage themselves much more in the planning of infrastructure.