Building African studies collections outside Africa: new challenges and directions for print, electronic and online communications

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There has been a long continuity of libraries across Europe collecting research material from Africa. This has clear benefits for researchers living and working in Africa, whose work gets higher visibility in the global research community. It is also of high value to research and policy in Europe. One reason why libraries in Europe collect material from Africa is because that material is of relevance across a range of research and policy questions. For example: early indicators of climate change; health and education policy development among geographically hard-to-reach communities; and new forms of political engagement. In many cases the research relies on networks of contacts and the ability to address a rapidly changing environment. It cannot be replicated or carried out as effectively by researchers based in Europe. The use of electronic publishing and communication has brought huge benefits in the speed with which research from Africa can be produced, and improved access to and visibility of that research. The past 20 years has seen much effort in building capacity in Africa to take advantage of new communications technology, and in many countries this is now reaching maturity. The benefits also bring challenges to research libraries in Europe that specialise in African studies. Researchers need and expect a different form of mediation in finding and access to material in an online environment. They are unlikely, for example, to consider visiting a physical building to read material in electronic form. For libraries, that have often seen preservation as an essential part of their obligations towards stewardship, there are difficult questions about their role in the preservation of born digital content that they do not "own".

This paper does not set out to provide an answer to these challenges. Instead, it attempts to do three things. First, it will outline these challenges within the context of the British Library's African collections. Second, it will look at some of the developments across Europe. By doing these, it will contribute to our understanding of the role of European libraries and other institutions in enabling access, in the longer as well as short-term, to research from Africa. For this reason, the paper will finish by outlining questions and issues rather than trying to reach conclusions. A crucial question is which of these issues are of the most importance and urgency for European libraries.

The British Library collects both books and serials from Africa – predominantly the former. We acquire from Africa mainly by purchase, and mainly in English, although we also buy selectively in African languages, French, Portuguese and Arabic. To give an idea of the scale of this buying, in 2010/11 we ordered around 280 non-official titles from sub-Saharan Africa – substantial, although not on the same scale as the Library of Congress.

Most of our buying from sub-Saharan Africa is from four major suppliers, and most of it is still in print. In Africa, the trend to publish digitally is, unsurprisingly, not as pronounced as in other areas of the world: it could be described as a gradual move, rather than a flight, to digital. However, even where the final product is print, electronic publishing models have had a beneficial effect on production and dissemination. The use of electronic packages in book design and format, and some degree of standardisation of electronic files that can be shared quickly, has improved quality and

helped speed the publication process. It has also made possible co-publishing models, where the cost of publication (and risks associated) can be shared across countries. The African Books Collective has achieved much in popularising print-on-demand publishing and digital printing, with benefits in reducing transportation costs and making smaller print-runs possible (again reducing financial risk to the publisher). As the distributor for CODESRIA, OSSREA and the Association of African Universities, the African Books Collective maintains a vital role in ensuring the dissemination of current social science research from Africa.

For journals, the picture is a little different. Although print remains very important, we also license content from Africa through Sabinet (which consists of South African journals) and Africa-Wide Information (which is an aggregation of bibliographic databases, and some full-text, again based in South Africa). Budget constraints mean that we have so far not been able to subscribe to the very useful newspaper aggregation site, AllAfrica.com, nor to African Journals Online (AJOL).

 A related challenge for the Library is the often low visibility of the content of many of the print journals from Africa to which it subscribes, but does not index at article level. The *Africa Bibliography*, now available online, helps fill this gap through indexing journals from Africa alongside those from Europe and North America. Other libraries are also adding records at article level to their catalogues. In Europe, the library of the Africa Studies Centre in Leiden has been leading in including article-level records for journals from Africa. The British Library for Development Studies, a separate organisation to the British Library, and based at the Institute for Development Studies in Sussex, has similarly been building up an extensive database of African journal literature that can be searched on their catalogue.

Government publications from former British colonies in Africa are a strength of the British Library's collections. Before independence, they came in more or less consistently under colonial copyright legislation. Thereafter, the British Library continued to collect official publications from newly independent African states, although in many cases supply has become irregular, particularly from the time of the economic crises of the 1980s. Overall, therefore, the post-independence collections contain a great number of gaps.

Today, we continue to collect hard-copy items from as many Commonwealth countries as possible and acquire government publications in particular from Botswana, the Gambia, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Lesotho, Namibia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe and some of the islands. Our collecting priorities are: most kinds of Parliamentary papers; selected *Gazettes*; primary and secondary legislation; statistical series; development and national plans; and the annual reports of key government ministries as well as the national bank. Some items or series come to us direct from government printers or bodies such as Statistics South Africa, but many are collected by specialist suppliers based in, or travelling to, Africa. Supply is generally unpredictable and patchy.

The last few years have seen increasing numbers of African government publications published on the internet. Many African countries have gone down this route for selected, and increasing numbers, of publications. This has had two major consequences. The first is far greater accessibility to researchers. In 2009–10 we carried out a small project to analyse what exactly was happening

with these publications, taking Nigeria and South Africa as examples.[1] For South Africa, we found that a far greater range of official publications was available on the web than we were obtaining in hard copy. These publications included the national census; a wide range of statistical reports and other surveys; annual reports of government ministries; development and strategic plans; and Parliamentary papers. In some instances, however, online publication does not broaden the spectrum of available government documents quite as much as might be assumed, because in some cases digital documents are no longer available in print. Indeed, when we tried (in 2005/6) to place new orders for a number of governmental annual reports that we had not obtained in years, we found that most were now only available digitally.

In Nigeria – where, it has been argued, a culture of secrecy makes access to information problematic[2] – far fewer government publications are available on the internet. Nevertheless, there are some Parliamentary papers, some Acts and several different statistical publications, although very little in the way of development plans, national plans or annual reports from ministries. Again, these resources generally widen the range of what we are able to collect at the BL.

What is happening is made clearer by a recent analysis at the British Library of part of our holdings of serials titles (of official publications) for selected African countries. We investigated the extent to which official serials titles from these countries were appearing on the web. The results of this exercise – and the figures will have a margin of error – makes interesting reading. Out of a total of 326 items, the largest category (111) was that of publications that seem to have ceased, or are no longer being supplied, and are not available on the web. The next highest (88) was of those available in both formats. Remarkably, the number of titles only available in hard copy, and the number no longer in hard copy but on the web, was exactly equal at 66. South Africa, Namibia and to some extent Tanzania stood out as countries with a marked migration of government publications to the web. (See Appendix 1 for the full figures.)

While the overall picture is clearly, therefore, not a simple one, there is nevertheless a move of some official publications to the web. The fact these are freely available online makes them more widely accessible than if they are in store at the British Library (although these days anyone with a need to use our collections can obtain a reader pass; the gatekeepers at the Library are less fearsome than they used to be).

The second and less positive consequence of web publication of these items is the question of long-term preservation, particularly when hard copies are no longer being produced. The main Nigerian government website (www.nigeria.gov.ng), for example, appears to function only intermittently. In some cases, too, publications previously online have been taken down, at least temporarily: the South African census of 1996, for example, could not be found in March 2010, although by May 2011 it had been restored.

It seems therefore to be the case that, while African governments often have the capacity to put their publications on the web, they cannot necessarily guarantee long-term access and preservation.

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[1] Colleagues who worked on this project were Nigel Robinson, Ewalina Bergonzi, Jennie Grimshaw and Patrick Casey.

[2] Angel Batiste, 'The current state of publishing and access to government information in Nigeria', Paper to IFLA conference, 2008, p. 10.

For one thing, they may not have the resources needed to implement governmental digital preservation and storage policies. In Kenya, for example, recent enquiries showed that the two bodies responsible for the preservation of these items (the National Archives and National Library) are not able to do so digitally, although the policy of the National Archives is to print out and preserve hard-copy versions. Add to this problems with internet access and website reliability, as well as, in some cases, the unpredictable effects of unrest or civil war on the business of government, and it is easy to see why African governments have difficulties in maintaining items that are, after all, a lot more difficult to future-proof than paper.

The 'move to digital' of official publications creates a particular problem for the British Library. We can no longer acquire certain publications in hard copy. We also cannot preserve them digitally, both because there is such demand on our permanent store that UK publications have to be prioritised, and because of the difficulties of getting permission to do so. We do not print out and bind these items ourselves because the staff resource is not available and there might be copyright issues with doing so. We are however following this up through research into the issue (of necessity constrained by staff time) and through redoubling our efforts to buy as many publications in hard copy as we can – since many countries are still producing substantial numbers of these. We have also raised these issues with colleagues in other European institutions, although without as yet coming up with any obvious solutions. Discussion was begun at the Bayreuth symposium in March 2010 and this paper is partly an attempt to follow up on these issues.

For publications from commercial and non-government sources, some similarities can be seen. Print remains an important form of publication and dissemination, although an increasing amount of material is becoming available through full-text online publishing and open-access repositories. Non-government and research institute publishing has also become a rich field for collaborative discovery and access projects, many featuring international partnerships. Such projects may have lessons that could be applied to the challenges outlined for official publications.

At the level of research organisations, more and more universities and specialist research centres are using Open Access Repositories to hold, describe and disseminate research and other communications. The *Open DOAR* directory of Open Access Repositories lists 48 repositories in Africa, with most having been established in the last 3 years. Open Access Repositories provide a quick and direct way for institutions to make their research outputs available. The standardisation of software, and cross-repository searching tools such as *Open DOAR* help in visibility and resource discovery. The contents of many of the repositories are exposed to search engines. However, the content and quality of repositories vary, with many holding a large proportion of PowerPoint summaries or Masters dissertations. Also, although many are listed as "live", content only appears to have been added for a few years. Maintaining institutional commitment, and encouraging a culture of contribution to repositories, is a challenge that is not specific to Africa.

Non-government and campaigns organisations frequently use their own websites to publish reports and other communications, and these can be among the most visible of electronic publications. Collaborative discovery and access projects have been successful in bringing together resources from many organisations. Examples of such projects in Europe include Eldis, which brings together literature and other resources on international development, and the Internet Library for Sub Saharan Africa (Iliss Africa). Both resources describe and link to resources from a wide range of

organisations, located in North and South institutions. In most cases, the resources are linked to at their author or publisher's location. In some cases, and with permission, Eldis keeps an access copy for use if a report is no longer available at a remote location, and for dissemination off-line.

Some libraries have started adding links to freely-available online publications in their catalogues. The library of the Africa Studies Centre in Leiden is one of the organisations taking the lead in this area for publications relating to Africa. The Centre makes local copies of non-commercial documents, but only makes use of this copy for access if the original is no longer available. Other libraries also host digital copies of reports themselves, for online discovery and access through their catalogues. The Nordic Africa Institute's *e-Africa Lit* is a sub-set of the larger library catalogue, providing full-text access to publications. These are currently from European sources, although there is some interest in starting to collect from African sources. The Library of the German Institute of Global and Area Studies (GIGA) in Hamburg creates bibliographic records for, and keeps local access copies of, selected publications from Africa. Similarly, Frankfurt University Library's Africa Department makes local copies (with author permission) of selected works in humanities and languages for long-term access. Local copies are only made for documents in sub-Saharan Africa (excluding South Africa) where there appears to be no institutional repository.

In some cases, access to full-text also involves retrospective digitisation and the creation of specialist repositories. One example has been the Oxford Refugee Studies Centre's *Forced Migration Online*. This has digitised unpublished reports from around the world, including Africa. Securing permissions to digitise was a resource-intensive process, and the project worked with partners to this end. In Africa, this included the libraries of the American University in Cairo and the Addis Ababa University. A current project at the British Library for Development Studies is creating a digital repository of publications from developing countries, with the aim of improving visibility and access to research from Southern institutions. The repository is using a creative commons licensing model, negotiated with the original publishers, in order to make material available. The first publishers to be represented are the Institute of Development Studies in Nairobi.

There are many causes for optimism regarding the sustainability of electronic publishing and repositories within Africa. The number of institutional repositories in African universities and research institutions is growing. Collaborative publishing, making use of new technologies to reduce production costs and spread financial risk, is supporting faster production and availability of research from Africa. African Journals Online (AJOL) now hosts more than 400 peer reviewed journals from 30 African countries, supporting the communication of research within Africa and to the world.

Recent years have also seen a growth of activity in European institutions around improving discovery and access to publications from Africa. Initiatives such as Iliss Africa, and the journal indexing carried out by libraries such as the British Library for Development Studies and the Africa Studies Centre, Leiden have added to the visibility of research outputs from Africa. Visibility and access for research outputs other than books or journal articles is also being supported by attempts at creating repositories of digital copies for long-term access. Copies are made with permission from authors (individuals or, more commonly, institutions) and this can carry both high resource costs and low chances of success. Securing permissions to copy, a legal requirement for libraries, is time-consuming and often results in no reply. Strategies to cope with this include: targeted collection guidelines that only seek to acquire copies where there is an identified risk of loss of the original

(and use of resource discovery and linking for other cases); and finding partner organisations in Africa to support the permissions process. It has also been suggested that libraries could make copies where no reply has been received, but this is seen by most as carrying too high a risk.

Alongside these successes, there may be some notes of caution. New technologies and institutional initiatives are improving access and increasing the potential for long-term preservation, but there are still questions about continuity over longer periods. Repositories and collaborative projects require institutional commitment and, in some cases, changes in research cultures regarding the sharing of information. European initiatives are limited to the extent that they can find out about research from Africa, and, in building repositories, on their ability to find the right contacts and partners to help secure permissions. These limitations can contribute to an under-representation of research from Africa in Europe-based directories and repositories.

This has been a short review both of issues for the British Library, and for other research libraries, and of some current projects. There has been a lot of progress in recent years that we can celebrate, but there remain issues. For the British Library these have been seen predominantly as affecting supply of official publications, but there is more wide applicability. It would be useful to discuss these further:

1. Visibility of publications has greatly improved with online publication, but there is still some fragmentation among services, and it is not always clear where there is duplication, and where there are gaps. The former may not be significant, but the latter feels more so. Is there a need for existing catalogues and projects to be more joined-up?

2. Much material is available without charge, but there is less clarity about permission to re-use. Securing such permissions is resource-intensive, and there are a high proportion of failed requests. Libraries have generally been risk-averse in re-use of online content, and are required to be by intellectual property regulations.

3. Projects that have had a higher level of partnership with organisations in African countries have shown success in securing access, re-use and, in some cases preservation. However, partnerships can also be narrow in coverage, have high resource costs to maintain, and are difficult to keep going over longer durations. They also rely on shared goals between participating institutions, and this may be difficult to establish for some subjects and types of information (are there common goals for official publications?). Although these may provide the most robust solutions, there is a limit to the number of partnership projects that an institution can maintain.

4. Libraries have been concerned about long-term preservation of digital objects, and have seen this as part of their role. Is this a view shared by producers of information and researchers? Are there trends that suggest that other organisations are better suited to fill this role, or that publishers will self-archive for the long term?

5. Have projects addressed the right sorts of information? Typically, projects have focussed on journals, and the sorts of material sometimes described as 'grey literature' (research reports and information from campaigns and policy centres).

This paper has focussed mainly on library-based projects. There have also been successes within publisher collaboration, and work on archives and research data. Further investigation into these projects may help provide answers to some of these questions.

Resources and organisations referred to in this paper

Africa Bibliography <http://africabibliography.cambridge.org/guideToBibliography.do>

Africa-Wide Information <http://www.ebscohost.com/public/africa-wide-information>

African Books Collective <http://www.africanbookscollective.com/>

African Journals Online (AJOL) <http://www.ajol.info/>

African Studies Centre, Library <http://www.ascleiden.nl/Library/>

AllAfrica.com <http://allafrica.com/>

The British Library <http://www.bl.uk>
>   Resources for African Studies at the British Library
>   <http://www.bl.uk/reshelp/findhelpregion/africa/africa/aresources.html>

>   Official Publications at the British Library
>   < http://www.bl.uk/reshelp/findhelprestype/offpubs/index.html>

The British Library for Development Studies <http://blds.ids.ac.uk/>

CODESRIA (the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa) <http://www.codesria.org/>

Eldis <http://www.eldis.org/>

Forced Migration Online <http://www.forcedmigration.org/>

Frankfurt University Library, Africa Department
<http://www.ub.uni-frankfurt.de/afrika/afrika_en.html>

GIGA (German Institute of Global and Area Studies), Information Centre
<http://www.giga-hamburg.de/english/index.php?file=iz.html&folder=library>

Iliss Africa (Internet Library Sub-Saharan Africa) <http://www.ilissafrica.de/>

Nordic Africa Institute, Library <http://www.nai.uu.se/library>

Open DOAR (Directory of Open Access Repositories) <http://www.opendoar.org/index.html>

Sabinet <http://www.sabinet.co.za/>

Appendix 1:

Analysis of 326 official publication serials titles taken by the British Library, 2011

Country	No. of titles not found on web, no recent issues	No. of titles not found on web, hard copy still rec'd by UK libraries	No. of titles on web, hard copy no longer rec'd by UK libraries	No. of titles on web, hard copy still rec'd by UK libraries	Totals
NB 'still rec'd' = 2008 or later					
Botswana	10	11	7	12	40
Gambia	2	2	2	1	7
Ghana	7	2	1	3	13
Kenya	12	10	4	5	31
Malawi	10	6	8	8	32
Namibia	21	7	25	23	76
Nigeria	3	1	2	2	8
South Africa	3	1	3	9	16
Swaziland	6	14	0	3	23
Tanzania	5	2	8	5	20
Uganda	7	2	2	7	18
Zambia	11	7	2	3	23
Zimbabwe	14	1	2	2	19
Totals	**111**	**66**	**66**	**83**	326

Notes
1. This analysis covers only a part of the British Library's official publication serials holdings. Not all African countries were covered.
2. Because of the difficulties of working with these statistics, this table will contain some level of error, and the figures are ball-park only.
3. Websites possibly carrying viruses have been excluded, as have electronic government publications provided on a commercial basis.
4. Titles recorded as being on the web may nevertheless be incomplete or not always accessible.
5. The comparison of titles to web resources, on which this analysis is based, was carried out by the Official Publications team at the British Library: Jennie Grimshaw, Patrick Casey and Jerry Jenkins.