

Challenges of Broadening Access to Scholarly E-resources in Africa – The JSTOR Example

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Since the early 1990's, several initiatives to increase the availability of scholarly information in Africa have resulted in a significant increase in the number of African institutions accessing these resources. Among the initiatives are: INASP's PERii program, eIFL.net, AJOL, JSTOR, schemes funded by commercial publishers and the UN, namely HINARI, AGORA and OARE, and so on. JSTOR's engagement in Africa consists of two main activities: (1) *gratis* provision of the JSTOR archive to non-profit and research organizations (since 2006), and (2) developing a digital library of primary source materials from and about Africa (since 2004). JSTOR's availability has resulted in an exponential increase in the number of African institutions' participation and usage from only a handful before 2006 to currently more than 539 institutions across the continent. Partnerships in building a digital library about Africa resulted in the development of three primary source collections: *African Plants* (now *JSTOR Plant Science*), *Struggles for Freedom in Southern Africa*, and *African Cultural Heritage Sites and Landscapes*. The increase in the number of participating JSTOR institutions and in usage is concentrated in particular countries and geographical regions. Observations from JSTOR's usage data reveal that availability of e-resources does not necessarily translate into significant usage of the collections. This correlates to a recent study (2010) commissioned by the Association of Commonwealth Universities to evaluate the availability and access to e-resources at four universities in East and Southern Africa. The study found that the top 20-ISI ranked journals are available at a level approaching many European universities, but the overall usage of the resources remains low. Among the factors to be addressed in order to increase usage are: awareness and better training in the use of e-resources; nurturing a research culture within institutions so that they become consumers and producers of new knowledge; continued investments in the access and affordability of the internet and electricity; and finally, increased availability of reliable and low cost computers. JSTOR's outreach program in Africa, while modest in size and scope, is aimed at addressing the awareness, training, and capacity building issues. Donors, users, and institutions should unite to address these challenges.