

Research Africa Reviews Vol. 2 No. 3, December 2018

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RA Reviews Editorial Voice:

Africa's Academic Publishing Industry – Quo Vadis?

When one scans online sites searching for information about the state of Africa's academic publishing houses, one finds that only countries such as South Africa, Egypt, Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Kenya have lively industries. Quite a number of African countries seem to have been neglected from the list that appears on the African Minds' site (est. 2016 <http://www.africanminds.co.za/>); hence very little meaningful development has been visible in the knowledge production process. African Minds, an African NGO that is based in South Africa and managed as well as governed by an international team, established a project that assessed 'African University Presses'(AUP) and the overall knowledge production process.

The African Minds NGO was created with many aims in mind, one of which was to conduct "research on developments and trends in scholarly publishing in Africa." In seeking to make data, information and knowledge more accessible, the NGO indeed has noteworthy aims and despite its formation only two years ago, it has already accomplished a fair amount. One of the projects that it has so far produced is the AUP project. When AUP got off the ground, the project's drivers planned to offer fresh insights and understandings of African university presses; they did this by taking into account the various 'technological advances and market opportunities'. The site further stated that AUP's goals included the enhancement of access to basic knowledge and making stakeholders aware of high-quality African academic publishing.

Since it is beyond the scope of this editorial to unpack the complete set of goals the NGO has, it will selectively comment on two issues that appear on the African Minds' site. The site generated a list of approximately 65 presses that any interested researcher would be able to explore, evaluate and analyze. Be it a particular university press or undertaking a comparative study of two or more university presses, the researcher would be able to collect basic information from the site. The material provided isn't rich in content but rather is a starting point for a researcher to begin with and expand upon. Additionally, the site offers an overview of the presses' geographical spread but underscores whether a university press is a mere press source or a publishing house.

This raises a few rhetorical questions about academic publishing: why has Africa lagged behind in setting up university presses or academic publishing houses? What effort has been made by the country's public universities in contributing effectively to the knowledge production

process? To what extent have African governments funded research projects to generate new knowledge? If presses have been set up at African universities then to what extent do they favorably compete with those in Europe and the Americas that have been in the business for many decades? Though these questions were only raised to partly respond to the ‘Quo Vadis’ (i.e. ‘In which direction are these institutions heading?’), it should cause one to seriously reflect on the role that universities play within their countries: the programs that they offer to their graduates and the direction they intend to take as they encounter a vibrant, competitive, and transformed tertiary educational environment not only in their countries but also globally.

Returning to AUP, it should be noted that the project’s founders produced a very informative report titled *The African University Presses*. The report was prepared by François van Schalkwyk & Thierry M Luescher who had it published during 2017. Their co-authored report provided an overview of AUP’s landscape and demonstrated that among the AUP team, there was a small, active group of university presses. The authors made the point that many of these presses have been hampered by institutional logics and have not made adequate use of the technological advances that should be able to assist them in reconfiguring ‘their production, distribution and marketing processes.’ Their study, which referenced case studies such as Makerere University Press, also reported that African academics have pursued easy routes in publishing their findings using predatory instead of reputable publishers. This is an issue that has been tackled by a few scholars during the past few years but which has become increasingly problematic since many have difficulties in blocking these predatory platforms from operating.

The report was accompanied by an online interactive map so that the researcher can obtain fundamental data about a specific press. The functions are very user-friendly, only requiring a click of buttons and filters to view relevant information. In looking at Egypt on the site, there was no data for one to explore though Egypt boasts a few university presses such as Assiut University Press. This was unlike South Africa’s UNISA Press that shared various links (such as Twitter and Facebook) with the user. In scanning all the map’s filters, one would observe that some have added sub-folders with a full dataset; however, those that do not will only reflect basic data.

Even though African Minds is a very young site, it has assisted in contributing towards an insight into the status of Africa’s Academic Publishing Industry. Prior to its existence, one had to undertake searches that generated very little data. In drawing attention to the fact that Africa has many university presses, it is essential to ponder in which direction they are moving and in which way they are competing with the established, globally respectable publishing industries such as Chicago University Press, Palgrave, Oxford University Press etc. that have made use of advanced technologies to market and circulate their publications.

Leaving that aside and turning to the contents of the current issue of *RA Reviews*, it is observed that it consists of a review essay, ten book reviews in English and another two in

Arabic. And the RART, once again, wish to encourage its readers to consider sending reviews of books, films, exhibitions and other items to this platform.

Acknowledgement

The Editor-in-Chief expresses as usual his appreciation to each and every member of RART for their various inputs at different stages of the process. He registers his heartfelt gratitude to Duke University's Professor Mbaye Lo who had been involved at various stages editorially. And he also records his thanks to RA's team led by Madison Cullinan, as well as Elise Muller (OIT) at Duke University, who assisted in finalizing this particular issue. As RAR enters its third year of existence, the review team would like to seize this opportunity to thank various book publishers who delicately send books and review materials to our network of reviewers. We would like to particularly thank Justin Cox of African Books Collective for his unrestricted collaborating with RAR reviewers.

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ISSN 2575-6990