

# Rowing upstream: promoting and disseminating LIS research in sub-Saharan Africa<sup>1</sup>

Patrick Ngulube<sup>2</sup>

Information Studies Programme, School of Sociology and Social Studies,  
University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa  
ngulubep@ukzn.ac.za

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*Dissemination of LIS research is fundamental to scholarship and the sustainable development of society. This article aims at demonstrating that research findings should be promoted and disseminated if they are to be of any utility to society. However, researchers in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) face a lot of problems when it comes to promoting and disseminating their research. Journals are one of the avenues that may be used, but some international journals are not easily accessible. Journals in Africa face viability problems. Policies in certain countries force LIS researchers to publish in certain journals which in some cases would be inaccessible to African scholars. Professional associations are not actively involved in disseminating research results in most countries in SSA. Publishing thematically by journals may inhibit publishing research outside the scope of a given theme. Open access and institutional repositories may help researchers in SSA to promote and disseminate their research.*

**Keywords:** African Journals OnLine, Capacity Building, Digital Repositories, Journals, Library and Information Science Research, Open Access, Scholarly Communication

## 1 Introduction

Research builds on existing knowledge. Theoretical frameworks are based on what has been done before. Scholars use research findings to generate further research, models and archetypes. The recording and dissemination of research is fundamental to scholarship and sustainable development. The dissemination of research findings is the *raison d'être* for research. Many organisations have made investments in knowledge, people, and infrastructure, and the knowledge that is generated should be popularized in order to achieve sustainable development. Generating and communicating innovative knowledge is fundamental to the progress of society and its transformation.

Many LIS researchers in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) work without the benefit of tapping into the knowledge of their predecessors because research emanating from the region is not easily available and accessible. Or is it a question of publishing to the wrong audience, as Nwakanma (2003) observed in the case of Nigeria? Scholars are forced to publish to the wrong audience due to limited outlets for disseminating research in their environment and policies of recognising research outputs in some countries. There is a danger of keeping on re-inventing the wheel and repeating research that was done before without any further innovative input if scholars do not have access to the pool of knowledge that is fundamental to their environment.

Despite the fact that LIS researchers have limited avenues when it comes to promoting and disseminating their findings, scholars in SSA have not focused on this potential crisis in scholarly communication. Consequently, there is a dearth of literature concerning the promotion and dissemination of library and information science (LIS) research in SSA. The tendency of many scholars has been to concentrate on funding library research in SSA at the expense of promoting the dissemination of the resultant findings of their research (for example, see Alemna 1993; Ekoja 1999). The common formal avenues for disseminating LIS research include conference papers, theses and dissertations, journal articles, and books. However, this article focuses on scientific journals because they are perceived to be the fastest way of promoting and disseminating research. Previous research is most commonly published in journals, where the research papers are 'refereed' by qualified experts prior to publication for quality control (Harnad 2003).

The LIS research community in SSA is facing major challenges when it comes to accessing previous research as well as disseminating and promoting their own. Although a study by Raptis (1992) ranked authors from Africa third behind authors from Europe (37.9 percent) and the United States (21.92 percent), African authors have a problem of finding avenues for disseminating their research results. Access to theses and dissertations for research purposes is very limited. Conferences on LIS matters seem to be limited if the call for papers appearing in LIS journals, newsletters and Internet

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2. Patrick Ngulube, PhD, is an Associate Professor, Information Studies Programme, University of KwaZulu Natal, South Africa

Listserve is anything to go by. LIS journals are dogged by a high mortality rate. National LIS associations are playing a limited role in promoting and sponsoring LIS journals. In some countries such as South Africa policies of rewarding LIS academic authors force them to publish in South African post-secondary education approved journals (SAPSE) at the expense of non-accredited journals published elsewhere in Africa.

Last but not least, institutions and researchers in developing countries often have little or no access to the articles on Africa published in the North due to the high cost of journal subscription. A limited number of African scholars publish in international journals partly because they have restricted access to the “instructions to authors” and journal technical layouts and styles as a result of lack of access to either full text online journals or their hard copy equivalents (Ngulube 2006). This has the effect of depriving knowledge generated in developing countries space in the global arena (Arunachalam 1994; Gibbs 1995). Given the foregoing, one could safely argue that LIS research from SSA seem to be “rowing upstream” when it comes to disseminating and promoting their research, to use the keywords of the title of the work of Levey and Young (2002). The problems faced by LIS researchers in publicising their work may lead to knowledge gaps in the global information society, and further widen the knowledge divide in the world and the marginalisation of researchers from the periphery.

## 2 Factors limiting promotion and dissemination of LIS research in Africa

This section discusses some of the factors that hinder the promotion and dissemination of LIS research in Africa. The focus will be on capacity building of authors, inadequate professional associations’ outlets for disseminating research, sustainability of journals, policies limiting journals in which authors could publish, publishing thematic issues and policies on recognising research outputs in some countries with special reference to South Africa.

### 2.1 Building the capacity of sub-Saharan Africa's authors

A cursory perusal of table of contents of many scientific journals tends to show that established authors pen most of the articles and they tend to dominate the publishing LIS landscape. That suggests that many LIS practitioners may lack capacity to publish. The lack of writing skills among LIS professionals has inhibited their ability to contribute to LIS research in east and southern Africa (Mazikana 1999:4; Stilwell 2000:168). Some workshops to build capacity were carried out in the 1990s and 2005, and their impact remains to be seen. The rate of rejection of papers submitted to the *African Journal of Library, Archives and Information Science* was as high as 61.44% (Aina & Mabawonku 1996:73). Such results call for a need to build capacity among authors through strategies such as training and mentoring.

Furthermore, the failure to attract publishable articles has negatively affected the viability of some journals in Africa. An example that comes to mind is the *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, a project partly sponsored by IFLA Africa Section. Authors should be capacitated in order for them to have confidence to write and submit the results of their research. Perhaps, what is also needed is a survey of the needs of emerging writers after which workshops that meet their specific needs are conducted. Targeting would be necessary because one size does not fit all.

### 2.2 The role of professional associations in promoting and disseminating research

Generally, professional associations in Africa have low membership as observed by Aina and Mabawonku (1996:64), but this is not the current case with the Library and Information Association of South Africa (LIASA) which has significant membership and has initiated a lot of projects including salvaging the *South African Journal of Library and Information Science* which was on the verge of disappearing from the LIS landscape in South Africa. LIASA has also managed to establish interest groups that meet regularly in various provinces and it also convenes an annual conference regularly.

Taking the cue from LIASA, one could argue that professional library and information associations may play a role in disseminating research results through various avenues if they strategically position themselves. That way they will be able to:

- (i) Sponsor publication of LIS journals
- (ii) Convene conferences and workshops that promote the dissemination of research rather than focusing on descriptive papers that are not based on empirical evidence
- (iii) Sponsor awards for emerging and established LIS authors
- (iv) Promote the establishment of institutional repositories for dissertation and theses
- (v) Promote open access initiatives (Morrison 2004:8)

### 2.3 Library and information science journals in sub-Saharan Africa: sustainability issues

Although it is recognised that journals play a key role in the development and promotion of a discipline, the sustainability of LIS journals in SSA has been plagued by numerous problems. Some journals are struggling to find sponsors. For instance, the *South African Journal of Library and Information Science*, which was regarded by Aina and Mooko (1999) as one of the major publishing outlets in Africa, almost collapsed in the early part of the twenty first century due to lack of

funding and leadership. Sponsorship can help advance the journal's mission by enhancing revenue and allowing the publisher a wider range of opportunities to serve readers. There are very few African library science journals that can be used to disseminate research results. South Africa and Nigeria are in the forefront as they publish more than one LIS related journal.

Some journals have regrettably disappeared from the publishing landscape, for instance the *Zimbabwe Librarian* and the *S.A Archives Journal*. Perhaps the trend is not surprising if we take into consideration the fact that a study by Alemna (1998) discovered that of the 17 West African library and information journals that were established between 1954 and 1994, 14 had ceased publication. On the other hand, Aina and Mabawonku (1996) point out that in most African countries scholarly journals cease to exist immediately after they are established, and those that survive are published irregularly within two to four years behind schedule. Such findings and the current state of LIS journal publishing partly explain why it is difficult to promote and disseminate research results within Africa and the world, thus limiting the south-south flow of information on completed research on one hand and the north-south flow on the other.

It would appear that the mortality rate is likely to be higher for journals that are initiated as projects. Such journals tend to collapse when funds dwindle before they stand on their feet. An example that comes to mind is the *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, a project partly sponsored by IFLA Africa Section. The sustainability of the journal is very doubtful in view of the fact that it was supposed to have been self-sustaining after three years of inception (Alegbeleye 2001). That does not seem to be likely, since it has difficulties in attracting publishable articles, and the level of its awareness in Africa's LIS landscape seems to be very limited. It is apparent that LIS journals in SSA are "rowing upstream" when it comes to sustainability issues.

#### 2.4 Publishing thematic issues

Some journals tend to publish thematic issues, for instance *Innovation: appropriate librarianship and information work in Southern Africa*. The Journal has published 29 thematic issues out of the 33 issues that were produced between 1990 and 2006. That has the effect of restricting the kind of research results that can be disseminated at any given time. The approach is not bad in itself if it is contextualised. For instance, *Library Trends*, one of the renowned international journals which is abstracted in the prestigious Social Citation Index, concentrates on thematic issues. Such a line is justifiable if one takes into consideration that LIS journals are well established and plenteous in the developed world. The same cannot be said of Africa where there are very few LIS journals. In that regard, LIS journals should adopt a broader publishing strategy that cuts across the LIS field rather than espousing the thematic approach. Diversification within the LIS field is the way to go as it allows for coverage of many subjects.

#### 2.5 Policies on recognising research outputs: SAPSE accreditation in South Africa

South African scholars are forced to publish in SAPSE accredited journals and journals indexed by the Sciences Citation Index of the Institute of Scientific Information (ISI), Social Sciences Citation Index of the ISI, Arts and Humanities Citation Index of the ISI, and International Bibliography of Social Sciences (IBSS) if they are to get any research incentives from the Department of Education. As a policy some universities in South Africa use publication in SAPSE accredited journals and those listed in international indices as a benchmark to measure their academics' research outputs. Furthermore, promotion is generally based on outputs in SAPSE accredited journals and those listed in international indices. Such a policy leads to researchers publishing in a certain category of journals which in most cases are not accessible to people in SSA due to prohibitive subscription rates. For instance the *African Journal of Library, Archives and Information Science*, which has been touted as the premier librarianship and information science in Africa that publishes regularly since 1991 (Opeke 2002:38), is not on the SAPSE list. Viable journals such as the *Ghana Library Journal* and the *University of Dar es Salaam Library Journal* do not appear on the international indices. These journals are abstracted on African Journals OnLine and full text articles are available to African readers free of charge to most readers in Africa. Such relatively accessible journals have the potential of making the dissemination and promotion of research in SSA achievable. It was once observed in Nigeria that publishing Nigerian LIS research in foreign journals which are relatively inaccessible deprives the nation of the benefits of utilising the research results to solve LIS problems in Nigeria (Nwakanma 2003:93). The same is true with other countries in SSA.

The need to publish in SAPSE accredited journals in South Africa has forced LIS professionals to turn to the few South African LIS accredited journals and those listed in international indices, thus depriving local people of their research, creating publishing backlogs and high rejection rates of manuscripts as editors are flooded with a lot of articles that do not have space to be published, particularly in South Africa. Established authors tend to be always at an advantage as they are familiar with the publishing turf. This is not good for the non-established authors and the dissemination of their research results. It normally takes up to six months for the peer review process to be completed and by the time an author is notified of the outcome of the process, the results could be either stale or could have been overtaken by events. This

calls for a rethink of the whole SAPSE approach if we are to promote an equitable and sustainable way of disseminating research results in LIS. Forcing authors to publish in SAPSE journals and journals listed in international indices also threatens the viability of non-accredited ones. Non-SAPSE accredited journals may end up failing to attract publishable articles and become a dumping ground for articles of a low standard.

### 3 Way forward

This section discusses means by which research in SSA may be promoted. African Journals OnLine, open access and institutional repositories have been identified as some of the vehicles that may be used by researchers in SSA to open new pathways in scholarly communication. These strategies may increase the visibility of SSA scholars and their research.

#### 3.1 African Journals OnLine (AJOL): disseminating knowledge of indigenous scholarship

African Journals OnLine (AJOL) was founded in 1998 by the International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publication (INASP). In 2005 AJOL moved to African Management and it became a not-for-profit company in its own right, based in South Africa and managed in association with National Inquiry Services Centre (NISC). The AJOL database was developed using the open-source journal management software called Open Journal Systems (OJS).

AJOL provides access to African published research, and increases worldwide knowledge of indigenous scholarship through its database of journals published in Africa, covering the full range of academic disciplines. Journals that are included in the database are (AJOL n. d):

- Scholarly in content, and contain original research (in addition to other content)
- Peer reviewed and quality controlled
- Able to provide all content for inclusion on AJOL (tables of contents and abstracts) in electronic format (e.g. Word files)
- Guarantee permission from the authors to allow AJOL to operate a document delivery service
- Published within the African continent. Management of publishing strategy, business development and production operation are all run from an African country.

AJOL provides information on each participating journal, including Tables of contents and abstracts (where available) for all articles published within these journals and some full text articles. All the material on AJOL is free to view, search and browse, however copyright of all content is retained by the journals or authors (AJOL n. d). Full text documents can be ordered and are available free of charge to countries in certain categories in SSA. Most countries in SSA fit into the category of those who are entitled to subsidized articles. AJOL may prove to be an ideal avenue that scholars in SSA can use to promote their research as AJOL provides support to researchers around the world through access to information.

#### 3.2 Open access

Although there are some concerns with open access archives such as the property rights linked to author self-archiving, undermining the viability of journals and institutional infrastructure and practices (Harnad *et al.*, 2003; Swan 2005), open access has the potential of building research capacity and promote the dissemination of research output from Africa in general, and the LIS sector in particular. The development of open access archives may improve global information dissemination and exchange (Chan, Kirsop & Arunachalam 2005). Open access creates new models of scholarly communication that are driven by technological changes (Giglia 2007).

According to the "Berlin Declaration on Open Access to knowledge in the Sciences and Humanities", an open access documentation should meet the following conditions:

The author(s) and right holder(s) of such contributions grant(s) to all users a free, irrevocable worldwide, right of access to, and a licence to copy, use, disseminate, transmit and display the work publicly and to make and distribute derivative works, in any digital medium for any responsible subject to proper attribution of authorship (community standards, will continue to provide the mechanism for the enforcement of proper attribution and responsible use of the published work, as they do now), as well as the right to make small numbers of printed copies for their personal use. A complete version of the work and all supplemental materials, including a copy of the permission as stated above, in an appropriate standard electronic format is deposited (and thus published) in at least one online repository using suitable technical standards (such as the Open Archive definitions) that is supported and maintained by an academic institution, scholarly society, government agency, or other well established organisation that seeks to enable open access, unrestricted distribution, interoperability, and long-term archiving (Seadle 2005).

It is clear from the above that open access literature should be digital, online, free of charge and free from most copyright and licensing restrictions. The IFLA (2004) statement on open access to scholarly literature and research documentation states: "Open access guarantees the integrity of the system of scholarly communication by ensuring that all research and scholarship will be available in perpetuity for unrestricted examination". In that regard, all scholarly literature and research documentation should be available in the public domain after an expiration of limited copyright protection.



Contractual obligations for authors to make scholarly literature and research documentation available without charge should be relaxed. That way authors would retain more rights to their works so that they can choose to put them into an open access venue such as a repository.

Some of the advantages of open access archives are (Chan, Kirsop & Arunachalam 2005):

- Access to international research output
- International access to research generated in developing countries
- Promotion of institutional research output
- Improve citation and research impact
- Improved access to subsidiary data

It is clear from the foregoing that open access holds a lot of promise for the dissemination and effectiveness of research from the developing world. Open Access provides a unique opportunity for research (Giglia 2007). In that regard, LIS researchers in SSA should promote the ideals of the Open Access movement and promote the adoption of Open Access so that their contribution may be included in the global knowledge society. That in turn might maximize the impact of their research worldwide. Thus, Open Access offers LIS researchers in SSA a window of opportunity to “row downstream” for the first time in history. Let us remember that indigenous communities by their very nature operated in an open access regime. In that regard, open access is not a new concept that is alien to the African environment. The use of sophisticated technology and technical framework distinguishes the open access of yester year from the open access of today.

### 3.3 Institutional repositories: closing the information gaps

Making research information available for all in the digital space raises questions related to relevance and context. Most of the information that has led to the so-called information explosion emanates from the West. Indigenous and local content is very limited. African scholars produce a lot of research, but the knowledge they produce is not accessible due to limited avenues they can use to disseminate it. However, the building of institutional repositories is likely to reverse the dominance of information generated from the West in the Internet. In other words, institutional repositories are:

- Increasing local content in the cyber space;
- Publicizing research from Africa; and
- Helping Africa participate in the information society.

In addition to building institutional repositories, there is need to formulate strategies to incorporate indigenous knowledge systems. By so doing institutional repositories will be relevant to all people in a particular context. There won't be the dominance of the “other” in the information society that is mirrored by the Internet.

## 4 Concluding remarks

It is evident that research should be disseminated irrespective of the seemingly insurmountable problems faced by LIS researchers in Africa. Researchers in sub-Saharan Africa should:

- Continue to publish in international journals, but should also archive their publications in their institutional repositories in order to make them accessible to colleagues and other readers worldwide;
- Identify emerging researchers and have a co-authorship scheme with them;
- Make their journals available online;
- National professional associations should promote the dissemination of research results;
- Create repositories of electronic theses and dissertations;
- Promote open access publications;
- The development of repositories and the wider access to research outputs they enabled should not be delayed; and
- Rise to the challenge of advocating the change of policies that hinder the wide dissemination of research.

It is easy for one to blame policies on recognising research output in certain countries and their negative effect on the viability of certain journals, but journal are to blame as well. They do not make efforts to be listed in reputable indexing services nor do they publish articles of a quality that may be recognised nationally and internationally. It has been observed that authors select journals in which to publish after consideration of the journal's reputation, impact factor, coverage by abstracting and indexing services, and increasingly by the journals availability online (Kennan & Wilson 2006). Journals in SSA will find it difficult to remain viable and even attract reputable authors if they fail to deal with these issues. Using African Journals OnLine (AJOL) facilities and open access archives may help journals in SSA to deal with problems of visibility.

It is clear from the angle that this article took that there are many areas for further research. Research is need to:

- Establish the challenges faced by LIS journal that disappear from the LIS landscape after a few years of establishment;
- Determine how far the open access initiative has taken root in African research institutions;
- Find out the role that professional library and information associations are playing in promoting the dissemination of

research;

- Establish the impact of publishing thematic issues in disseminating research results in Africa; and
- Investigate the best means of building capacity among authors in SSA.

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