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African Scholars Publishing in American Online Journals: Emperical Analysis by an Editor

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Abstract

There are some American online journals dedicated to publishing research findings of African scholars. One such online journal is The African Symposium (TAS). Although these journals might not suffer the same technological problems of African online journals, they nonetheless face many problems associated with human and technological inadequacies that make publication decisions difficult for an editor of such American online journals. The thrust of this article is to highlight some of these human and technological problems using empirical evidence from the analysis of received journal articles and feedback from a focused group discussion in a Nigerian university. Much of what is discussed in this paper is generated from insights acquired over the years as the managing editor of The African Symposium, the online journal of African Educational Research Network (AERN). Suggestions are made as to how to help minimize some of the identified problems and increase the publication opportunities of African scholars who either "publish or perish" in their various institutions on one hand, and how international research institutions and donor agencies can assist African scholars narrow the digital divide that exists between them and their American counterparts, on the other.

Keywords: African scholars, Publishing, American online journals, Emperical analysis

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INTRODUCTION

The African Educational Research Network (AERN) was founded in 1992 by a small group of United States and African universities (visit www.africanresearch.org for more information). It is a non-profit network dedicated mainly to the dissemination of information on Africa. The main projects of AERN include *The African Symposium*, our on-line African educational research journal and a variety of other activities to promote and support Africa-based scholars (AERN 2008). *The African Symposium* is specifically devoted to publishing original research findings on educational and human development issues in and on Africa. Thus the focus of the journal is large and flexible enough to accommodate scholars interested in Africa from any part of the globe.

At the first annual summit of AERN at Albany State University in April 2005, I was unanimously appointed the managing editor of *TAS* having earlier served as a reviewer for the journal for more than three years. My tenure as editor marked the beginning of the fifth year of successful online publication of the journal. My first assignment as editor was to raise the profile of the journal by applying for an international standard serial number (ISSN). Effective February 22,

2006, under Title 17 of the United States Code, the United States copyright office of the library of congress registered *The African Symposium*: *An Online Journal of the African Educational Research Network* with assigned ISSN TX 6-342-323. A copyright certificate was also issued and since then, the registration information has been put on all of our publications.

Since 1999 when *The African Symposium* made its debut, a timely publishing outlet has been provided to many African and American scholars and students who had hitherto relied on traditional paper journals for their articles. This effort has ensured access of African graduate scholars and students in American institutions to the works of scholars and graduate students in African educational and human development. Brochures were printed and widely circulated through AERN members from Africa and the United States. The journal was also advertised in many international and educational organizations like *Yearbook of International Organizations* (http://www.uia.org) and Project of the Center for Research Libraries (joyh@gragonbbs.com) among others. These efforts were rewarded with an avalanche of articles from African and American authors sent periodically to the editor electronically. While technological inadequacies are not a major threat to scholarly online publication in the United States, the same cannot be said of Africa. Most African nations face both technological and human problems in the preparation and transmission of online journal articles electronically to the editor in America.

LITERATURE REVIEW

African scholars work in technologically challenged environments (Oshikoya & Hussain, 2004). That Africa is the least technologically developed continent of the world is no longer in contention (Oshikoya & Hussain, 2004). While developed countries of the West seek to conquer space to further enhance scientific and technological development of their societies and environments, much of the African continent is still struggling to feed its teeming population and curb the menace of health and educational problems occasioned by mass illiteracy and the scourge of HIV/AIDS (Ngulube, 2004). While most African governments cannot even harness their natural endowments and low labor costs to improve the lives of their peoples, developed countries have developed information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure that makes them competitive in an increasingly globalized economy (Oshikoya & Hussain, 2004). According to Oshikoya & Hussain (2004), "the competitive and comparative advantages of countries are being determined by access to information technology and knowledge" (p.1). It may seem that Africa has more pressing problems at hand, such as education, primary health, and AIDS awareness, among others, than the development of ICT infrastructure. But the fact remains that the development of ICT is the only hope that will accelerate the development of other sectors of the African economy including education. The current ICT development deficit in Africa adversely affects the efficiency of African authors in the preparation and dissemination of their research findings through electronic transfer of the results to online journals abroad.

Ngulube (2004, p.1), noted that 'the computer (and its associated technologies) is the major driving force behind the technological changes affecting access to information'. In many African countries where articles are sent to TAS like Nigeria, Kenya, Botswana, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, and Uganda, there are significant challenges associated with ownership of personal and/or government computers that could have enhanced the authors' access to information. In a discussion following an address to prospective Nigerian authors in February 2007 at the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria, (Adewuyi, 2007), I was informed of many problems the University lecturers face that inhibit their research and teaching jobs. Many of the problems had to do with lack of ICT infrastructure, including computers.

The Internet holds the greatest potential to give African scholars access to required information to enhance their research and teaching efforts. However, Internet connectivity on the African continent lags far behind that of the rest of the world. Even where full Internet exists, it is generally restricted to the urban centers and its cost is far beyond the means of public sector users. At the same time, irregular electric power supply in many countries (Nigeria is a notorious example), necessitates the private cyber cafes to embark on the use of generators powered by expensive gasoline or diesel fuel, the availability of which is not regular. Indeed, UNESCO (2003, p.2) asserts that '70% of Africa's population does not live in reach of Internet access points. Both inadequate telecommunication systems, the socio-economic situation, as well as lack of human resources in some countries are the main reason for Africa's low connectivity.'

Lack of adequate training in the use of ICT is problematic in Africa. For third world scholars to enter and compete in the global computer and knowledge age, they would need adequate training in Information and Communication Technology. In Liberia for instance, Wongbe (2004, p.1-2) laments that 'more than 80% of school children graduate from school without ever having seen or touched a computer in the classroom.' Furthermore, 'the teachers are not trained in the use of computers and there is no form of Information Technology education training in the schools' curriculum.' Even in 2011, this observation holds true in many African countries. The point here is that in the educational context, ICTs are

simply tools for facilitating research, teaching and learning. The effective and appropriate use of ICTs is actually more important than their availability.

Aside from technological problems faced by African authors, research on communicative competence and academic discourse has for long exposed the linguistic problems that African scholars face in writing scholarly articles in the English language. Most African scholars use English as a second language, having naturally acquired a mother tongue before learning English formally in school. In that sense, most African scholars are at least bilingual, while others are multi-lingual. Writing academic papers in a language other than the mother tongue may pose problems. For instance, Roscoe (1977) lamented the multilingual situation in Africa:

> It is well known that the wealth of language Africa has inherited from the past hangs on the continent like a mill-stone, obstructing basic communication, exasperating central governments, confusing educational systems, and making the overall task of development hopelessly tough and expensive. (p. 35).

Alo (2003) actually links communicative behavior with academic success, insisting that writers/scholars must be competent in all the components of communicative competence – linguistic, socio-linguistic, strategic, and discourse - in order to produce well-formed utterances and sentences (p.117). It is a linguistic fact that the first language of a person might interfere with the appropriate learning and use of the necessary competencies in the target language. Academic writing is a complex communicative process involving cognitive, socio-linguistic, as well as discourse skills that scholars must develop so as to effectively communicate the results of their research to the global community of English language users.

Writing scientific English within intercultural boundaries (see Ventola, 2007) as those that exist between Africa and the United States, for example, might pose problems for African scholars. The linguistic world is faced with two orthographic/spelling systems – British and American. Many African scholars who sent their papers to American online journals have had their papers returned for correction because of their use of the British autographic system, thus delaying editorial decisions on those papers. Idiosyncratic use of words and phrases by African authors might also impede comprehension of what the author is trying to put across when an American reviewer reads the paper.

Writers become more and more competent and successful in their attempt to get their papers published through hard work and practice. The process of reviewing research and academic papers for possible publication involves 'peer review, negotiation, revision, and eventual acceptance for publication' (Gosden, 1995). This process allows an interaction between the 'novice' and 'experts' in scientific discourse in their areas of learning and expertise respectively. The interaction is rooted in linguistic and rhetorical exchanges among scholarly writers in the academic community. As managing editor of *TAS*, I have been actively involved in this process for more than six years. I am of the opinion that sharing my experience with the scholarly world about what can enhance the chances of African scholars to get published in American online journals is a worthwhile venture. The next section details the research method adopted for this paper.

RESEARCH METHOD

Data Source and Analysis

There are two sources of data for this study: (1) analysis of received articles by African authors since I took over as editor in 2005 till date (see Table 1 below) and (2) feedback from a focus group discussion of African researchers/writers at the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria in 2007 (See the list of participants in Appendix A). The journal was publishing four times a year (March, June, September, December) when I took over as editor in 2005, but at AERN's second annual summit at the North Carolina State University in April 2006, it was decided that as from 2007, the journal would publish twice a year – June and December. Table 1 shows the number of published and rejected articles from 2005 to June 2008.

Between 2005 and 2010, I received a total of 430 articles from African authors from all over the continent, United States, India, and China. During the period under study, 183 articles, representing 43% of total were published; while 247 articles, 57% of total were rejected. In reading and editing the articles, and taking into consideration reviewers' comments and suggestions, I encountered problems categorized under technological and human problems. By technological problem, I mean articles whose publication decision was delayed or rejected because of problems associated with inability to open the articles with Microsoft Word and articles whose corrected versions could not be resent on time by authors. (Authors often write to ask for time extension citing irregular power supply and Internet down time as excuses). Human

problems involve articles whose publication decision was delayed or rejected due to poor grammar, failure to follow publication guidelines, and inappropriate titles, among others.

Table 1: Total Number of Published and Rejected Articles from 2005 – 2010*

Year	Volume Number	Issue Number & Date	Number of Articles Received	Number of Published Articles	% of Published Articles	Number of Rejected Articles	Percentage of Rejection
		1 March 2005	25	8	32%	17	68%
2005	5	2 June 2005	22	10	45%	12	55%
		3 September 2005	21	9	43%	12	57%
		4 December 2005	21	5	24%	16	76%
2006	6	1 & 2 June 2006	23	9	39%	14	61%
		3 & 4 December 2006	25	10	40%	15	60%
2007	7	1 June 2007	36	20	56%	16	44%
		2 December 2007	33	20	61%	13	39%
2008	8	1 June 2008	35	17	49%	18	51%
		2 December 2008	37	18	49%	19	51%
2009	9	1 June 2009	41	14	34%	27	66%
		2 December 2009	29	15	52%	14	48%
2010	10	1 June 2010	44	13	30%	31	60%
		2 December 2010	38	15	39%	23	61%
		TOTAL	430	183		247	57%

Source: AERN Website: www.africanresearch.org
* Percentages are approximate only.

On Monday February 26, 2007, I gave a talk to some African scholars (26 participated, see Appendix A) at the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria on the problems that African academic writers face in getting their papers published in *The African Symposium* in particular and other American online journals in general. During an interactive session after the talk, many participants discussed the problems they faced in technological terms, which were mainly what I categorize in this article as technological.

RESULT

I will highlight the result of this study by concentrating on the rejected articles as a result of editorial decisions based both on technological and human problems.

Table 2: Total Number of Rejected Articles from 2005 – 2010*

Year	Volume Number	Issue Number & Date	Number of Rejected Articles	Rejection for Technological Problems	Rejection for Human Problems
		1 March 2005	17	14	3
		2 June 2005	12	8	4
2005	5	3 September 2005	12	9	3
		4 December 2005	16	10	6
2006	6	1 & 2 June 2006	14	8	6
		3 & 4 December 2006	15	10	5
2007	7	1 June 2007	16	8	8
		2 December 2007	13	7	6
2008	8	1 June 2008	18	11	7
		2 December 2008	19	14	5
2009	9	1 June 2009	27	15	12
		2 December 2009	14	9	5
2010	10	1 June 2010	31	16	15
		2 December 2010	23	11	12
		TOTAL	247(100%)	150(61%)	97(59%)

As Table 2 shows, 150 articles (61% of total) were rejected by the editorial board of *The African Symposium* for technological problems. The number is almost the same of 97 articles or 59% of total rejected due to human problems between 2005 and 2010.

DISCUSSION

Technological Problems

Meeting publication deadlines is what every editor would demand from prospective authors. Online journal article writers from many parts of Africa face a plethora of problems that delay submission of their work on time. During an interactive session with some African scholars at the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria in February 2007, participants cited prohibitive costs of personal computers, irregular power supply, and inadequate training in the use of ICT hardware, as some of the problems causing their inability to meet publication deadlines. Being at the mercy of the few cyber cafes that could still operate in their localities, authors who did not have personal computers had to queue behind others in order to use the few available functional computers. I gathered that erratic power supply usually caused power surges that destroyed installed computers. In a situation where most cyber cafes were neither registered as a business nor their equipment insured, many owners of such cafes simply folded up due to their inability to replace damaged computers and other hardware they use for business.

At the same interactive session, some authors confessed that they did not actually have computer skills and therefore write in long hand and give to professional typists to assist them type. Again, unless the authors have the money to pay the typists, their manuscripts might not be prepared on time to meet publication deadlines. Very often, because of their inability to use the computer to correct detected errors, computer illiterate authors send their articles with the errors for the editor to figure them out! This obviously would cause the articles to be returned to the author for revision, even before the articles are sent for review. Moreover, from my experience, many authors had sent articles that were inappropriately saved with computer programs that could not be opened by Microsoft Word, the program that is recommended in the journal's guidelines. The articles had to be returned to authors, thus delaying decisions to be made on the articles. Many authors simply did not resend their articles to the editor.

Human Problems

Perhaps the most serious problem I had experienced as editor of *The African Symposium* is the failure of authors to adhere to the *Guidelines for Authors* as laid down in the AERN website (www.africanresearch.org). Whenever I receive an article, I will look for the following compliances: adequacy of the title vis-à-vis the content of the article, a succinct abstract, an introduction, and references. Under references, the American Psychological Association (APA) format has to be followed; if not, the article will be returned to the author to fix the problem. Another problem with references is omission of some references that are cited in the content of the article. There have been various ways by which authors have addressed this problem. The conscientious authors painstakingly do the corrections and resend the corrected article within the stipulated time. In many instances, authors will acknowledge receipt of their returned article, but will not do anything to reformat the references but resend the same article to me within 24 hours! Such articles are automatically rejected. Many authors write to acknowledge receipt of returned article and ask for time to reformat, but I will never hear from them again! I think this is part of the reasons why there is a high number of rejected articles.

Since authors realize that *The African Symposium* is recognized by their institutions and articles published therein count towards tenure and promotion, many of them are in a hurry to publish with *TAS*. In some instances, the same authors have submitted more than one article, suggesting that the editor will pick any one he wishes to publish. The problem this practice had caused in the past for the technical editor of the journal includes cross-matching topics with the content of the articles. This problem arises when both articles submitted by the same author are reviewed and recommended for publication. It is needless to say that this practice had since been discontinued. If an author submits more than one article, all of them will be sent back and the author advised to resend only one s/he wishes to be considered for publication.

Another major problem I have encountered is what could be termed incompetent use of the English language by many authors. This includes minor spelling errors to serious syntactic errors of, for instance, subject/verb concord, and

inappropriate titles. Spelling errors not only included misspelled words, but also inconsistent use of the British and American orthographic systems. Here are samples:

Misspelled words:

- acomondation (accommodation)
- ocassion (occasion)
- recieve (receive)
- releive (relieve)
- convinient (convenient)

Subject/Verb Concord

- The <u>samples</u> <u>needs</u> testing (The samples need testing)
- The <u>boy</u> roaming the streets <u>were</u> shot (The boy roaming the streets was shot)
- Such <u>analysis</u> of static variables <u>are</u> not perfect (Such analysis of static variables is not perfect)
- <u>Erickson</u> (2004) as well as his supporters <u>were</u> attacked (Erickson as well as his supporters was attacked/Erickson and his supporters were attacked)
- Neither the teacher nor the students was allowed to leave the classroom (Neither the teacher nor the students were allowed to leave the classroom)

Inconsistent use of the British and American Autographic Systems

British	American
Colour	Color
Programme	Program
Recognise	Recognize

Inappropriate Titles

- Perceived Problems Against the Performance of Nigerian Elite Football Referees (Perceived Problems Militating Against Utilization of Nigerian Elite Football Referees in International Competitions)
- An Investigation of Assessment Practices by Teachers Business Education Subjects (An Investigation of Business Education Teachers' Assessment Practices)

From my experience, many journal articles with good chances of publication have been rejected for poor organization and lack of clarity, occasioned by incompetent use of the English language by the authors. Most of these errors are detected by reviewers and their reports are sent to authors whose works were recommended for publication after necessary corrections. If the errors inhibit comprehension, the papers are rejected.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There is no doubt that the African author faces both technological and human problems, which adversely affect their research productivity. Most African countries, their institutions of higher learning, and research outfits have not provided adequate ICTs to support online publication. In addition, many promising articles become unpublisheable due to improper attention paid to how the English language is employed to convey meaning to the wider English language reading public. The African scholars and the international community should collaborate to solve some, if not all, the identified problems in this study.

- African scholars working in colleges and universities should be exposed to the skills of grant writing in order to access billions of dollars made available by various foundations all over the world and procure needed computers and other soft wares.
- Accessing relevant information about these foundations and organizations requires computer literacy of the African scholar and availability of ICTs in order to benefit from numerous resources available on the Internet.

African scholars can be computer literate if they endeavor to attend computer literacy programs and workshops wherever they are organized in their localities.

- Funny as it may seem, scholars may form cooperatives, save some money from their monthly salaries, and borrow money for the cooperatives to purchase computers and associated hardware like printers, scanners, and other technological paraphernalia that might give them open access to the Internet and enhance their research productivity.
- African scholars should adopt collaborative research efforts whereby at least a colleague who is competent in the use of the English language is a partner in the team. This will take care of many of the linguistic problems that delay editorial decisions or that may lead to outright rejection of articles.
- In single-authored papers, write ups should be shared with linguistically competent colleagues to vet the writing before they are sent for review.
- Perhaps the easiest thing to do is for authors to strictly adhere to publication guidelines of the journals to which articles are sent for publication consideration. It is curious why many authors simply fail to do this, even after initial reviews by the editor and advice of what is required of them.
- Authors should be mindful of deadlines and set up a convenient time frame and do a thorough revision of their writings before sending them for review.

It appears that the international community is assisting Africa to initiate improvements in connectivity and networking on the African continent. According to UNESCO (2003), the 'Regional African Satellite Communications Organization aims to carry all satellite traffic within Africa through co-ordination of satellite capacity, and Africa One, an AT&T project, aims to lay optical fiber cable around the continent with gateways to all the coastal countries interested' (p.3).

- It is hoped that this trend will continue with provision of adequate financial and human resources by individual African countries to complement the efforts of these and other initiatives.
- The international donor agencies and research institutions should urgently assist African scholars with grants to purchase computers and associated soft and hardware.
- More importantly, there is need for training of African scholars in Information and Communication Technology through computer literacy workshops. Through ICTs, interactivity and accessibility of research among scholars will be enhanced in that networks could link schools, libraries and research centers around the globe.
- Moreover, grant-writing workshops should be organized and financed by research institutes to assist African scholars become more productive.

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Appendix A: Name, Affiliation and Email Addresses of Participants at OAU Meeting in 2007

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Source: Minutes of Meeting Received from Obafemi Awolowo University, Nigeria.