

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Publishing history versus publishing anecdote: the importance of data on the book trade in Africa

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In 2013, Hans Zell asked the pertinent question, ‘How many books are published in Africa?’ Noting that the figures for African publishing output had been cited for at least two decades as 2–3 per cent of global production, he traced these back to data from an outdated and incomplete UNESCO survey as well as a number of sources that simply did not exist (Zell 2013). Moreover, the figures had remained static all that time, and he estimated that no national bibliographies existed for at least twenty African countries, a key source of data (Zell 1995; 2018). Based on these shortcomings, Zell (1995; 2019) has repeatedly called for more reliable statistics on the book trade across the continent. A decade later, the picture is not much clearer, and there is still a pressing need for more evidence and data when talking about books in Africa.

While UNESCO is no longer collecting data on book production and consumption, both the International Publishers’ Association (IPA) and World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) have been making a concerted effort to broaden their global publishing industry statistics to include more countries from the Global South (e.g. IPA 2023; WIPO 2023). These reports are conscious of the difficulties in comparing data from different countries, and have become cautious of measuring the output of an entire continent and comparing it with global production figures. They also acknowledge that their figures are dominated by the Global North (Kolman 2022). These reports are still being used to estimate the proportion of African publishing in global book production and/or revenue, with at least one article estimating that Africa accounts for 1.4 per cent of the total global book market (SME 2023). However, the same article notes that the African book market is growing, with an approximate annual growth rate of 6.5 per cent between 2013 and 2018 (citing a 2019 IPA report). Such a tension between decline (globally) and growth (locally) is puzzling; analysing the data would suggest that the proportion of African publishing can only decline if this growth rate is lower than the global rate. What such statements show is that we are extrapolating from incomplete figures, that we are conflating revenue and production, and most importantly we do not yet have sufficient rigorous data to back up claims about African publishing.

While it is not easy to obtain an evidence-based overview of contemporary publishing in Africa, the task is even more difficult when it comes to publishing history. Contact with Hans over the years has helped me to think through how my academic research is relevant to modern publishing practices; I'd argue that knowing more about histories, backlists, and so on, can be significant for decision-making and for understanding why our current situation is the way it is. I've appreciated his openness to including more historical sources in his databases and our correspondence has made me think more broadly about what kinds of evidence enhance our insights into particular historical periods. In my research on the history of publishing houses, mostly in South Africa, I have found that the first source of any information is anecdote and memoir. Such first-hand accounts are often insightful and vivid, providing glimpses into the lived experiences of working in publishing in the twentieth (and now also the twenty-first) century. But they are also limited: storytellers create a narrative arc and omit certain information while burnishing other details, and so they are often biased and always incomplete. To supplement this initial picture, archives are required, the actual records of what happened and when, and by whom. While archives are also biased and incomplete, they provide a more consistent record of events and decisions.

In some cases, these two sources of information clash. For example, in my research on the anti-apartheid publisher, Ravan Press, I have found several instances where the anecdotes repeated by authors do not line up with the letters, printer briefings and financial data (le Roux 2018). Two influential women authors, Noni Jabavu and Miriam Tlali, both described their relationship with Ravan in overwhelmingly negative terms. In Tlali's case, in particular, her personal account of her work being torn apart without any consultation has been accepted by many scholars as the true version of events. However, the archives show that initially cordial relationships, during which the authors had regular input on how their works were published, broke down over time. Disputes arose over how the work and the writer are presented, and the extent of consultation with the author; and, secondly, royalties, contractual arrangements, and the right to fair remuneration. Similar stories continue to circulate among authors today, complaining about exploitation and powerlessness, and while they reflect real experiences, they also only present one side of a complex relationship and industry.

These inconsistencies can only be unearthed if archival evidence is added to the anecdotal. However, as is the case with current publishing statistics, the publisher archives themselves are incomplete and often unavailable. In the absence of an archive, a history can be developed based on the material record, which again is based on the example of Hans Zell: the painstaking work of compiling detailed bibliographies. Zell's critical bibliographies of scholarship on publishing and the book trade in Africa have been invaluable in my own research and in shaping my views on how publishing has developed. They have also shown me how significant and influential even a partial set of data can be – and that you can only be aware of the gaps when you know what already exists. I am grateful to Hans for giving me access to the bibliographies when I had just finished my PhD in 2013, as this enabled me to broaden the scope of my research beyond South Africa, and to sharpen my literature search skills.

The records contained in a bibliography are a powerful tool for countering bias as well as the myths around the book trade that continue to circulate: ‘There is no reading culture in Africa’; ‘Throughout Africa, there is a book famine’; ‘There is no publishing in sub-Saharan Africa’; ‘No books are produced in indigenous languages’; ‘She is the first black woman publisher’; and so on (see e.g. le Roux 2021). For each of these statements, there is some basis in fact, but there is also a wilful ignorance and even denial of the work that has gone into publishing in African countries since independence(s). For instance, the Publishers’ Association of South Africa (PASA) produced a catalogue called *Writing in Nine Tongues* in 2007 that listed more than 5,000 titles, in a deliberate attempt to show the efforts of local publishers to produce books in the indigenous languages (PASA 2007). Admittedly, this catalogue is not up to date and is limited in its scope. However, the anecdotal evidence that ‘no books’ can be found in a particular language in a specific bookshop, appears to supersede this kind of careful data gathering. A 2023 report on transformation in the publishing industry criticizes the ‘limited cultivation of African language book production [that] continue[s] to inhibit transformation’ (MISTRA 2023: 11). While it provides a deep dive into personal perspectives on publishing, the report was deliberately based on ‘lived experiences and subjective senses of the extent of transformation in the sector’, rather than the kinds of detailed statistics on book production that could be captured in bibliographies (MISTRA 2023: 23). The result is a slew of new initiatives every year to produce books because there are apparently none available, rather than policies and programmes based on expanding and supporting existing local publishers and their lists.

Most of what we think we know about African publishing is based on anecdote, not evidence. This may be a sweeping statement, but it can be supported by evidence, in contrast to the availability of detailed and reliable statistics on publishing in African countries. Hans Zell’s body of work has blazed a trail and set a clear agenda for those interested in capturing the progress, growth and vitality of the publishing industry in African countries. As universities become involved in publisher training and publishing research, I hope we can build upon his work to better understand and support the book trade in Africa.

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