

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Nigerian journals, publishers, and libraries: a response to Hans Zell

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Abstract

An important and timely recent article by Hans Zell on Nigerian university presses prompts wider questions about the state of Nigerian scholarly publishing, how universities in general and journal publishers in particular adapt, and how libraries access scholarly outputs. This brief response to the article seeks to widen the discussion and encourage further research and action on the subject.

Résumé

Un article récent et important de Hans Zell sur les presses universitaires nigérianes soulève des questions plus larges sur l'état de l'édition universitaire nigériane, sur la manière dont les universités en général et les éditeurs de revues en particulier s'adaptent, et sur la manière dont les bibliothèques accèdent aux productions scientifiques. Cette brève réponse à l'article vise à élargir le débat et à encourager de nouvelles recherches et actions sur le sujet.

Introduction

In an important recent article in *Africa Bibliography, Research and Documentation*, Hans Zell discusses problems and trends among Nigerian university presses. Combining deep experience of this scene with 'a cursory amount of research about the current state of university press publishing', he reveals a 'bleak' picture of 'traditional university press publishing ... almost completely abandoned in most cases' with many presses resorting to commercial printing instead of scholarly publishing in contrast to a once 'lively academic publishing scene'. Some causes of the crisis are briefly addressed – financial constraints, managerial policies privileging self-sustaining commercial operations – as are negative effects on scholars. Today's sad picture is of an 'almost total lack of publishing output by Nigerian university presses ... most of them currently dormant or disbanded' (Zell 2022: 12).

Such problems are not new but have a tendency to accumulate and intensify. Zell thus provides a timely update prompting deep thought. In addition, his select, critically annotated bibliography offers a rich guide to readers. I do not disagree at all with his analysis but rather offer here brief comments as an addendum in the hope they may continue and widen the debate, provoke further research, and in a small

way help bring to a head questions – and possible answers – about academic journal publication (and distribution) for implicit in this debate is a call to action. Such questions also relate to scholarly publishing in other African countries and how libraries provide access. I write in the same year as the African Studies Association of the UK awards its Outstanding African Studies Award to Walter Bgoya and Mary Jay, who have spent many decades helping develop the distribution of African publishing outputs in the global North, reminding us how publishers, librarians, and scholars are intricately connected.

Nigerian academic journals: print acquisition and selection

My own experience as a bibliographer over four decades included sixteen years of selecting, deselecting, and adjusting approval plans for one of the most extensive African studies library collections. Michigan State University (MSU) assisted the foundation of the University of Nigeria in the early 1960s and its library reflects a keen interest in Nigerian scholarship, reinvigorated in the 2000s by the arrival of leading Nigerianist scholars such as Nwando Achebe and efforts to rekindle earlier partnerships. One of my central tasks was to peruse, accept or reject trolley loads of newly arrived journals (and books) from Nigeria. As I adjusted and refined the flow of journals, I took time to closely and critically examine them with a view to meeting selection criteria and also for selective dissemination of information to academics and postgraduates, reading selected articles with a view for better liaison with academic staff, for podcasts, and other scholarly activities. A large cohort of African studies academics across many faculties and new research agendas pushed me to widen the scope of the plan to include, for example, pharmacy, agriculture, media, cinema, politics, and history. I found it useful to scan or browse articles and Contents pages of some journals and over time developed a certain feel for trends and for distinguishing better-quality journals.

Implicit in selection/deselection of library collections is quality. However in the North measurement of quality of African publishing outputs at times can be moot due to ingrained prejudices or ignorance. I had assisted the establishment at MSU of the North American distribution centre of the African Books Collective (ABC), headed by Bgoya and Jay. As distribution increased, the response of some American librarians was to reject (certain) African books as their covers were regarded as not attractive, strong, or glossy enough or because cultures within their pages were deemed not 'suitable'.

Journal crises in Nigeria (and the North): problems of access and indexing, and online solutions and conundrums

Analogous problems can arise when Northern readers come across Nigerian journals – if they do so at all, for African journals in general and Nigerian journals in particular are poorly indexed or distributed globally. Most databases and e-journal platforms have negligible coverage of journals from the continent despite valiant efforts by librarians and scholarly publishers to include a small number of journals in, for example, JSTOR and Project Muse, together with the more substantial efforts of African Journals Online (AJOL).

AJOL, launched in 1997 in the UK with the support of the International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications before relocating to South Africa from 2005, has achieved a stronger measure of access for African readers and a better deal for publishers, even going beyond access to try to plug the information divide by bolstering national publications and indigenous knowledge (Smart 2005). More recently it has assessed journal quality and volatility with ongoing ratings by 'stars'.¹ As of mid-2024, AJOL hosts 754 African journals (up from 220 in 2005), 500 in open access. Nigeria has the largest number, 299 (followed by South Africa, 105). Of these 299, fully ninety-two are deemed 'inactive', sixty-six gained 'No-stars', sixty-nine were accorded 'One-stars', forty-one 'Two-stars', and none gained 'Three stars', while twenty-two had their assessment 'Pending'. However, assessment can be inexact and appears based solely on online issues. *African Journal of International Affairs and Development* is listed as 'inactive' as of 2019 yet research libraries hold print issues through 2021. Clicking on its current issue shows 2014; seven years out of date. (Proquest also offers three back years of this journal: 2009, 2014, and 2015.) A moral here is the need to balance print and online, and I shall return to this theme. A few AJOL journals 'progress' to Northern databases: AJOL lists the *Nigerian Journal of Genetics* as 'inactive' for the reason it is now published by Elsevier.

Of the sixty-two African Studies journals in JSTOR only twenty-one are based in Africa (three of which have not published (online) for over twenty years), and only one is Nigerian. Some of these JSTOR journals were originally in Project Muse in a project initiated at MSU in which I was involved, but they moved to JSTOR; two remain in Muse. Two Zimbabwean journals were initially in Muse but none remain; complaints by libraries of tardy publication of one apparently led to its exclusion.

Scarcity of journals and books accompanied by deep problems of their publication, costs, and quality continue in many African universities, exacerbated by underfunding, resource limitations, and occasional disasters such as the tragic University of Cape Town (UCT) Libraries fire of 2021 (Kirkwood, Noble and Singer 2023). In the North, a common response is to disparage African publishing. Nigerian journals, some printed on poorer quality paper for financial/supply reasons, some plagued by poorer quality content or editing, are looked down on. Yet recent scandals afflicting some of the largest, wealthiest journal publishers of the North are salutary. Wiley was forced to retract 11,300 papers, close nineteen journals and pause publication of 250 more, with 'compromised articles', corrupted research, and bogus authorship. Elsevier, long criticized by librarians for price-gouging, confirmed some editors were weekly offered cash to accept manuscripts. Another publisher 'had to sack 300 editors for manipulative behaviour' (Joelving 2024: 254). Hence the 'progress' of some African journals to Northern platforms, while it can bring some monetary returns, can be a double-edged sword with considerable loss of independence, higher costs for local libraries to buy-back access and, as with Wiley, fragile credibility. A repartee would be: that doesn't compromise good journals of the North; no, yet how many would add: some bad Nigerian journals don't compromise the lot. In fact I found rewarding articles among those I read.

Another persisting problem is weak indexing in 'global' platforms. A recent study found 2,117 active Nigerian titles, yet coverage of 243 of them (on AJOL) in Web of

¹ See <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/ajol/JPPS>

Science and Scopus was very limited, 7.4% and 7.8%, respectively, compared to 45.6% in CrossRef. South African journals dominate, having 73% and 62% of all African journals indexed in Web of Science and Scopus, whereas Nigeria publishes an estimated 44.5% of all African journals (Asubiaro and Onaolapo 2023). A related study found the problem particularly acute for biomedical journal indexing (Asubiaro 2023). In an article appearing soon after Zell's piece, Alkasim Abdu squarely addresses the 'Giant in isolation' that is Nigerian journal online publishing. Analysing data from leading Nigerian university journal publishers from a good representation of universities across all categories and major platforms such as AJOL, he underlines, as I found (Limb 2005), that the majority are still available in print only. Abdu suggests lack of awareness of AJOL may explain the large discrepancy between the number hosted by AJOL and total Nigerian university journals. His survey of AJOL reveals that, as of August 2022, of the 610 journals aggregated, 249 were from Nigeria with 103 deemed inactive (compare my above figures as of May 2024 of 299 with ninety-two inactive). He estimates the total number of journals hosted by Nigerian universities at about 2,000. Abdu's analysis of the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) database shows only twenty-three from Nigeria (thirteen university-based) of 18,117 journals from 130 countries (Abdu 2023).

Twenty years ago I discussed problems confronting African journals. Many appeared in short runs, became dormant, often were poorly printed and suffered from irregularity of publication and poor subscriptions, distribution, and marketing. All this was exacerbated by 'scarcity of resources, limited markets, and the brain drain' generating 'a veritable "journal famine"'. I concluded 'most African journals remain ephemeral and marginalized on a global scale; they continue to be poorly represented in most Western collections and databases'. By 2005 e-access had improved but difficulties remained with regularity and viability, while 'inequities in information flow and in broader economic resources' suggested such problems would continue. What was needed, I advocated, was 'a broad approach involving many universities, and even many countries, with projects extended to include international bodies' (Limb 2005: 130, 137-8). Today, despite successes such as AJOL, not a lot has changed.

Who actually publishes Nigerian journals?

Zell's analysis of the disappearing trick of university presses prompts the question of who actually publishes the several thousand Nigerian journals published each year. One indication of trends is provided by analysis of the 327 (after allowing for duplicates) new Nigerian journals published from 2020 and catalogued in Worldcat that reveals the effective publishers.² Only six were published by university presses (chiefly in the north: Jos with three, Ahmadu Bello two), confirming Zell's thesis. Roughly 71% were issued by higher education units (departments, faculties, institutes); 23% were commercial/NGO/associational; 15% governmental; university presses issued only 2%. Some Worldcat records are harvested from the DOAJ but most reflect selection trends from major African studies research libraries (including Northwestern, Stanford, MSU, Princeton, and Frankfurt universities).

² <https://firstsearch.oclc.org> accessed 26 May 2024. The total was 347 but removing duplicates make 327.

To some extent, university presses in many universities worldwide generally have focused more on books than journals though some, such as Cambridge University Press, have developed an impressive suite of journals, including in African studies. In Nigeria, whether publishing departments rely on university printing presses and/or desktop publishing, or send files to local or more distant print companies is not always clear and requires fieldwork. I witnessed both as operative during a trip to the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, in 2008.

What is also apparent from both analysis of the titles of this sample and from my years examining Nigerian journals is that a good number of newer titles include the term 'international' following directives from vice chancellors a decade or so ago to internationalize their content and standards. A number also showcase interdisciplinary approaches. At times these trends can lead to unlikely and unwieldy combinations across too many disciplines and with unclear international dimensions. On the other hand to some extent they also reflect wider global trends embracing interdisciplinary and transnational studies.

Nigerian journals and balancing collection development

The need to balance print and online collections was for two decades a guiding principle for many librarians but recently an online-only mania has spread rapidly. The trend raised the hackles of readers at New York Public Library over a decade ago but for a while it seemed a degree of balance would be maintained and attempts to impose a digital-only university library were isolated. Today however a good number of once-distinguished research libraries have seen much of their print collections literally destroyed or 'hidden' well away from users, creating a new kind of 'book famine' both in terms of lack of printed works and also in terms of the gaping lacunae left as decades of publications are not (yet) accessible online. Some library managers brag of success in entirely destroying special libraries; others remove entire floors of monographs in favour of workrooms to create plasticine figures or cafes. As an external doctoral examiner I notice the difficulty of candidates, in Africa and the North, in appreciating the full context of primary sources they never touch or fully examine and often neglect. The distinguished African studies librarian and historian David Henige was always alert to the dangers of predatory journals.³ In recent years we have to confront dangers of predatory corporate managers, whether in terms of Nigerian publications pushed away from university presses, as Zell notes, or towards exaggerated 'internationalization', or to imbalanced library collections. How ironic then that in the future scholars of the North may be compelled to go to Africa to find certain specialized print materials (where they still exist).

What future then for the Nigerian print journal, in Nigeria and in libraries of the North? Many information science surveys over the last twenty years have proposed a panacea of simply getting more and more journals into JSTOR or AJOL. Others rejoiced when one or two African journals made it into the (not always salubrious) stables of Elsevier or Wiley. But dangers arise when, online, 'Things Fall Apart' as we see during power outages or when active journals are labelled 'inactive'. In any case, how many

³ Zell (2022) includes useful annotated citations of works on predatory journals and Africa.

libraries of the North still acquire Nigerian print journals and does it matter? Statistics noted above suggest it does.

Hogarth Representation is the largest supplier/vendor of Nigerian journals to North American and European libraries. Their clients are largely the richest, largest African studies libraries. Oluranti Olumoroti of Hogarth, based in Ibadan, kindly provided me with some statistics and his estimation of relevant trends in a recent unpublished report, 'The State of Journal Publishing in Nigeria 2001–2023'. He estimates that global and local developments, including the stability of the last three decades of democracy and the emergence of online resources, have contributed to a steady increase in the number of tertiary institutions in Nigeria and this has been accompanied by an increase in the number of journals. Universities face challenges economically and in marketing their journal titles; hence circulation of many of these journals is restricted. He points out that 'central organs, faculties and departments of tertiary institutions as well as professional associations, learned societies and some private concerns are involved in journal publishing', and adds the interesting comment that 'Hogarth Representation often have to make special arrangement with journal publishers to have our customers included amongst copies to be printed' (Olumoroti 2024). Journal issues supplied to libraries by Hogarth over the last twenty-two years are shown in Table 1.

These statistics are only a rough indication of total journal output and reflect resource limitations of a single supplier. Nevertheless they are useful when combined with trade statistics and Worldcat – and insightful given the paucity of such figures and a usual tendency of vendors and librarians to keep such details to themselves. Disregarding figures for 2021–23 that omit items still in process, a steady growth of supply of printed issues is evident.

In his discussion of Nigerian university presses, Hans Zell does mention journals but most sources cited are websites, many unreliable or inaccurate as he notes. As I show above, most Nigerian journals are today not published by university presses. But for those that are, we can turn to other sources to determine if any of the presses Zell discusses maintain some limited output of print journals; even perhaps under 'special arrangement' with vendors. Worldcat reveals, for example, that print copies of quite recent (2019–22) volumes are held by research libraries of a range of Ahmadu Bello University Press journals including *Kano Journal of Educational Psychology*, *Gusau Journal of Education*, *Bayero Journal of Islamic Law*, *ABU Journal of Public Administration*, *Al-Hikmah Journal of Islamic Studies*, *Nubapoly* and the venerable *Kano Studies* (1965–), now reappearing in a new series. It would be interesting, if tedious, to more closely analyse print issues including prefaces and bibliographic data, and undertake interviews with editors, to determine precise relations with university units and whether or not traditional functions of the press have been taken over, adapted, or abandoned by current effective publishers. That symbiotic relations do exist is indicated by the fact that *Katsina Journal of History* (2017–) involves both the Department of History Studies at Umaru Musa Yar'adua University in Katsina and Ahmadu Bello University Press, Zaria; print copies from 2017 to 2020 are held. This bibliographic exercise and such examples can be extended further back in time and to other presses, but I have neither the time nor space to elaborate – yet these cases suggest there may be a slender silver periodical lining to the dark clouds of press decline. And we should keep in mind that to do hands-on analysis, or even draw from Worldcat, we need research libraries that hold such copies; libraries that maintain at least a measure of balance of print and online.

Table 1. The state of journal publishing in Nigeria 2001–23 as reflected in journal issues⁴ supplied by Hogarth Representation

Year	No. of Issues
2001	783
2002	841
2003	930
2004	1215
2005	1156
2006	1257
2007	1430
2008	1568
2009	1845
2010	2033
2011	2482
2012	3024
2013	2523
2014	2212
2015	2581
2016	2643
2017	2954
2018	3159
2019	3340
2020	2841
2021	1875
2022	1335
2023	411

Source: Olumoroti (2024).

Library collection policy must balance online and print. The UCT fire underlines the back-up value of online repositories and the relative success of AJOL in enhancing access is undeniable. Yet power outages and e-journal package cost outrages remind us equally of the enduring value of print, just as the enormous sums thrown at suites of certain journals compromised in the Wiley scandal surely prompt a rethink of quick-and-easy acquisition strategies. The achievement of quality journals and learning, in the North and in Africa, can only be improved by such a balanced approach to publishing, access, and collecting.

⁴ An issue here refers to the number of times a title has been produced. All issues are the printed edition.

Conclusion

Despite enormous problems and the decline of Nigerian university presses as such, so ably analysed by Hans Zell, the vibrancy and massive output of Nigerian scholarly journals continues, reflecting the lively and productive intellectual milieu as well as the adaptability and resilience of authors, editors, and their universities. Today the steady stream of new journals more often than not is published by university departments or faculties, rather than under the imprint of formal university presses. Many of these remain print-only yet, simultaneously, hundreds of others make it into (or out of) online platforms. In some ways this diversity is emblematic of Africa's most populous and diverse country.

We should keep in mind the late Henry Chakava's optimistic vision of publishing for a new era, that should 'come out of local publishing houses' and with an ongoing need for 'the production of strong, influential journals' (Ilieva and Chakava 2016: 116, 120). Serious concern with these problems in the 1980s–90s led to extensive research by writers such as Zell and, in time, new projects such as ABC and AJOL emerged. Notwithstanding the advances made by such projects the problems remain, so hopefully raising them anew will prompt both productive new research and projects. And if your library has an approval plan, a 'special arrangement' may help spark the printing of new journal issues.

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