The politics of digital "reform and revolution": towards mainstreaming and African control of African digitisation

Peter Limb

Peter Limb
Africana Bibliographer
Michigan State University, East Lansing.
Limb@msu.edu

Abstract

Current challenges regarding the frame of reference and control of African digitisation projects pose serious questions about their future direction. The author suggests practical strategies aimed at mainstreaming resources and increasing African control, including the need for readers of Innovation – librarians, information scientists, archivists, and historians – to engage in the "politics" of securing this control. By maintaining ethical approaches and flexibility, by listening closely to priorities of African partners, by continuing to initiate worthwhile projects in the North yet also practically supporting African initiatives and by directing limited-end pilot projects towards mainstreaming, we can help to turn expropriation of African resources towards the harvesting of African (and Northern-based) resources for mutually beneficial use.

I focus in this paper on current challenges regarding the direction and control of African digitisation, pose serious questions about its future direction, and then suggest practical strategies aimed at mainstreaming resources and increasing African control, including the need for readers of *Innovation* – librarians, information scientists, archivists, and historians – to engage in the "politics" of securing this control. Here digitisation refers not only to isolated pilot projects but also to an increasingly mainstreamed process of making information resources available online.

When viewed from the North, there are two immediate apparent contradictions or dilemmas about digital initiatives in or about Africa requiring "reform":

- Firstly, scholars, librarians, and archivists need new information resources to pursue new pure and applied research on Africa, and they wish to make use of new technologies to efficiently discover and exploit these resources. In the era of digitisation, this invites *mass* digitisation of African scholarly resources, including those located in Africa. Yet, by developing and then continuing to lead African digitisation, the North sets the agenda.
- Secondly, "open access" helps all, but how "open" and how "accessible" will the Internet become, especially in the African context?

When viewed from Africa, vital issues concerning these processes include the "revolutionary" questions whether current and future Africa-related digitisation projects and processes involve Africans in
- control;
- genuine partnership;
- and tangible benefits.

Other important questions include, who will determine restriction on access, and what are the alternatives to domination by the North? As Johannes Britz and Peter Lor have argued, there must be an equal South-North, as well as North-South, flow of information.[i]

Control of the content, rate, and direction of digitisation is crucial if the process is to serve primarily African interests. However, financial and technological resources and power lies chiefly in the North. As Michelle Pickover emphasises, lack of control means that some digitisation projects represent "concrete examples of how social memory and identities are produced, managed, accessed and owned, in ways which commodify information, privilege the state over the public, reinforce notions of globalisation and cultural imperialism and perpetuate an uneven flow from the South to the North."[ii] Despite this hegemony of the North, there is enormous potential for empowerment within Africa. The University of the Witwatersrand, for example, in 2006 launched a major open access digital library of resources on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, "Traces of Truth" (truth.wwl.wits.ac.za). Although largely funded externally by North American foundations was conceived, planned, and executed in South Africa by Wits Historical Papers and the South African History Archive. However, a recent project to digitise the papers of Archbishop Tutu saw efforts by a British university to remove the papers to England whereas South Africans could have capably managed and executed the process. This is not an isolated incident. Little wonder, then, that Pickover throws down the gauntlet to people in the North in a recent article in this journal, arguing that key questions around these issues are how to:

> share knowledge without being exploited? ; … enter into partnerships
> with … the North in ways that address and not reinforce the digital
> divide? ; … ensure that such partnerships do not merely reformulate
> issues of heritage plundering and cultural asset stripping? ; … take
> into consideration issues of connectivity and context, use and power? ;
> … ensure that digital projects do not serve to replace repatriation of
> actual heritage items with digital replicas … still ensuring ownership
> and control by the North …?[ii]

In addition, Pickover importantly adds, we need to ask whether such digital
projects are "Simply adding to pressures being exerted on the states from which
these objects originate … [which are] difficult for them to resist," and whether
"the temptation of financial aid [is] producing a new form of imperialism
reinforcing the digital divide?"[iii]

Some writers argue, with good reason, that involvement from the North in
digitisation projects is more disinterested, useful, and at least an improvement
on removal of archives from Africa.[iv] However, behind these seemingly benign
acts of charity lie both the short and long-term goals of philanthropy, and the
"political" battles fought to secure and then sharpen this disinterestedness. In
the North, despite an apparent move to open access represented prominently by
the Google book digitisation project, there is talk of Google's mass digitisation
products eventually being free only to major participants and open only to those
who pay. This reminds us that Google, once the darling of open access
practitioners, is now a major capitalist corporation, and all that that involves
with regard to advertising. A "political" imperative for librarians, therefore, is
to push to ensure that these digitised books *remain* openly accessible in the
public domain.

The question arises whether online documents on, say, the national liberation
struggles of Southern Africa should be readily accessible only to the wealthy in
the North, or to the tiny elites of Africa? This issue in not new, and has been
posed in debates over trying to make content for the North available to the
South. In all these equations, one faces the need for self-sustainability and
funding. There eventually may be a graduated seepage into more open access,
as seen in the history of The Essential Electronic Agricultural Library (TEEAL)
and Access to Global Online Research in Agriculture (AGORA)[v] in agricultural
literature, or in JSTOR's transition from a "sliding scale" for African subscribers
to the recent decision to go to open access in Africa. Of course, this only
happened after spirited criticism at an African Studies Association conference.
And open access still requires African universities to "go get" the content, itself
often an expensive operation. We may reach a point where other sectors cover
sustainability, enabling open access.

Another issue concerns the speed of digitisation: are we moving too fast, or too slowly? And what of digital form and content? Of course, there are major copyright and financial issues that greatly encumber major textual digitisation projects. Nevertheless, in my capacity of being both a practicing historian as well as a bibliographer, I cannot but agree with comments expressed by Professor Yonah Seleti at a DISA workshop in 2003 that newspapers such as *Ilanga lase Natal* are much more valuable for historians than say organisational newsletters. It should be far easier, of course, to secure copyright from the latter, but project partners could profitably deploy funds from the North in negotiating with the former and establishing dedicated copyright centres. Equally important is content. Pickover (see above) rightly raises the issue of selectivity of content: who omits what, and how might this influence changing paradigms of teaching and research.

Related to content issues are the levels of interaction and consultation in projects. When I spoke not so long ago to the Head of the Department of History, University of Dar es Salaam, an archaeologist, he knew nothing of a major project with a declared interest in Tanzanian archaeological sites. This strikes me as indicative of a tendency of the North to lead and incite Africa to follow. Let us take some other examples. When African-initiated or African-owned digital projects emerge, we find that they receive scant practical support from the North. Why is this so? Some might argue it reflects a certain suspicion of African publications in general in the North, linked to, for example, delays in publication or quality of binding. Digital publishing can largely overcome these problems. Yet when viable products such as *SABINET Online's SA e-Publications* emerge and deliver substantial digitised scholarly resources with profits returned to Africa, only a small handful of libraries in the North subscribe, the same libraries that throw buckets of money at multi-national publishers. What is required here is a willingness by librarians in the North to invest in Africa, to occasionally take a risk, which they also do with mega-publishers, for "white elephants" roam not only in Africa!

Related to this problem is the continued limited accessibility to the Net by the majority of Africans with global-national-and-class digital divides[vi] all producing user elites. When to this are added continuing educational crises and publishing "famines" in many countries of Africa, the result is a potent brew.[vii] For their part, African governments and companies need to better recognise the value of, and invest in, online scholarly resources: they certainly do so when it comes to government statistics, business and parliamentary sites, and science. There are some very fine e-resources in Africa in these areas, not to mention the success story of African online newspapers and advertising. In addition, there have certainly been advances across a number of African universities such as, for example, the University of Dar es Salaam recently have taken big steps

towards bringing their libraries online.[viii] The University of Nigeria soon hopes to launch the largest library in Africa. Another African success story here is *SA History Online,* which has done a fine job in delivering broad-based resources useful for a wide range of students, teachers, and researchers. One could add many other fine, homegrown initiatives.

Yet many African countries require enormous labour and investments just to meet basic needs, let alone support digital initiatives. In this regard, we should not imagine that New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD)-style policies would be a panacea. However, if Africa loses control of its own intellectual resources in the digital domain, then things are likely to worsen, especially if they have to pay transnational companies to buy back their content. One political battle here is to get governments and companies to support homegrown digital initiatives from the community of scholars and the wider community. The sooner done, the better.

Another urgent need is for effective inter-varsity, regional or Pan-African, and international cooperation to replace the old "missionary" syndrome of aid/philanthropy. There is much empirical evidence that a good deal of "aid" money stays in the North. How then does this relate to digitisation and what practically can be done?

Three things need implementing to reverse the dependency syndrome. Firstly, projects funded from the North must focus squarely on capacitisation of African players. Secondly, joint projects need to have their agendas set, or at least agreed to, by African partners. Thirdly, governments and companies should increase funding of local projects.

There is increasing appreciation of the need for capacity-building by librarians and scholars in the North. The Cooperative Africana Microform Project (CAMP) and Africana librarian members have set a fine example in getting out in the field and talking to African archivists and librarians about their priorities. CAMP has embraced this need with new committees, though the challenge is still to secure adequate funding.

There is some evidence of closer co-operation in digital Africana projects, though most universities still pursue "go it alone" ventures that largely amount to a mere drop in the ocean of problems. The latest initiative of the African Online Digital Library (www.aodl.org), "Diversity and Tolerance in Islam of West Africa" is a good example of wide cooperation effectively combining text with multi-media to produce sites useful to scholars. This project, with US Department of Education funding, *combines* the resources of Michigan State University with Université Cheikh Anta Diop de Senegal, and University of

Legon in Ghana, plus leading scholars from Harvard and other US universities, showing the way for better inter-varsity cooperation, both North-North and North-South. Similarly, Digital Imaging project of South Africa (DISA) and Aluka have broad national committees. That is not to say that given wider cooperation then most donors will necessarily redirect grant funds to Africa, but the lessons here are *we need to think big, and build wide partnerships* if we are to solve big problems, such as helping preserve endangered archives.[ix]

We should acknowledge the advances by several digital projects. In the field of e-journals, successes include South Africa's SA e-Publications, Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa's Codesria journals and the African e-Journals Project. There are recent achievements with Timbuktu manuscripts by Northwestern University and Center for Research Libraries (CRL) and by DISA[x] and Aluka with Southern African liberation movement papers. Digitisation of dissertations is proceeding apace at six South African universities and in Dakar, some open access. Kwetu.Net in Kenya, owned locally, adds digital content locally and regionally.

Many of these products are open access, such as for example, the many works digitised by *SA History Online*. There are exciting new joint ventures with audio and film, such as *Overcoming Apartheid,* a partnership between Michigan State University, Community Video Education Trust (Cape Town), Culture, Communication, and Media Studies (University of KwaZulu-Natal), the South African National Film, Video and Sound Archives and the African Natal Congress (ANC) Archives. CRL is moving towards digital supply of microfilm resources. There is much experimentation, and much innovation to get around bandwidth costs, notably the trail-blazing work of the eGranary. There is the recent breakthrough with JSTOR. Looming on the horizon is the promise of African digital repositories. All these projects can or should involve capacity-building. As Lor argues, even if African libraries lack resources, capacity building must be central to North-South partnerships.[xi]

Diametrically opposed to joint, capacity-building projects are trends towards the expropriation of African resources. I have written elsewhere of the new "Scramble for Africa" – for African digital raw materials.[xii] To some extent, the digital version of expropriation is just a new phase in an old pattern, a new scramble for African commodities, this time the printed page scanned and delivered, creating a new value added product. Twenty-first century missionaries carry not Bibles but scanners. Scanning is not difficult, but on a mass scale requires resources and to be useful also requires conversion by Optical Character Recognition (OCR) and quality control. The products are, of course, a boon to researchers but where does one draw the line between mass copying and looting of heritage? Here open access seems to be the panacea, but

only while the digital door stays open. Even so, African repositories still want to attract researchers to their collections for multifaceted benefits. There are recent cases of acquisition of original African archives that raise serious ethical issues.[xiii] Legally, there is "nothing new in cyber-space": copyright rules.

This tension increases with the seductive appeal of digitisation projects with which some of us are involved, or which we look forward to acquiring or using. One danger is that if we get the mix of cooperation, benefits, and ethics wrong then state and private archives may be reluctant to continue digitisation. I can hear some people saying that African archives and libraries are so strapped for cash they will welcome projects no matter how mercenary! I am not so sure. We are now only at the tip of the iceberg: what will be the state of digitisation in ten, or fifteen years?

Here we need foresight. Who will be in charge? Will our projects grow so well as to *dominate* the field? How can we simultaneously encourage expanded resources and access yet avoid building our own Digital Empires, or will our projects become useful *models* for African initiatives? Is it in African countries' long-term interest to "sell" access to their national heritage? In South Africa, one can imagine in ten years further growth of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) but the persistence of similar socio-economic global, national, and local inequalities as exist today. Will South Africa, despite its great sensibilities, digitally dominate neighbours and beyond, a sort of Springbok-sized digital imperialism; or will it assist digital equality? Will the Net be more open or closed? These are all complex questions.

Philosophically, there is a need to transcend the limitations of past operating models. Whilst acknowledging and securing important sources of funding, we need to go beyond the intellectual and (more subtle) political and economic reliance on the financial institutions of the North and recognise that social structures in African countries can be very different, without for example a history of rich foundations. In any case, as expertly recounted in a recent history of American philanthropy, historically the rich often have exercised charity as a form of social control or clientelism. The recently publicised "philanthrocapitalism" of billionaire Buffett, notes Pakistani journalist S. M. Nasseem, obscures the minuscule international aid of US and other major capitalist countries (who still lag behind the UN's 0.7% of Gross National Income set 35 years ago).[xiv]

Digitisation *from without* can equal greater enmeshment with donor economies. Greater dependence means greater loss of independence. The reluctance, until pressed, of some grant projects to give genuinely disinterested support for open access or infrastructure in Africa is of course a symptom of a much wider

expropriation of African resources. Let me stress here that some bodies, such as Aluka and JSTOR, recently have responded positively to African demands for wider access: we need MORE such examples. Grant projects need to be centred squarely on Africa; we need more effective flows of grant resources *to* Africa; there needs to be more flexibility by granting bodies; if not, and in any case, new sources should be sought internationally and nationally.

Librarians too should transcend their reliance on rigid models. A case in point is the recent friction between the African-owned African Books Collective consortium and the Library of Congress over the latter's continued supply of African imprints despite many such books being available in the US. African Studies centres in the North need to liaise more closely with their African counterparts to bolster partnerships that will clearly identify and work towards African priorities. Scholars of the North need to put back into Africa what they take: how many American scholars take seriously the ethical guidelines of The Essential Electronic Agricultural Library of the African Studies Association (ASA – US) on assisting African archives and libraries?

What then should be our "politics"? Here I mean politics in the broad sense of the term. The "politics" that librarians engage in professionally may be limited, but in a small way can contribute to shifting opinion and practice and enhancing wider access to information. Pointed questions and sharp criticism directed at JSTOR and Aluka by several US-based Africana librarians at recent ASA meetings may not have been directly responsible for both organisations "opening up" e-content more widely across Africa, but they undoubtedly publicised and highlighted inequalities and narrow vistas. There are many social arenas, some not so obviously political: there are "struggles within the struggle," and struggles just to maintain African Studies in many places, or even to defend Area Studies from the onslaught of pro-militarist ideologues in the US. There are internal institutional battles over funding, and issues of priorities.

My view here is that it is crucial that Africans control digitisation of their *own* resources and that they initiate and set agendas and priorities. The North actively and disinterestedly should support such projects, but with their grant monies largely spent in Africa itself, despite the proclivities of government agency-foundation-university grants that always seem to see the lion's share spent in the North, not in the real lands of the lion, Africa. This does not mean projects initiated in the North should not continue and blossom; but that "politics" should involve us individually and collectively arguing and lobbying for such directions within current and future digitisation projects.

On the ground, we find this easier said than done. Mentoring, intellectual interaction, and financial assistance will continue to be of great significance.

Many African universities have weak ICT resources. Yet it is no panacea to hand over ICT to companies just because they are Africa-based or even African-owned. Indeed, the history of the development of digital resources in the North is one of ongoing struggle between corporate ownership and open access, and much experimentation by libraries around this issue. Here there is a contradiction: as we publish digitally, do we own our own publications; and as we in the North mainstream digital projects, do we dominate the field? How do we avoid continued marginalisation of Africans as the Web juggernaut clicks onwards?

I argue firstly that *mainstreaming* the best digital initiatives enables us to leave behind the previous phase of ad hoc, grant-driven, one-off projects. Thus, the most useful online resources become an essential part of the scholarly process: as indeed JSTOR or e-journals in South Africa already are. In Africa, mainstreaming requires Africans becoming co-owners of content. Africans should co-administer major global digital products. This will require either financial struggles or organisational flexibility. Secondly, we should *cooperate* with each other on the *widest* practical scale where appropriate. Politically, this means we must continue to support both what one might term the digital "reforms" of the North and the digital "revolution" in Africa.

By maintaining ethical approaches and flexibility, by listening closely to priorities of African partners, by continuing to initiate worthwhile projects in the North yet also practically supporting African initiatives and by directing limited-end pilot projects towards mainstreaming, we can help to turn *expropriation* of African resources towards the *harvesting* of African (and Northern-based) resources for mutually beneficial use.

Endnotes

[i] J. Britz and P. Lor, "A Moral Reflection on the Information Flow from South to North: An African Perspective," *Libri* 53, 3 (2003):160-173.

[ii] M. Pickover, "Negotiations, Contestations and Fabrications: The Politics of Archives in South Africa Ten Years after Democracy," *Innovation* no. 30 (2005), pp. 1, 10. It is worth quoting at length, as Pickover's article was a seminal text for the Workshop on Politics of Digital Initiatives Concerning Africa, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 4-5 August 2006, at which my paper was first presented.

[iii] Pickover, p.10.

[iv] C. Saunders, "A Historian's View," *News from the Nordic Africa Institute* 2 (2005): 26–27.

[v] The Essential Electronic Agricultural Library was developed as a CD-ROM library available only to developing countries. The project is likely to be superseded by Access to Global Online Research in Agriculture, a portal (www.aginternetwork.org) providing free access to over 500 major journals in agricultural sciences to public

institutions in eligible developing countries, generally those with annual per capita of $1000 or less.

vi D. Cogburn, "Elite Decision Making and Epistemic Communities: Implications for Global Information Policy," in S. Braman ed. *The Emergent Global Information Policy Regime* (New York: Palgrave, 2004).

vii M. Robins and R. Hilliard, eds. *Beyond Boundaries: Cyberspace in Africa.* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2002); P. Zeleza, "The Dynamics of Book and Library Development in Anglophone Africa" in Roger Stringer ed. *The Book Chain in Anglophone Africa* (Oxford: INASP, 2002). www.inasp.info/pubs/bookchain/profiles/zeleza.html

viii D. Rosenberg, *Towards the Digital Library: Findings of an Investigation to Establish the Current Status of University Libraries in Africa* (Oxford: INASP, 2005).

ix An effective project here is Indiana University's preservation project with Liberian archives.

x M. Pickover and D. Peters, "DISA: An African Perspective on Digital Technology," *Innovation* no. 24 (2002):14–20.

xi P. Lor, "Preserving African Digital Resources: Is There a Role for Repository Libraries," *Library Management* 26, 1/2 (2005): 63-72.

xii P. Limb, "The Digitization of Africa," *Africa Today* 52, 2 (2005): 3-19.

xiii See T. Mendina and J. Britz, eds. *Information Ethics in the Electronic Age: Current Issues in Africa and the World* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004) and P. Limb, "Ethical Dilemmas in Southern African Archives and Libraries,"*Innovation* no. 24 (2002): 51-58, and for an integrated picture see A. Dick, *The Philosophy, Politics, and Economics of Information* (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2002).

xiv L. Friedman and M. McGarvie, eds. *Charity, Philanthropy, and Civility in American History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); N. von Hoffman, "Buffet's Billions" *Nation* (10 July 2006) (available at www.thenation.com/doc/20060717/howl); S.M. Naseem, "A Face Lift for Capitalism" *Dawn* (17 July 2006) (available at www.dawn.com).