

Print on demand (POD) as development potential for Africa

Independent publishing in sub-Saharan Africa is underdeveloped in most countries, yet such development is integral to development and cultural autonomy. National, regional and continent-wide distribution is weak. This industry weakness impacts negatively both on publishing houses and their concomitant parts. Through African Books Collective (ABC), 124 autonomous African publishers from 20 countries collectively market and distribute their titles internationally, enabling them to maximize overseas sales income. Print on demand (POD) is a major resource for production and international distribution, a tool for digital marketing to the wholesale channels, and a means to maintain publisher control over content. There is untapped potential for POD to contribute to intra-African book trade. The Espresso Book Machine offers an opportunity to tap this potential.



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Introduction

In Africa, the arts and scholarship, broadly defined, have always been an integral part of historical experience and cultural identity – as in the case of all peoples and societies. Culture is integral to human experience and development, and engenders dialogue, social and political consciousness, social change and progress. Writing and literature contribute to the construction of history and identity, and provide pleasure and enjoyment. The arts may build bridges, foster recognition and belonging: as such they are instrumental to achieving a cultural diversity, pluralism and tolerance.

Publishing is a central component of culture, the arts and intellectual endeavour, allowing literature, the arts, knowledge, science, ideas and information to be articulated and disseminated. Publishing is moreover a creative industry which makes an important contribution to economic development. Books are cultural products with both intellectual and commercial values. Reading is a creative process that expands and enhances education, which is recognized as they key to economic development. In the developing world, the creative industries may also be regarded as vectors of sustainable development.

Independent and autonomous publishing in Africa is underdeveloped and struggles to secure access to textbook orders, the backbone of the industry. The dominance in the textbook market of

capitalized foreign-owned companies often denies local publishers access to sales which could support scholarly and literary publishing, which is less profitable. Africa, with 15 percent of the world's population, produces less than 2% of the world's books, and of all books published in Africa, about 95% are school textbooks. This compares with a ratio in the developed world of educational to general publishing of about 50%.

This paper considers the ways in which the digital environment is assisting the development of independent publishing in Africa, particularly through the use of print on demand (POD) as a production and distribution resource. The experience of African Books Collective (ABC), an organization of 124 African publishers, illustrates how POD is being utilized and shows what its potential might be for the future.

Background

After independence, there was a brief flourishing of autonomous publishing in Africa, but the general increasing economic constraints and the imposition of Structural Adjustment Programmes by international institutions impacted very negatively. Publishing is not recognized as a strategic industry, the lack of investment in education has limited



Publishers from Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa and Tanzania, who were amongst the founders of ABC, meeting in Oxford with Mary Jay, CEO.

access to trained publishing professionals, and library funding is low and heavily dependent on donor agencies or overseas book donations. The infrastructure barriers in Africa are manifold: lack of access to capital; low literacy rates; poverty impacting on purchasing power; publishing largely in the European rather than local languages; weak national, regional and continent-wide distribution channels; and a generally poor printing infrastructure. Foreign-company domination of textbook markets in Africa further denies African publishers the resources for investment.

In this context, African Books Collective¹ was founded 20 years ago by a group of independent publishers to collectively market and distribute their titles outside Africa and to benefit from hard currency sales to build their publishing programmes. Over \$3 million has been remitted to African publishers. It is a social enterprise whose mission states: *'African Books Collective, founded, owned and governed by African publishers, seeks to strengthen indigenous African publishing through collective action and to increase the visibility and accessibility of the wealth of African scholarship and culture'*.

The reverse context was the difficulty of acquisition for libraries, institutions and book buyers outside of Africa. Founded with donor

agency support, as of 2010, ABC has become self-sufficient. Whilst the story behind ABC is a long one, the key to its self-sufficiency has been the strength of the organization flowing from African publishers being responsible for the strategy of the organization; the building through donor support; and in 2007, the switch to publishing largely through print on demand. Currently 1,700 titles are distributed in 20 countries from 124 independent and autonomous African publishers – including scholarly, literary and children's titles – with some 200 new titles being added annually.

Print on demand as an African resource

The ABC model of distributing books from Africa greatly increases cost-effectiveness by enabling the printing of books in the US to fulfill customer orders for North America, and in the UK for the rest of the world. Books do not need to be imported to the UK from Africa, with attendant freight, customs and clearance costs, and shipped worldwide to customers; shipping costs to Michigan State University Press, ABC's North-American distribution partner, are eliminated; and warehousing costs are reduced. Wastage is also eliminated by not needing to estimate the numbers of books to be

imported. Additionally, book formats are standardized and overall quality improved, largely eliminating returns. Africa's own voice through its knowledge production and literature is readily available worldwide.

African markets are small, given the purchasing power and literacy levels mentioned above. POD is enabling titles to be published which could not justify an offset print run. Such titles can be sold in the international markets and the publisher can be sent a very small supply for its own market. Whilst it would be desirable for the local market supplies to be printed locally, the technology for short digital book runs is not available or is prohibitively expensive where it is available.

There are barriers to African publishers working individually with POD providers in the 'North' (that is, the developed nations): security of electricity and internet access, online payment systems and credit, and sufficient expertise to format books to printer requirements. Affordable internet access and technical expertise are not widely available within African book publishing. By working collectively through ABC as a one-stop resource, these needs can be met. The technical expertise of formatting for digital set-up books at the printer is increasingly transferred from ABC to individual publishers. Publishers are empowered and ABC itself minimizes its digital set-up work.

International distribution

The challenge of getting books to the market is a global phenomenon, not one that is specific to Africa. Supermarkets, the big book store chains and online sites are squeezing independent book-sellers. So the challenge is to use POD for both digital printing and marketing.

Whilst, generally, POD unit print costs are higher than an offset print run, the savings in shipping and warehousing need to be set against that. There is no doubt that an African publisher making its titles available by print on demand in the US for North America, and in the UK for elsewhere, will improve its costs and secure in-print status for such titles, through the 'virtual' POD warehouse.

If a title is available via POD, it can be marketed through digital wholesale channels which in turn disseminate information widely over the internet. ABC largely achieves this through a three-way partnership between its printer, Lightning Source,

and wholesale partners.² This is key, as the major wholesalers are the outlets through which the greater part of the book trade now channels.

Once a title is set up for POD, it becomes relatively easy to convert to formats for e-books, providing an additional or alternative source of income.

The POD model also preserves a publisher's right to maintain control over its own distribution channels. Publishers worldwide establish prices for the markets into which they are selling, in order to take account of their various costs to get a book to a specific market. However, this has not been sufficiently respected in Africa, particularly given the development needs. Dealers seek to purchase books at the local lower prices in Africa, in local currencies and at discounts, and then to re-sell on to the North in hard currency prices, retaining the profits. This is a violation of territorial rights which are recognized in developed countries. For example, a US publisher with a co-publishing or distribution agreement in the UK would rightly regard it as an infringement of its rights if books from its catalogue were bought up locally in the US and sold on in the UK, in violation of the publishing or distribution rights they have granted. By using the speed of POD to get books quickly to market, the African publisher can more easily circumvent such buying trips. Whilst libraries and institutions must have regard to tightening budgets, such rights should be respected, particularly in the development context.

Intra-Africa distribution

Within Africa, there is a need for affordable digital printing, for local POD, and short scholarly runs. Given the hurdles within and between countries, the digital printing gaps are twofold: first for a publisher to print only to customer order or short digital print runs, so as to make the warehousing and wastage savings; and secondly, the need for a publisher in, for example, Kenya, to print a book in Ghana for a customer in Ghana. The physical hurdles of transport, currencies and bureaucratic impediment make intra-country sales negligible—these can be overcome by printing in the relevant country.

Digital printing is probably only available currently in Kenya and South Africa but has not impacted on production and distribution, largely because of comparatively high costs. There is a need for a POD facility in at least the capitals of

African countries so that titles can be distributed between countries. The Espresso Book Machine (EBM) is a POD/digital printer small enough to fit in a bookshop or library, and it has the potential to meet this demand. Currently, EBM is only available in the UK, US and Australia. It has the advantage too that through partnerships with content providers, the machine can access publisher catalogues for downloading/printing titles to order. Thus EBM can be used as an on-site print-only machine, or a distribution facility through access to the catalogues of content providers. The 1,700 African published titles available through ABC are available through the EBM. If the machines were available in Africa, it would be a positive opportunity to address intra-country distribution.

Conclusion

In 2001/2002, a pilot POD programme was conducted between a Nigerian publisher, ABC and Lightning Source. One hundred titles were set up, both new and backlist. This was successful in eliminating much wastage due to poor production, and loss of orders due to awaiting stocks from Africa. New titles were gradually set up for POD, but it was only in 2007 that nearly 1,500 were digitized for POD, excluding only some titles not suitable — e.g. extensively illustrated colour art books and long extent law reports. In 2008, short-run publisher direct orders grew by 121% and net sales income after remittances to publishers by 70%. There is no doubt that POD, through the partnership with Lightning Source and wholesale partners, has increased distribution of African-published books outside Africa, maintained a flow of revenues to Africa, and greatly increased the visibility of the wealth of African culture, scholarship and literature.

The challenge remains for more African publishers to harness these opportunities for

international distribution, and for the spread of the technology to Africa itself.

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Further reading

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