

AFRICA**Universities need imaginative, ICT-enhanced presses****Thierry Luescher and François van Schalkwyk****22 September 2017 University World News Global Edition Issue 475**

How are African university presses, which have an important mission and unique contribution to make to the African knowledge base, faring under the global scholarly publishing industry's current 'market' conditions?

Scholarly book publishing is in trouble. Two contrary developments can be observed internationally. On the one hand, there are perceptions in academia of 'robber capitalism' on the part of the large commercial publishers as they protect their oligopoly in the face of dissolving spatial barriers and diminishing value add.

On the other hand, we are witnessing a contrary trend: the emergence of the knowledge commons; a new form of social capitalism made possible *inter alia* by the latest technological advancements. This emergence takes place in an institutional context long dominated by an editorial logic and, in more recent times, by the logic of the market.

In the midst of these contrary trends are African university presses – some over half a century old, others started in the last decade – that have an important mission and unique contribution to make to the African knowledge base.

How are African university presses faring under the current 'market' conditions and the contradictory developments of 'robber capitalism' and hyper-marketisation on the one hand, and the emergence of 'social capitalism' and open access knowledge sharing on the other hand?

What do African university presses make of the challenges and opportunities presented in the scholarly publishing realm within their contexts?

Are they deploying the technological changes in production, distribution and marketing made possible by digitisation and network effects of the internet? Have they adjusted their production processes, gone digital, and bought into the latest technologies to be able to produce e-books, enhance their visibility and marketing strategies by including social media, and drastically reduce print-runs?

The cost of producing a top-notch scholarly book is high; returns are low. New technologies such as print-on-demand as close as possible to the point of sale minimise printing, warehousing and distribution costs. Those are imperative.

Some large international university presses have been able to make the transition; others have ceased to produce or become but an imprint of one of the large publishing companies that dominate the international landscape.

What about African university presses? Are they surviving, withering or thriving?

Research into African university presses

A holistic way of approaching these questions is to consider shifts in the dominant institutional logic in the academic publishing industry.

Based on a baseline survey of university presses in Africa, in-depth case studies of selected university presses, and an analysis of the publishing choices made by African academics, we examined the opportunities and constraints faced by university presses in Africa.

Our research provides a global overview of the African university presses landscape and shows that of the 52 university presses in Africa there is a small, active group of university presses. Fifteen to be precise – excluding pure printing presses without editorial function.

In most cases, they are not yet making use of technological advances to reconfigure their production, distribution and marketing processes, nor are they experimenting with new publishing models such as open access. Most operate according to the erstwhile ‘editorial logic’, and some few have ‘commercialised’.

Were it not for the African Books Collective and Google Books, most would be completely invisible outside their small local footprint. And as our baseline survey shows, few make use of social media or have working and informative websites.

Our case studies of selected African university presses surfaced unsurprising challenges, such as scarce resources and limited capacity.

They also show that African university presses are constrained by institutional logics that are holding them back from experimenting with new ways of doing things. But much is hinged on will: the will to innovate; to relearn; to adopt new technologies.

Universities are not the most agile of institutions, and the African university presses are clearly not on the forefront of adopting new technologies, rethinking their models of selling on consignment to the few campus bookshops in the capital.

So what do academics do? Based on an analysis of the publishing choices academics at a flagship African university make, an alarmingly high number of African academics are choosing to publish monographs with predatory publishers.

In this way, they get their book out – even if it is overpriced (and thus not accessible to other researchers in their home country or on the continent) and has gone through little, if any, value add.

What is to be done? The African University Press research report is available for free download [here](#) and includes a set of recommendations to university presses and their host institutions as well as to funders interested in supporting scholarly publishing in Africa.

Dr Thierry Luescher is research director: higher education and development in Africa, at the Human Sciences Research Council in Cape Town, South Africa. He is also an associate professor in higher education studies affiliated to the University of the Free State, South Africa, and a trustee of the non-profit, open access academic publisher African Minds.

François van Schalkwyk is a doctoral candidate at Stellenbosch University’s Centre for Research on Evaluation, Science and Technology, host of the DST-NRF Centre of Excellence in Scientometrics and STI Policy, in South Africa. Van Schalkwyk is an independent researcher in the areas of higher education, open data and scholarly publishing. He is also a trustee of the non-profit, open access academic publisher African Minds.

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