SunScholar Stands for Sun in Africa – Stellenbosch University and Oop Toegang

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Hunters for gold or pursuers of fame, they all had gone out on that stream, bearing the sword, and often the torch, messengers of the might within the land, bearers of a spark from the sacred fire. What greatness had not floated on the ebb of that river into the mystery of an unknown earth...

(Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness)

The idea of mystery behind what is unknown in Africa, remains today an excuse for those same “hunters for gold or pursuers of fame”, to take from the continent what they need, and to leave it at a flimsy bundle of world’s scholarly papers, which forms barely 1% of the world’s scholarly output. “A new form of poverty, Information poverty,” as defined by Nwagwu and Ahmed in their paper Building Open Access in Africa, should warn the continent against choosing “the information poor” path. That this time Africa may choose, is visible from “the information rich” choice of the Stellenbosch University, which stands out as the first African university to sign the Berlin Declaration on Open Access to Knowledge.

More Than One Sun

Nicknamed Maties for mates or ‘maat’ in Afrikaans, the students of the Stellenbosch University or the SUN, are those that form the academic heart of Africa, although placed on its very South. The University designed Africa’s first microsatellite, SUNSAT, launched in 1999, and not surprisingly, SUN is recognized as one of the top four research universities in South Africa. Predominantly Afrikaans medium University, students are allowed to write their assignments, tests and examinations in English, as well.

Today, Maties are proud users of SUNScholar, freely accessible electronic archive for the collection, preservation and distribution of digital theses, dissertations, research articles, inaugural addresses, and conference material. They even hold a blog where they keep the community up-to-date on the SunScholar News or ‘Nuus’. During the Open Access Week 2010, the seminar was held at SUN, which presentations and videos are now available online.

“Open access is the only way to reach people that need information but cannot afford it,” Professor Wolfgang Preisner, Head of Medical Virology in the Faculty of Health Sciences, said. To illustrate his point,
he referred to pathologists and laboratory technicians who do not necessarily subscribe to journals, but can easily stay informed via the internet on the latest findings about, “for instance, the effectiveness of a particular test for HIV.”

Technology In the Heart of Darkness

**Although an imperative, Open Access in Africa must overcome many obstacles.** More Sun and SUNS will be necessary to reveal what African researchers can offer, and especially those from the sub-Saharan area. According to Nwagwu and Ahmed, “DCs are posed with the challenge of either becoming an integral part of the knowledge-based global culture or face the very real danger of finding themselves on the wrong side of the digital divide.” In their paper, some of the main obstacles are outlined, to building Open Access in Africa, due to its indispensable reliance on internet technology:

1. **Bandwidth**

“The average African university has bandwidth capacity equivalent to a broadband residential connection available in Europe,” and yet it “pays 50 times more for their bandwidth than their educational counterparts in the rest of the world, and fails to monitor, let alone manage, the existing bandwidth.” The OA initiative relies on websites that researchers are supposed to use. “Build it and they will use it,” strategy remains still to be questioned.

2. **The Absence of Africa from the African thing**

“Many African countries, which ought to be the prime beneficiaries of OA, have not actually addressed the movement. Even at the individual institutional level, adequate concern about access to institutional publications have hardly been expressed.” Apart from the SUN, and their initiative in South Africa, apparently, “all the efforts aimed at liberalizing access to scientific publications originate from either US or UK, comprising both government and non-government agencies and associations.”

3. **Internet as the Western-Focused culture**

“ICTs used are by their very nature, cultural. As noted by Keniston (1998); the content of software is determined not only by the language, but by deep, underlying, usually implicit and unacknowledged (because thought to be natural) assumptions inherent in the software itself. Software carries with it a view of the world, of people, of reality, of time, of the capabilities of users, which may or may not be compatible with any given and social context.” Nwagwu and Ahmed continue to explain that “presently, African languages are yet to make any meaningful input in the internet. As is well known, the internet is overwhelmingly US-based, English speaking, and Western-focused.”

The challenge is posed on the Africa, and if one University can do it, why wouldn’t the others? **The awareness should be raised in Africa of the tools they can use in order to fight the “scientific information famine.”**
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