

**AN ACCESS BASED INFORMATION RESEARCH AGENDA FOR AFRICA:
DEVELOPED IN THE CRUDE ENGLISH STYLE**

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INTRODUCTION

Proposing a distinctive research agenda for Africa might at first sight seem like a way of saying that Africa has no place in the global information society, and it might actually look like a way of introducing a kind of 'separate development'. This is certainly not the intention. Arguing for a distinctive research agenda for any country or region is quite simply a way of recognising that the history of one place is different from that of another and that geographical circumstances vary across the world. A programme of research and development that fails to take this into account is almost certainly going to miss addressing distinctive circumstances and is likely to offer proposals that do not fit the needs of the region. This is such an obvious proposition that it hardly seems worth making. It is only worth making because, obvious though it might be, it has been consistently ignored in Africa with thoroughly unsatisfactory consequences. The story of information development in Africa is scarred with entirely inappropriate projects that have brought little but waste, disappointment and a disastrous loss of confidence.

This paper proposes a research agenda based on what, it will be argued, is a particularly appropriate principle, developed in a pragmatic way. Before some remarks explaining the value of access as a driving principle for an African information research agenda, the 'crude English style' requires a word of explanation. When Charles Darwin finally plucked up the courage to publish the ideas that he had been developing for decades with considerable apprehension (his wife was a devout Christian who was very uncomfortable with the implicit exclusion of God from Darwin's scheme of things) he sent copies of The Origin of Species to many people whom he judged might appreciate his line of argument. One of these was Karl Marx, resident in London and developing his ideas on capital in the British Museum Library's Reading Room. Marx liked the 'Origin'. He felt that its logical pursuit of the implications of massive quantities of evidence from geology and biology fitted well with his own extensive studies of society and economy and the dialectic materialism he was applying to this evidence. However, as Marx wrote to his close associate Engels, the 'Origin' was 'developed in the crude English style'. By this he meant that it was rich in observation and the deployment of evidence, but that it was comparatively untheoretical. The present paper is based on some decades of observation in Africa, the collection of evidence, and the development of a comparatively untheoretical approach. No claim of equality to Darwin, or Marx, should be inferred from the use of the quotation.

The choice of access as a principle for an African research agenda comes not only from a sense of its value in an African context. Librarianship was the professional area in which the author was first employed and first acquired a sense of how work with information might best be furthered. The focus of librarianship in those distant days, and still to an unfortunate extent today, was on the document (its acquisition, organisation, storage and preservation). User access to the document was often almost a secondary consideration. During the second half of the twentieth century librarianship was gradually transformed by the development of an information science which placed the focus solidly on the interaction between the user and information, whether in documentary form or not. Librarians today, whatever their category of library, are much more like information scientists than the custodians of the book that they used to be. However, there is still some work to be done in shifting the professional focus away from institutions like the library towards the interaction between people and information that takes place just as much on the dusty pathways of an African village as it does in the research laboratories of the world's great universities and industrial corporations.

The value of access as a principle is that it is essentially dynamic. Dictionary definitions of access list several ways of using the word that are not especially relevant here. However, all include the use of access to mean the finding, retrieving or obtaining of data, files, or information. The definitions essentially make it clear that this is an active, positive process and they convey the sense that it is the engagement between people and information that is the significance of access. Access has the further virtue that it is capable of being extremely hospitable to a wide variety of topics or approaches. Access based research is certainly not tied to a specific methodology. Because people are always at the centre of it, an access approach lends itself to the full range of social investigatory techniques (observation, interviews, questionnaires and so on). It is also quite possible to devise and set up experiments that can test the strength of propositions such as those that might suggest a certain type of tool or, a specific prototype, might be appropriate under certain circumstances. It also permits the use of historical and text-based forms of investigation. An inclusive, eclectic, dynamic principle open to a full range of research approaches is particularly appropriate for African circumstances.

African information research is not as yet a well-developed field and it does not have a great number of studies that offer models for new researchers. African information researchers are effectively pioneers and they need the freedom to roam effectively in pursuit of a principle that inspires rather than constrains them. The intention here is to identify some categories of research that fit comfortably within an access related programme and show something of the type of research that might be appropriate to these categories. Seven such categories have been identified for the purposes of this paper. They are:

- Freedom of access (and combating the suppression of information);
- Intellectual access to content;
- Physical access to information institutions;
- Virtual access to electronic resources;
- Socio-economic access (and the problem of exclusion);
- Access to tacit knowledge;
- Psycho-spiritual access (and the acceptance of information).

Each of these will be sketched out in a little more detail to illustrate their researchability and relevance to African circumstances. A few examples of work that explores these directions (quite a bit of it the present writer's own, it must be admitted) will be offered. But mostly this paper is a set of suggestions. Readers can interpret them in their own way; accept them or reject them. Nothing about this is intended to be prescriptive. A good research agenda is open to new topics, new approaches. It should be there to be overturned. Perhaps the only conclusion that a reader will draw is that the agenda presented here needs to be overturned. So be it. That is much better than passive acceptance of some supposed authority's agenda.

FREEDOM OF ACCESS

Logically this fits well at the beginning of the list, but since the author has concentrated on this area for some years a reader might expect that claim. Freedom of access to information is a powerful universal principle, enshrined in Article 19 of the UN Universal Declaration on Human Rights. IFLA bases its core activity on Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression (FAIFE) on precisely what is said in Article 19. There is a danger here. If one is able to feel that by saying 'What about Article 19?' a discussion on intellectual freedom matters is effectively closed, then maybe we might be missing something. Just like all principles that are treated as absolutes ('Thou shalt not kill', for instance), closer analysis turns up all sorts of possible exceptions to the rule. This should lead us to question how the principle has been developed and justified, which in turn might point to a need to establish whether a principle is as universal as it looks. Just as in some societies (the Afars of Djibouti maybe) a universal prohibition of killing might look like a means of preventing young men proving their manhood, in other societies questioning the control of information access by those who hold secular or religious power could seem like an unjustifiable interference with vital social stability.

Some Chinese students at Loughborough University have shown an interest in the current state of information control in China. At a certain amount of personal risk, they have surveyed a few hundred rather well sampled respondents, discovering that there is a high level of acceptance of state information control, even amongst students. Such findings might well be identifying old-established Chinese social norms rather than something produced by the Socialist system that China has had since 1949. A thoughtful exploration of Chinese concepts of privacy (Lu, 2005) certainly suggests that there exist attitudes that do not match what one might expect in Europe, or even Africa. At the same time, it is possible to identify ways in which those who hold power also control the generation and recognition of information at a very fundamental level. Thus even in a society that has many of the usual forums and institutions for access (like newspapers and libraries) phenomena that might generate information do not always do so. A rather superficial exploration of this idea by the present writer, in the context of Malawi (Sturges, 1998), looked at the ways in which the Banda regime could effectively define what was information, and what was not, through the various structures of power and influence that it had built. These two examples are only a clue as to the research possibilities that can be generated by a principle ostensibly so sealed off from questioning as freedom of access to information.

INTELLECTUAL ACCESS

The cataloguers, or metadata experts as we should probably call them now, also deal in certainties. They would say that knowledge can be analysed and categorised to allow it to be described in ways that will make possible the accurate retrieval of documents, or even less fixed units of information. This proposition has spawned an enormous volume of research and resulted in the creation of highly effective retrieval systems for libraries and databases, and it has also contributed to better retrieval from the Worldwide Web. However, there is a less frequently exposed downside to this. The analysis, categorisation and description sometimes seems to rely on the faith that there is a universal order that can be relied upon, and a universal mode of perception that can be directed towards this. This is obviously not the case. Many years ago, in the apartheid era, editions of the Dewey Decimal Classification actually treated South African history as the history of the European presence in the region, and relegated the history of the black population to 'Social problems'. This was one perception of the order of the universe, but not one that accorded with any rational analysis of the subject. In some ways the problem parallels the dialogue between multiculturalism and integration of communities that is such a significant aspect of the broader political climate in so many countries. (Sturges, 2005) Should we seek a way of living together based on some generally agreed principles, or should we agree to differ on a great deal? If we agree to differ, do we implicitly accept an information world in which different perceptions and different truths are reflected in metadata just as much as in other cultural manifestations? In such a world, a specifically African approach to information retrieval would be required. In pursuing the implications of this, the application of a self-consciously ethical approach might be an appropriate starting point. Interesting material on ethical indexing can be found at <http://www.infoethics.org.uk/sourcesandresources.htm#Indexing>.

ACCESS TO INSTITUTIONS

Much writing on access to information posits a seeker for information free from handicaps and disabilities. While such a perfect individual might exist, it has to be recognised that very substantial percentages of the population of any country would not fall into that category. Visual impairment is the most obvious problem and in Africa there are very high proportions of the population blinded by conditions that are treatable, given the availability of appropriate medical attention. Identifying the problems arising from access for the blind, for the disabled, and for those with learning difficulties is researchable in ways that include considerable potential for experimental methods. It has to be admitted, however, that incorporating provision for the disabled in new buildings, let alone in the systems that buildings might house, requires a very serious investment commitment by those who hold the purse-strings. Researchers should not allow this to deter them, both because freeing the potential of Africa's disabled through information access is such a significant part of the agenda, and because good research can also be directed towards identifying low-cost solutions.

Underlying all the physical access issues are other questions that are only beginning to be answered in a few progressive (and well-funded) institutions in the industrialised countries. Even if everyone were free from obvious disabilities, there is still no standard requirement for space and facilities that applies across all of humanity. This becomes obvious when we examine, first of all, how people learn and, arising directly from this, how they study most effectively. At this point information research intersects fruitfully with educational, behavioural and psychological research. It is quite apparent to the casual observer that some people learn best in isolated silence, some work well with background music and other sounds, others need dialogue and the reassuring presence of other learners, some require a chair and work surface, others prefer to stand up or even walk around for much of the time. Identifying the range of learning preferences, exploring the ways in which they might be culturally conditioned and experimenting with different configurations of spaces and furniture offers stimulating research possibilities. In a specifically African context resource constraints will often limit the range of possible solutions, but experiments with low cost facilities, reading rooms and community technology centres in the villages and townships are already widespread. What may well be lacking is the underpinning research on learning styles and cultural preferences. For instance, the proposition that many people are more comfortable with a simple reading facility offering tables, chairs and electric light than monumental libraries of the kind found in some of Africa's great cities, is certainly testable. If ideas and examples of experimentation with new institutional provision are needed, India is a ferment of activity in this area and there is no lack of accounts of exciting and innovative work. (Shadrack and Garai, 2006) The scope for investigating African learning styles and preferences and attempting to match these to the design of institutions is vast.

VIRTUAL ACCESS

Institutions, in the sense of four walls and what is to be found within them, are already looking like marginal considerations for the forward-looking information researcher. Whilst the physical institution has certainly not yet outlived its usefulness, it is certainly true that virtual access is a central concern. Much of the Indian experimentation mentioned in the previous section is directed towards making technology work for all kinds of communities, and not just the highly educated elite in the cities. Whilst nowhere has quite the extent and variety of experiments as India, where the whole e-government enterprise has been adopted as a major policy objective by the central government, states, NGOs and local community groups, things are also happening in Africa (Herselman, Jacobs and Akinsola 2005). To anyone not actively connected with these projects, they may look like an exercise of faith rather than realism. The question that naturally occurs is whether communities with very low literacy levels, a near total absence of the reading habit and very poor access to print, can actually benefit from virtual access through telecentres. The evidence that they can begins to accumulate with each completed experiment, but the focus on experimenting with provision is naturally on whether the provision will work, not how it will work. There seems to have been very little in-depth study of poor people's interaction with technology. This is probably why one particular item (Noronha, 1999) makes such a striking impact. The article describes putting an access point into an Indian urban slum community without announcement, unsupported and unsupervised, but carefully observed. The response, and the swift mastery of the

technology by local children is then reported. This is what we would like to believe, but is it true and would something like it happen in other disparate communities? The question very much needs the answers that research can provide.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC ACCESS

The exclusion of whole communities, groups and sections of humanity from information access is a fact of life globally. In the industrialised countries this tends to apply to migrants, asylum seekers and travelling communities such as the Roma (gypsies). To some extent it is language that excludes these groups and this can be, and is, overcome by anyone who addresses learning the dominant language with sufficient energy and diligence. This is seldom everyone in the relevant group, however. Old people and women are often left stranded with only the hope that other family and community members will share the benefits of access with them. In some communities they may well be disappointed in this hope. Patriarchal societies, in which the role of woman is limited to their work in the home, may well have no impetus at all towards anything like information access that threatens to empower women. This can also apply even when women are in practical terms in a position that should carry economic status. Take the female-headed farming households that are so common in Southern Africa where a large numbers of men are not present in the home for a variety of reasons, including employment in some distant location. It is possible to demonstrate that female-headed households are subtly discriminated against, in terms of a range of benefits including access to agricultural information through the structure of the system of distribution (Chipande, 1987). The exclusion of women is certainly only sometimes a product of not knowing the language.

Whilst ignorance of the dominant language is a genuine barrier, it can also be just a symptom of a more pervasive system of exclusion. In East Africa, for instance, Swahili is the natural *lingua franca* of a number of countries. People speak it often as fluently as their mother tongue, but implicit in the system is the requirement that to succeed at a high level in most walks of life knowledge of English, a minority language, is necessary. In particular, it plays a part in unspoken, but highly effective, restrictions on access to schooling for some communities. These restrictions also cast a shadow of exclusion on the years after schooling should have been completed. They include no fixed address, no certificates from school, no formal employment record. These are barriers that particularly tend to exclude indigenous peoples from access. In global terms, this obviously refers to the Maori of New Zealand, the Aborigines of Australia, or the First Nation peoples of North America, who are very much excluded from the benefits of full participation in industrialised countries. However, it should not be forgotten that there are also similar situations in the developing world, tribal peoples in India and China, the Quechua in Peru, or, closer to home, the San in Southern Africa. In addressing information exclusion, it is first necessary to understand, through research, the mechanisms by which it works. The area is fraught with misunderstandings, but that only offers more interesting challenges.

ACCESS TO TACIT KNOWLEDGE

The use of the phrase 'tacit knowledge' identifies an approach based on knowledge management. Knowledge management is a misunderstood concept, too frequently treated as a synonym for the type of information management that is concerned with documentation. What knowledge management actually focuses on are the barriers to the effective dissemination and use of information presented by a comparative absence of documentation. This can reach levels of complete absurdity. A student dissertation, reported by Sturges (2001) identified a complete lack of systematic documentation of the activities of the Addis Ababa Water and Sewerage Authority, reducing much of its planning and its responses to problems to guesswork, and placing this utterly vital set of public services at the mercy of those employees whose memories held unique and invaluable knowledge resources. An organisation that relies on the tacit knowledge acquired, retained, and used when the occasion arises, by its personnel is in no position to manage its information. What it can try to do is to develop systems that will capture and organise the tacit knowledge for use. Within the organisation there are the incentives to encourage cooperation with a knowledge management programme, and the tools for knowledge management systems exist.

What is interesting in an African context is the way in which knowledge management's preoccupation with the knowledge resources endogenous to the organisation resembles the oral knowledge of African societies. For centuries oral knowledge has been the information patrimony of African peoples and oral heritage is still vital for Africa. The question then arises as to whether a knowledge management approach has something to offer oral society. This idea is encouraged by the sense that oral society is endangered: by the migration from the villages to the cities; by loss of influence by the guardians of traditional knowledge and practice (the healers, herbalists, craftsmen, artists, griots, praise poets, dancers, inyangas, spirit mediums, and traditional leaders); and by the predatory activities of multinational companies eager for herbal knowledge that can be turned into profitable products. Whether capture of traditional knowledge on databases, on video, in books and other recording media is the solution is another matter. A sense that oral knowledge is a living, mutating resource, not capable of being fully extracted from its human and community context suggests that attempting to capture its current content is not the answer. Maybe it is support for the societal structures in which oral knowledge lives that should be pursued, rather than a knowledge management solution. Whatever the answer to this may be, it is an area capable of generating a rich variety of truly African information research.

PSYCHO-SPIRITUAL ACCESS

This final section is possibly the one most requiring explanation. It is arguably the acceptance and internalisation of information, and its re-creation in the individual human in the form of personal knowledge, that is the most neglected aspect of access. Most discussions of information services and the patterns of information-seeking to which the services relate seem to assume that those who are served are rational actors in a basically orderly world. Take, for example, the agricultural extension services that employ some many administrators and field agents to diffuse agricultural innovations across most African countries. (Sturges and Chimseu, 1996) The agents will have the task of supplying farmers with information concerning developments in the breeding care and commercial exploitation of animal herds, or new strains of crop

and methods of cultivation. The information will have originated from an agricultural research centre or a commercial organisation with a research capacity, and have been processed by the ministry of agriculture and its experts. The quality of the information will be, presumably, unquestionable and farmers will be expected to incorporate the innovations into their practices with direct beneficial consequences. A similar set of arguments might also be applied to other transfers of information, especially those that involve a top-down route from the creators of information to its recipients. Such expectations also attach to responsive services, such as libraries, which provide information materials and access facilities from which users can obtain information of their own choice. The librarians or other providers have carefully selected the documents and other resources, these are intended to offer the best information available and the assumption is that users will come to the institutions, they will obtain useful knowledge, and then act accordingly in their lives.

The problem is that it does not always work like this. Users and potential users have a puzzling tendency to ignore or reject much of what is offered to them, although they may pay lip service to its value. When this occurs, we cannot really talk of the transaction between provider and intended recipient as if access had occurred. The possibility of access has been offered, but access has failed to be completed. The well-meaning provider is likely to find this very frustrating and the response of the intended recipients is may well be described in terms that include 'irrational'. To compound the frustration, the choices of information that people actually make and the sources from which they obtain it may well be part of this seeming irrationality. For instance, the staff of an electronic network set up in Ethiopia in the 1990s to provide information for farmers, were surprised to receive numerous requests for astrological information from farmers wanting help in making decisions on crop planting, stock rearing and family matters. (Sturges and Gooch, 206) Despite anxieties about the legitimacy of providing this type of information, the staff eventually began to respond helpfully to these requests. This had the benefit of increasing the farmers' confidence in the service and their ability to accept the scientifically based information that was its *raison d'etre*. The message for the information provider is the importance of awareness of traditional knowledge and communication, and not only in the agricultural sector. Beyond this, there is the possibility of casting information services in forms more compatible with society's psycho-spiritual norms. Only one thing seems certain, however, which is that this offers exciting research possibilities.

CONCLUSIONS

Whilst the research suggestions in the preceding sections have been presented as offering benefits for Africa, it is actually possible to say that they are in fact just missing or neglected aspects of a global information research agenda. Take for instance the conferences organised in various recent years under the title of Information Seeking in Context (ISIC). The relevance of much of the content of the conferences for an access agenda is considerable, and the proceedings are a rich fund of methodological exploration. At the same time, the subject matter of most of the papers has been distressingly narrow. The papers overwhelmingly originate in North America and Northern Europe, and they deal with a noticeably small range of milieu: health care, business, the educational system and a few others are completely

dominant. You could say that ISIC has a lot to offer Africa, but it might be better to say that Africa has a lot to offer ISIC. A wider and much more varied geographical spread of subjects for investigation could raise the whole ISIC project to new levels of interest and relevance, with obvious benefits to the North American and Northern European heartlands of information research.

A final example, once again drawn from the author's own work, illustrates the point. Prompted by a fascinating but unpolished account of the role of information and communication in the Eritrean liberation struggle (Kidane, 1999) a mainly literature-based investigation of some African liberation struggles was carried out. (Sturges, 2004) This was followed up by a study of the Namibian struggle, between 1966 and 1990, using archive material and the results of fieldwork to build on what emerged from the published literature. (Sturges, Katjihingua and Mchombu, 2005) A model was developed to organise the plentiful information on the conflicts that derived from the historical research. The model takes into account both the liberation movement's information and communication activities and the established power's counter-insurgency programme. The processes that this represents are broadly present on both sides of the conflict, thus logically calling for its duplication if two different sets of data, one concerning the activities of the liberation movement, and the other concerning the established regime, are to be accommodated. The model can then be expressed diagrammatically.

The point about this is that if you detach the model from the African context in which it was developed, it may well have utility in other contexts, such as the struggles between business corporations and the economies in which they operate. There is a similar mix of overt and covert activity in corporate information activity. Areas such as data mining, industrial espionage, product promotion, protection of intellectual property, and many others have direct parallels in the conflict between liberators and the colonial or quasi-colonial powers that be. On the basis of this line of argument, we could perhaps go on to say that this is an example of how the global information research arena could use the invigorating effects of an access-based agenda. There is no reason at all why that agenda should not merely take full cognisance of a neglected geographical region such as Africa, but actually emerge from Africa itself. There are rich resources of historical data that can be dug out of the literature, archives and human memory in Africa and the scope for experimentation and current investigations in the continent are as considerable and, in some cases greater, than anywhere else in the world. Why shouldn't Africa generate the research agenda, rather than wait for it to be imported from elsewhere?

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