

Scanning The Landscape and Mapping New Knowledge Flows

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The move to reinscribe a “commons thinking” in many areas of society today has, in the academic world, led to the global knowledge commons movement. Powered by new technologies, the knowledge commons has been widely viewed as a way of narrowing access gaps between resource-rich and resource-poor countries, if one assumes that more researchers in the latter could potentially have easier access to global knowledge this way. However, some scholars believe this has not been the case. The inequities and exclusions persist because the technological infrastructures and literacies needed for information border crossings and for engaging with new knowledge – the very tools that should “flatten” the world – have ended up creating more divides.

Indeed the cost of new technologies is still quite prohibitive in many developing countries, and the new literacies needed to function in the knowledge society need to be strengthened. Some critics have therefore believed that Africa, a continent that has lagged behind in most areas of modern development, will not be able to play catch up. This view was premised on the evolutionary mindset that African countries would need to reach a similar level of development as richer ones before digital technology could take hold. However, the unforeseen uptake of mobile technologies on the continent forced a rethink. One possible reason for this fast track route, or leapfrogging, may be attributed to the network effect, the “strong compulsion to be part of the information society... a compulsion linked to the needs of a neoliberal global economy that demands connectedness” (Robert Hassan, *The Information Society*, 2008). So the convergence of this and multiple new technologies has provided the impetus for content production, dissemination and use, and helped bring African scholarship, ideas and perspectives to new audiences in the global information space.

This paper will interrogate the "flattening" by exploring the broad contours of the scholarly open access landscape in sub-Saharan Africa to understand how research communities are engaging the rest of the world through their publications. It will discuss results of an environmental scan conducted to a) assess the number of research repositories in Africa; b) identify and analyze their characteristics – content by subject area/topic, publication type, number of items, hosting institution type; c) examine accessibility issues, and d) try to determine their global impact through an analysis of their usage statistics -- frequently downloaded items, number of users, and countries of visitors.