Digital Publishing in West Africa: Technology and the Future of the Book

Full Review of Information for Change 2011, Lagos, Nigeria, 11th May 2011

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Wednesday 11 May 2011 saw the fifth **Information for Change** workshop, held in Lagos as part of the tenth Nigeria International Book Fair.

The **Information for Change** workshop developed the main theme of the Book Fair "Technology and the Future of the Book: Implications for the African book industry" by focusing on the region with the title of "Digital Publishing in West Africa: Technology and the future of the book", which itself echoed the theme of the previous year's workshop held in Nairobi, "Digital Publishing in Africa: The next steps".

Information for Change gathered a panel of speakers and case studies from West Africa that demonstrated the range of digital experience and passion in the region. Three main speakers, from Cassava Republic Press, from the National Library, and from the Nigerian National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA), supported by four case studies, presented a publishing industry on the brink of major digital development, but held back by a mixture of uncertainty and practical constraints. (For full details of the speakers and case studies see the website www.informationforchange.org/speakers)

At the **launch workshop** of the Book Fair held the previous day the keynote speaker Robert Baensch made the point that, globally, the problems of digital publishing (wide range of formats and files, proliferation of hardware devices, piracy and security issues, set up costs, a workable business model, a pricing structure that works, and so on) become the focus for publishers, rather than the opportunities that digital opens up for publishers. This is as true in Nigeria as in any other country.

Bibi Bakare-Yusuf in her keynote address identified one of these opportunities as the qualitative change in people's relationship with knowledge and experience that can be brought by the interactive and participatory aspects of the digital revolution.

"Through technology, publishers can increasingly deliver rich content using a variety of media. We can talk also about ebooks and the possibility in terms of sales and better access etc. However, I am sceptical about the immediate opportunities here in Africa. Nonetheless, digital allows us to challenge the notion of the narcissistic authorial voice or the cult of the 'genius' that is at the heart of book production with its obsession over the individual celebrated author which masks the collective efforts that is involved in any act of creation. However, with digitalisation and socialising media, especially where online text, art, music, film are combined, a dynamic and collaborative way of creation and learning becomes available. In societies like ours where we have mis-educated and under-educated individuals whom we allow to transmit their own mis-education to future generations, interactively produced and inherently participative

content can reduce that and offer teachers and learners a new way of learning and ultimately enable a re-discovery of the joy of the 'book'. There is much work to be done."

"It's about power!"

The Information for Change workshop World Café sessions asked participants to identify "What works" and "What doesn't work" in the digital publishing sector in Nigeria. Overwhelmingly (a factor of at least 5 times any other mention) the "Doesn't Work" list was headed by 'Power' - not as in power relations in the information industries, but as in power cuts and availability of electricity. The workshop was fortunate in getting through to just-gone 4.00 in the afternoon before the first power cut, and this aptly illustrated the power issue. Without a consistent power supply, it is hard to make the digital revolution happen. One simple statistic casts light on the power problems in the country:

> Nigeria has a population (155 million) three times that of South Africa (49 million) and in 2007 had about 9% of the generating capacity of South Africa (21.92 billion kWh vs 240.3 billion kWh). And South Africa doesn't have enough capacity and suffers from power cuts or 'load shedding'.

What works? or What are we doing right?

In answer to the "**What Works**" question, people identified some key indicators:

- relatively widespread use of the internet in Nigeria which is No. 1 in Africa with nearly 44 million users or 37.1% of all internet use in Africa (Egypt is No. 2 with 17%; South Africa is ranked 4 with 5.7%)
- high ownership of mobile phones in Nigeria (73.1 million users or just under 50% of the population) and of these a reasonable number (no-one had figures but an observed fact) of BlackBerries and smartphones. Nigeria has the largest number of mobile phone owners in Africa, followed by Egypt (55.4 million and South Africa 46.4 million)
- the largest Mobile Network Operator (MNO) in Africa is currently MTN Nigeria: the South African operator Vodacom (for many years the largest) was relegated to No 4. by mid-2010
- relatively secure internet access into and out of the country through undersea cables, and active plans to increase this, so reasonable bandwidth and reasonable cost (but also see "What doesn't work?" below)
- publishing to CDRoM was quite widespread
- engaging with a global market - the African Books Collective was mentioned a number of times as an example of effective collective marketing
- increasing use of social networking sites (facebook and twitter mentioned a lot) especially by urban based and young audiences
- effective web payment systems are being introduced (NetNaira, Surepay, CashEnvoy, and Virtual Terminal Network, and mPesa) and beginnings of online bookshops (Walahi.com, Naijareads.com, Kalahari.com.ng)

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- some effective use of podcasts, especially in the religious and motivational sectors
- rapid expansion of the local film industry (Nollywood) with all the supporting digital and communications infrastructure
- a substantial and critical mass of institutions in the Lagos area creates a digital pool of internationally-connected academics and researchers whose digital behaviour is the same as that of peers anywhere else in the world
- from the presentation by NITDA, a sense that government did understand the need to develop an enabling infrastructure and consistent legal framework that will encourage the development of digital publishing.

What doesn't work? or What are the problems?

Apart from "Power", the answers were unsurprising, with one exception:

- piracy is a big issue, and distrust of digital formats because they are easy to pirate was very obvious through the workshop
- unrealistic cost of hardware and software, when compared with costs in Europe or USA
- for readers and other devices, issues of (a) unaffordability (can't afford it); (b) unavailability (can't find it); and/or (c)unmaintainability (can't get it supported)
- lack of widespread broadband and WiFi (although the mobile phone companies are addressing this but I can't find any timescale: it'll be sooner rather than later)
- although digital infrastructure is OK, there is no redundancy or back-up capacity in the system: when the optical cable out of Lagos into the rest of the country was severed a few weeks before, there was no alternative, and the rest of the country was cut off for some days
- restricted connectivity at peak use times (but getting better)
- lack of secure and generally agreed payment system (but see developments above)
- lack of a large enough trained and skilled workforce in the field (there is a lot of poaching of staff because there is not a large enough pool of trained people in the country)
- lack of an effective legal framework to administer digital publishing in the country - links to issues of piracy
- physical problems in intra-Africa trade limits effectiveness of marketing/promotion outside the country. This negates the benefits of global reach embedded in the web.

And finally - the one that surprised me -

- issues of quality, of content, or editing, of production, of design; all these came together under the general concern that digital publishing (or at least digital production and printing) makes it too easy for material of very low quality to be self-published. Some is to do with academics who will put a cover onto their lecture notes and then make this required reading for their students; some linked to self-publishing of memoirs and 'autobiographies'. Many 'publishers' in Nigeria are printers who take on self-published work, so there is a lot of material of compromised quality. Most of this is at present in print, but participants could see how the ease of

access to digital platforms could exacerbate this problem. This in turn raises the question of the quality of any metadata: not only the quality of the product but also the quality of the information that lets you find the product.

Establishing and conserving standards and quality is at the centre of a very fierce sense of professional pride among publishing and information professionals in Nigeria. After 'Power', the issue of Quality was the most mentioned under the 'problems' heading.

Can the academic market be the digital driver?

In many countries the academic market has been in the forefront of digital changes, through journals and monographs; indeed, journal publishers have been the quickest to innovate. In Nigeria there is a lively academic market - but the aim of researchers is to be published outside Nigeria, in global peer-reviewed journals. According to the Bookshop Manager on the stand of The Nigeria Institute of International Affairs in the Book Fair, who produce peer-reviewed journals, research monographs and more substantial books, and various series of papers, not one of them is available in digital form (although they have a quite impressive website at www.niianet.org). But they seem to have no capacity to deliver content digitally.

Other researchers I spoke to all aspired to be published in international journals, so there is little upward pressure on the academic publishing sector in Nigeria to develop digitally. Indeed, they see how the international academic publishers like Routledge or Elsevier or Springer have developed their digital presence, and feel they do not have the resources to compete.

Interestingly, in Ghana I did meet a publisher/bookseller who was seriously exploring the academic market as a place to sell pre-loaded digital readers (offering enhanced e-books and journal articles together with additional Open Access content for specific courses). He said that the costs can nearly work, and the legal structure (to secure territorially-limited digital rights in academic material) is nearly in place. So watch out for developments in Ghana.

Looking to the future

Everyone at the workshop agreed with the keynote speaker and was sceptical about the immediate future for digital publishing in West Africa. There is plenty of digital promotion and marketing. People are beginning to use social media in promotion. There is a lively blog universe in Nigeria. There is a vibrant multimedia and mixed media sector, represented at the workshop by a case study from Communicating for Change, a Lagos-based communications organisation working through film, television, and radio (supported by print) to bring education and entertainment to new audiences. Publishers have been using digital production and work-flow technology for some years, and some are creating files for digital print-on-demand for global markets.

All the ingredients for a lively digital publishing sector exist in Nigeria. The question is how and when the critical mass is reached and the parts come together to create new publishing streams in West Africa.

Will there be any substantial publishing programmes of e-books in Nigeria in the next few years? No-one at the workshop was going to say when, but all agreed that it will happen, and probably sooner than we think.

Overall, the question at the Book Fair conference and the Information for Change workshop was expressed as **"Will the book survive?"** After a week of talking and listening in Lagos at the Book Fair, I'm confident that the question should be rephrased as **"How will the book survive? And will we have to change our ideas of what constitutes a book?"**

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Information for Change is a series of workshops about publishing for development, organised by a group of international NGOs. The workshops provide participants with a unique opportunity to come together to share experiences, learn from others, and network. Recent workshops have focused on the opportunities offered by developments in digital publishing to secure greater impact for those engaged in publishing for development.

There have been workshops in Cape Town, Nairobi, and Lagos. The organisers are now considering options for what to do next: a workshop for francophone Africa? One in Ethiopia? One in Tanzania?

On the website www.informationforchange.org there are programmes for past workshops, details of speakers together with their presentations, video interviews with participants, and transcripts of some sessions. Visit the website now to see outputs from the Lagos workshop.

For more on the Nigeria International Book Fair visit their website www.nibfng.org and for more on the Nigeria Publisher's Association see their website www.nigerianpublishers.org