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The impact of open access on knowledge production, consumption and dissemination in Kenya’s higher education system

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The impact of open access on knowledge production, consumption and dissemination in Kenya’s higher education system

David Mwambari, Fatuma Ahmed Ali and Christopher Barak

ABSTRACT

Open access (OA) journal publishing is presented in the literature as both an opportunity for and a threat to academics, authors and higher education systems. Institutions with information and communication technologies (ICT) infrastructure have enabled their academics to freely retrieve accessible content in various disciplines, which in turn increases the rate and quality of publications from these institutions. Using semi-structured interviews with Kenyan faculty, students and librarians and with Kenyan and non-Kenyan publishers, as well as secondary sources, this article examines perspectives often overlooked in this debate. The paper concludes that while OA is considered an important initiative that could enhance knowledge production and consumption in Kenya, it nevertheless presents its own challenges, which should not be overlooked. OA is not a simple solution to individual and institutional challenges or systemic epistemic injustices, which lead to poor-quality knowledge circulating via some OA platforms and have the potential to dampen the global competitiveness of knowledge produced in Kenya and other countries in the Global South.

Introduction

Open access (OA) journal publishing is the free, immediate, online availability of peer-reviewed research articles with full re-use rights (Matheka et al. 2014, 1). It makes published academic articles freely and permanently available online, for academics to read and benefit from in their own research and publishing. OA is touted in the literature as being more equitable compared to traditional scholarly publishing, as it allows anyone with an internet connection – regardless of where they are in the world – to access, read and build upon the most up-to-date scientific literature (Meagher 2021; Ezema and Onyancha 2017; Tomaselli 2021).

The OA debate in research is as ancient as the creation and systematisation of knowledge itself (Rose 1993). Such debates across disciplines on the question of who should access...
knowledge and how it evolved since the time of monasteries to universities – as institutions of knowledge production and consumption – are exemplified by works in the field of natural and social sciences (Tomaselli 2021). Scholars such as Nentwich (2001) divide the evolution of knowledge-sharing into three phases. In the first phase, he points to the creation of academic journals in France and the United Kingdom in the seventeenth century. He argues that in this period, academic journals were published by government institutions but also by non-profit organisations such as universities. Knowledge was shared for other researchers to build on but not sell, as it was subsidised (Nentwich 2001). Using Elsevier as an example to explain the second phase, he claims that it was not until the 1960s that such organisations became ‘very efficient in turning scholarly output into commodities’ which has led to the current debates (Nentwich 2001). While this system profits publishing companies and allows for a sustainable business model, it puts a high price on knowledge, which gives an advantage to a select few in the Global North and inhibits access to information for researchers of the Global South. The third phase started with ‘the journal crisis’, which has increased the cost of accessing publications while library budgets have declined. The current crisis is not only caused by an unsustainable commercial system, but also shaped by the advancement of information technology and digitalisation. Online journals are evolving due to the low cost of producing and disseminating them globally (Nentwich, 2001). Online publishing presents opportunities such as the ability to reach readers without gatekeepers. It provides a global platform for other publishing challenges that the research community is grappling with, including quality assurance over what is published. It has allowed for more transparency in knowledge production (Mwambari and Owor 2019). Therefore, the implications of this article can be positive when considered in line with the growing calls for restructuring how knowledge production is undertaken and disseminated, not only in the context of the Global South but, more importantly, as a global knowledge ‘commons’ exercise and by making it accessible to all (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018, 4).

More recent scholarship on the OA debate has explored the digitisation of scholarly publishing, and the journal pricing crisis (Meagher 2021, 342). Even though academic journals date back over 300 years, they originally evolved to structure knowledge sharing within non-profit, disciplinary frameworks of scholarly societies and academic bodies. Their engagement with corporate publishers only emerged from the mid-twentieth century, amid academic funding cuts and corporate takeovers of smaller publishers, particularly affecting the social sciences (Meagher 2021, 342). Current pressures to shift towards OA are associated with the digitisation of publishing in the 1990s, which created the possibility of a ‘global knowledge commons’ for the more open and equitable dissemination of scholarly research (Meagher 2021, 342). Yet the value and implications of OA and whether it offers the right solution to many of the problems faced in the Global South have been questioned (Meagher 2021; Okune et al. 2021). However, OA is also considered a tool of epistemic injustice, especially if it only gives students and academics from the Global North better access to scholarship, while their works are simultaneously privileged and achieve greater mobility via these platforms than those of their colleagues from Global South institutions – such as those in Kenya interviewed for this study (Piron 2018; Meagher 2021; Faciolince and Green 2021; Mwambari, Purdeková, and Bisoka 2021).
While these debates have evolved in academia and policy circles – for example, in Europe and the United States – experiences from the Global South are often overlooked in these global discourses. Thus, the main objective of this article is to explore the perspectives of different actors in Kenya’s higher education sector on OA and how it shapes knowledge production, consumption and dissemination in their context. Whereas respondents spoke positively of OA evolution in Kenya’s context, the paper argues that it is nevertheless important to remember that knowledge and the architectures that support its production, consumption and dissemination are ideological. Both knowledge aligned to undomesticated ideologies and production of poor-quality knowledge on OA platforms only dampen the global competitiveness of knowledge produced by higher education institutions and academics in Global South countries, such as Kenya. Kenya presents an important case study given its vibrant higher education system and influence in the East Africa region and beyond, even with its challenges and contradictions.

Methodology

This study employed both qualitative and exploratory research methods to obtain and analyse the data collected. These methods allowed for a better understanding of the problem, especially in a subject area where information is scarce. Seventeen semi-structured interviews were conducted, involving Kenyan and non-Kenyan respondents, including publishers/editors, academics, students and library staff from private and public higher education institutions in Nairobi and Eldoret between August and October 2019.

In this research, ethical issues are of utmost importance and have a direct bearing on the overall integrity and protection of the participants. Therefore, all the respondents were provided with a consent form detailing and disclosing all the relevant information pertaining to the research and its purpose. A disclosure of what the research will be used for and how the information will be handled was also shared. Prior to the interviews, the respondents were informed about the nature of the study, the expectations related to their participation, and the voluntary nature of their participation, including their rights to either decline to participate or withdraw at any stage if they felt uncomfortable and wished to discontinue participation. As part of the confidentiality agreement, it was decided that the names of the respondents would not be revealed in order to safeguard their privacy (except for the publishers, who gave us permission to use their names in this publication, even though we did not end up disclosing their identities). The respondents were selected using purposive and snowball sampling methods. The interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed. The transcriptions of the audio-recorded interviews were analysed thematically based on the research objectives and questions. Secondary data was mainly retrieved from published scholarly works on knowledge production and consumption, and OA publishing, in the institutions of higher education in Kenya.

We also draw on the personal, gendered experience and long-term observations – in classes and trainings offered in both rural and urban institutions of higher education – of the authors. The authors have over two decades of experience combined in higher education in Kenya as students, student advisors and professors in private and public universities. Their analysis also includes insights gained over the years in Kenya and the East African region but also as African diaspora students and scholars in Belgium, the United Kingdom, Spain, the United States and
Australia, where they studied or worked. The authors also read, write and follow research debates in English, Kiswahili, Spanish and French, major languages that are used in sharing knowledge in Africa. These linguistic abilities allowed the authors to engage with broader debates on OA in non-Anglophone Africa even if the focus is on an Anglophone case study: Kenya.

Open access and knowledge production and consumption in Africa

In an attempt to address challenges of knowledge accessibility, scholars have debated different options that work alongside institutionalised and commercialised models. However, various solutions discussed in the literature have also been contested by scholars working on OA in the Global South (Willinsky 2006; Fuchs and Sandoval 2013; McCann and Polacsek 2018). For instance, two models (amongst many others) are of importance to this article: first is the ‘Gold’ OA which is accessed at the point of publication, usually paid for by the contributing authors in order to make the article freely available via the internet to download, copy and share across networks. The second is ‘Green’ OA which can be accessed on separate archives or repositories, usually for free. This model enables researchers to use online platforms such as Academia, Research Gate and other search engines that require visitors to register for free so as to upload full versions of their soon-to-published papers on those engines. Green OA can also consist of uploading one’s work on personal websites or in library repositories (private spaces, such as in universities or otherwise public libraries) for those with membership to access (Fuchs and Sandoval 2013).

While these two models are examples that are considered successful, as they have given researchers in countries with highly advanced information and communication technologies (ICT) infrastructure more flexibility, they remain problematic and challenging for other researchers, especially in Africa, where there is poor ICT infrastructure (Fialho and Van Bergeijk 2017). A recent World Bank Study has documented that while connecting Africa’s universities to affordable high-speed broadband internet services is essential to reach the goals of the digital economy, challenges persist in terms of strengthening and establishing national research and education networks (NRENs) to provide sustainable and affordable access to broadband connectivity to institutions of higher education. This broadband connectivity should also include remote universities, increasing speed and reliability and investing in ‘soft capacity’ – ie digital content, faculty development and management capacity (Bashir 2020). This presents limitations in terms of how academics in the Global South are able to take advantage of the benefits offered by OA. Sometimes this translates to a situation where knowledge published from the North is easily accessible in the South but not the other way round. Even so, more recently, some journals pf the Global North, such as De Gruyter Journals, have become OA by waiving the article processing charges for specific countries in the Global South, including Kenya.

The challenge with these solutions is that ‘free availability on the internet is only possible if “someone” pays for the cost of production and dissemination’ (Papin-Ramcharan and Dawe 2006, 2). For OA to work, one needs to have a funder or an institution that can subsidise or pay those costs. A study conducted at the University of West Indies found that researchers at the university reported a lack of awareness of OA publishing options, inadequate funding for researchers to pay charges associated with publishing articles, and poor internet infrastructure and connectivity (Papin-Ramcharan and Dawe 2006, 2). Yet some
countries in Latin America are embracing OA at a higher rate than other parts of the world due to its benefits in democratising knowledge and also for its impact on economic development. For example, Victoriano Colodrón’s (2018) article on the *Times Higher Education* blog shows that Latin American countries have increased their use of OA as an avenue for both producing and consuming knowledge (Victoriano Colodrón, 2018). This is also true in some African contexts, especially in collaborative research in certain disciplines (Iyandemye and Thomas 2019). Thus, the move to and relevance of OA debates is not limited to Anglophone contexts but also shapes knowledge production and consumption debates in other epistemic and cultural contexts.

OA is becoming increasingly widespread in the world, including within Africa (Nwagwu 2013, 3). However, the global pattern and level of awareness and deployment of OA may be determined by the level of digitisation. Therefore, in Africa, the OA publication debate can be situated within the broader politics of ICT capacity, sovereignty, knowledge production and use in higher education. There is a sense in which the debate and support for OA lean more towards consumption (in knowledge-starved environments, free and easy access to published work is easily embraced). The danger is that this is only a palliative that may undermine efforts and strategies to invest in local knowledge-production infrastructures.

Debates on Kenya’s higher education have ranged from exploring the evolution of sharing knowledge in cultural practices that pre-date colonialism to the era of colonialism itself, which introduced western knowledge systems while disrupting and, in some instances, eroding the traditional avenues for knowledge sharing (Taiwo 1993; Mazrui 2014). Various factors, such as post-independence struggles, coups d’état, and corruption, which plagued many post-independent African countries, in addition to structural adjustment programmes imposed on African countries by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank in 1980s, have negatively affected the capacity for production of knowledge on the African continent (Mkandawire 2005; Mamdani 2007; Zeleza 2022). Moreover, the bourgeois class created by colonialism isolated themselves and became agents of neo-colonialism rather than for the development of their new independent countries (Ekeh 1975, 93; Ake 1979 cited in Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018, 16). Other negative experiences included 1980s to 2000s inter-state, intra-state, ethnic, natural resources and other kinds of conflicts that were widespread in the 1990s, and states and donors became preoccupied with their resolution (Alao 2007).

Postcolonial efforts to re-organise higher education as a basis for national development and sovereignty, including knowledge production sovereignty, have often faced hiccups that present themselves as solutions. One can cite the Addis Ababa conference of 1961 which came up with an ambitious vision, subsequently followed by others on continental and country levels (Psacharopoulos 1990). Similarly, African scholars sought to decolonise the ways in which knowledge was shared by making recourse to indigenous systems of knowledge production and use (Mwambari 2019; Faciolince and Green 2021). The calls to decolonise education and privilege African knowledge and languages still persist (Wa Thiong’o 1992), even as OA is becoming entrenched. For decades, African intellectuals have argued that the place for diverse African cultures in education and development should be restored and African thinkers and intellectuals and traditional ways of sharing knowledge should be embraced (Adebowale 2001; Mama 2007). In an attempt to create institutions and systems of producing African-led research, organisations such as the
Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), and the Africa Academy of Sciences (AAS) were created and embraced by Pan African scholars from across the continent and in the diaspora. There are, therefore, important efforts and contributions made by OA journals in the Global South, like those of the CODESRIA multilingual journals in humanities and social sciences or the *Contemporary Journal of African Studies* of the University of Ghana (Nyamnjoh 2010). These journals have taken advantage of advancements in technology to give global mobility to African-led research and ideas that in some cases challenge hegemonic scholarship on Africa and the world (Mwambari 2021).

These trends and struggles explain the background that created the environment and infrastructure that shaped social sciences and humanities knowledge generation and sharing in Africa in the past few decades. However, efforts to achieve knowledge sovereignty through investments in sovereign knowledge-producing systems have not always produced successful outcomes, as many challenges remains unaddressed in most institutions in Africa. A lack of sufficient national-level funding for research and publications means acceptance of external funding through, for example, the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (Banya and Elu 2001), and other powerful global institutions that impose conditions on the kind of research that is produced or what is accepted as knowledge from African scholars and worthy of being shared globally (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018). These negative trends crippled higher education in Africa, especially following the structural adjustment programmes (Murunga 2007). Available funding largely enforced outward-looking agendas mirroring other neo-colonial development agendas (Hountondji 1995, 2), with certain challenges experienced in knowledge production in peer-reviewed journals in Africa (Zeleza 2007).

In some ways, scholars in Africa and other regions of the Global South no longer mourn the inaccessibility of research outcomes from the Global North (Nwagwu (2013, 3–4). Both older and newer in-lab and out-of-lab information materials – books, serials, grey materials and others – are uploaded onto the internet and downloaded by other scholars and researchers on a daily basis. Furthermore, the most significant opportunity offered by the OA movement in some countries in the Global South is the use of online spaces to develop and share Africa’s rich ‘knowledges’, methodological approaches and other resources that have not been previously accessible to the rest of the world due to gatekeepers who considered certain knowledges to have less value or to be less rigorous (Mugo 2021, XI).

Yet the general environment for OA in Africa is a very difficult one because it involves technical expertise, hardware and software technologies, costs and know-how deployed within institutions, structures and policy frameworks to guide content identification, selection and distribution, among other things. Building a technology based on open resources infrastructure is a scientific process involving knowledge of the social system of science – copyright issues, licensing, and so on – as well as technologies. Thus, OA goes beyond creating a website, coming up with the name of a journal or any other source and, thereafter, calling for papers and then distributing what has been received from and to the public. Other challenges include the lack of subscriptions, arising from the lack of resources for institutions to pay for subscriptions which shifts this burden to researchers, who have to pay high publishing fees ranging from US$1000 to $2500 per publication (Matheka et al. 2014, 2).
However, despite the persisting challenges, academics in Africa have produced and continue to produce knowledge of good quality that influences global debates. These African scholars, in social sciences and humanities for instance, are based both in the diaspora and on the continent of Africa. They tend to be based at well-resourced universities in Global North, with some in South Africa and fewer in other research institutions in other regions of Africa. In East Africa, scholars and actors in Kenya's higher education stand out as some of the most dynamic, as the paper will show below.

**Kenya's higher education and publishing system**

The SCImago Journal & Country Rank (2021, 24), a portal that includes journals and country scientific indicators developed from information contained in the Scopus database, has placed Kenya in seventh position in Africa and 68th worldwide in terms of research publications and H-index between 1996–2020 (see Table 1).

In terms of the pipeline for research and knowledge production, Kenya boasts a number of public and private universities and research institutions. By 2020, there were 31 public universities and 19 chartered private universities in Kenya (Republic of Kenya 2020), although post-graduate training – which is critical in sustaining the pipeline for research and knowledge production – is largely concentrated in public universities. The National Research Fund (NRF) mobilises funding for research and knowledge production and distributes the same to universities and other research institutions. The number of licences granted by the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) increased by 34.8% to 6015 in 2018/2019, representing 90.8% of all licence applications received. This signals the country's ambition to enhance its visibility in relevant research and knowledge production (Republic of Kenya 2020).

Various research institutions are linked to ministries and universities to facilitate access to graduate programmes. These research institutes include centres such as Kenya Agricultural Research Institute (KARI), Kenya Medical Research Institute (KEMRI), International Centre for Insect Physiology and Ecology (ICIPE) and International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI), among others. These research centres continue to support capacity for research and doctoral education in Kenya while providing the manpower required to not only drive university education but also open up avenues for new knowledge and solutions to problems in critical areas of national and international concern.

However, it seems that in the recent past, more research, knowledge production and dissemination is taking place in the colleges outside higher education institutions. A data
analysis by Nature Index, counting of all research outputs for Kenya published between 1 December 2019 and 30 November 2020, shows that higher education institutions fall at the bottom compared to research institutions outside universities. This information is summarised in Table 2 (Nature Index 2021, 24).

OA initiatives are underway in Kenya. For instance, the Kenya library and Information Services Consortium (KLISC) is a grouping of libraries in Kenya advocating for OA journal publishing and policies. However, the establishment of KLISC in 2004 was made possible through external support from the International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications (INASP). The membership of KLISC includes libraries in public and private universities, public libraries, museums and research institutions with the aim of ensuring access in Kenya to electronic resources, including OA materials. Kenyan libraries have also been members of the Programme for Enhancement of Research Information (PERii) since 2001. PERii has been promoting OA through compiling a list of OA resources, promoting OA repositories and supporting publishing – for example, via Africa Journals Online (AJOL), etc.

As part of the OA initiative, some OA research journals have been launched in Kenya, mainly run by Kenyan institutions. Examples of such institutions include the Kenya Medical Research Institute and the University of Nairobi. These journals are often free to the researcher as well as the reader, with the publishing costs being covered by the hosting institutions. However, the journals face challenges related to quality, the peer review process, relative impact factors and sustainability (Matheka et al. 2014, 3).

Various institutions in Kenya have adopted OA policies making research work within those organisations accessible. Students’ and staff works are deposited in e-repositories they own and are made visible and accessible. Moreover, most Kenyan institutions now ensure access to a wireless internet connection throughout their facilities, which is an important step in creating a framework to take full advantage of OA and to create and sustain OA repositories online and offline. Furthermore, some of these institutions receive external funding for their research, and their embracement of OA is partly and sometimes because of the condition(s) attached to the grant (Matheka et al. 2014, 3). Although the motivations to upload the research on OA online platforms might vary and include donor conditionality, over time they also become part of the institutional culture.

The Kenyan government has no explicit policies mandating OA publishing akin to those in the UK and Australia. Yet some tangible steps have been taken in funding local research, through NACOSTI, that also encourage beneficiaries to share their research outputs in OA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Count of published work</th>
<th>Percentage share</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kenya Medical Research Institute (KEMRI)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Museums of Kenya (NMK)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KEMRI–Wellcome Trust Research Programme (CGMRC)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Centre for Insect Physiology and Ecology (ICIPE)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African Butterfly Institute</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Nairobi</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maseno University</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenya Wildlife Services (KWS)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moi University</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

journals for policymakers, students, other scholars and the general public. Through this com-
mmission, grants have been administered to support scientific research and innovations for
national development, targeting priority areas aligned with the government’s development
agenda. Since the inception of this programme in 2008/2009, it has stimulated renewed
interest among researchers and innovators in various institutions across the country. NACOSTI
has also accumulated institutional expert power that allows it to become a broker for other
funders interested in funding research in Kenya or training of future researchers. Some of the
new funders include the Chinese government, which has its own economic agendas. The
next section explores the less examined specific experiences of scholars, researchers and
institutions (ie libraries as distributors/or managers of journals) vis-à-vis OA in Kenya on knowl-
edge production.

**Perspectives on OA in Kenya’s higher education system**

Responses from the students we interviewed seemed to suggest that OA was more appre-
ciated for allowing easy access to knowledge already produced, but not as a system for
facilitating knowledge production. Most students interviewed had accessed a number of
journals through OA. A respondent defined OA as ‘the ability to access scholarly works
online like journals freely’.

She further indicated that she found subscription-based journals more relevant to her research needs compared to OA journals. Another student mentioned that he accessed OA journals as he did not need to pay to obtain the complete information or article. According to him, ‘many people cannot afford to pay for subscription charged journals and this hinders them from accessing knowledge’. He also cited internet connectivity challenges in some parts of Kenya as a key issue facing OA journal usage. Meanwhile, another respondent understood OA to mean ‘unrestricted open access to content, especially in published research journals’. She mostly accessed OA journals as they were free, and according to her, ‘subscription-based journals affect knowledge creation in higher education in Kenya since some have charges that are too expensive for students’.

As shown above, Kenyan libraries are at the forefront of advocating for OA journal
publishing and policies, a fact that was corroborated by the five librarians interviewed
from three universities (public and private, urban and rural). They all reported that part of
their job is to ensure that the most current books, periodicals and journals are available
for users in their respective libraries. For instance, one of the interviewed librarians said
that his department works towards ensuring that the library has current subscriptions
to online journals and books as well. He also indicated that owing to the vast student
population and many areas of study they represent, the university heavily invests in his
department.

Another librarian described OA as ‘the freedom and right to have information freely with-
out the limitation of embargoes, copyright, subscription and any other limitations, legal or
physical’. He noted that the majority of users of his library prefer subscription-based journals
since the university has paid the subscription fees and they are free for the students. However,
he was quick to point out that subscription-based journals have limited the reading culture
in Kenyan institutions of higher education owing to the charges they attract. Moreover, he
noted that the users in both the private and urban universities that continuously subscribe
to these journals are almost the only beneficiaries in Kenya. Besides, he believes that OA
enables information sharing across the globe and does not skew information sources from a particular part of the world.

A librarian from an urban public university defined OA as 'scholarly literature that is free of charge and often carries less restrictive copyright and licensing barriers than traditionally published work, for both the users and the authors'. He mentioned that both open and subscription-based journals were accessed in his university library. He also indicated that OA journals influence knowledge use towards certain authors or parts of the world based on their publication affordability. Therefore, for him, this translates to the Global South being largely disadvantaged.

A senior librarian in a rural public university, in the area of information dissemination, indicated that their online journal subscription is too large owing to the vast number of programmes offered by the university. However, he lamented that the subscription-based journals are not paid on time. As a result, most users subscribed to OA journals instead.

Among academics, various perceptions of OA were expressed. A dean in one of the public universities argued that subscription-based journals limit knowledge use in Kenyan higher education as they are expensive. OA, he argued, influences knowledge use by those aware of its existence and who actually utilise the journals. Similar sentiments were aired by another dean in charge of a university graduate school, who agreed that subscription-based journals affect higher education in Kenya because some very good papers are not accessed and read owing to access fees. Hence, for him, OA was the way to go as information was increasingly made public at no charge.

One of the faculty members said that OA reduces paywall challenges because it promotes knowledge circulation. According to him, 'subscription-based journals affect higher education in cases where subscription funds are not available, or subscription is delayed.' Another faculty member agreed that subscription-based journals affect knowledge because of their lack of accessibility due to high costs. She further stated that

OA mostly leads to the publication of outdated material since the gap an author is covering could already be covered in a subscription journal. Secondly, OA lacks prestige and authorities in certain disciplines shun from publishing with them, and this skews publications towards favouring the Global North, thus [it is] no wonder the Global South or Africa contributes only 1% in key journals.

However, OA challenges should not be considered the only challenge that Kenyans or scholars from the Global South more generally face. The broader contexts of higher education in these countries also matter, in terms of internal or external funding challenges, for instance, or the lack of capacity on individual and collective levels to conduct research and produce globally competitive knowledge.

**Kenyan and non-Kenyan publishers’ perspectives on open access**

The perspectives of students, librarians and researchers generally differ from those of publishers. For instance, one of the respondents, a South African publisher/editor who has worked with Africa-based researchers, including Kenyans, had a different perspective on the OA debate. She said that
Open access from a publisher’s perspective needs to be looked at as a business model. We question its sustainability due to inequality between countries, institutions and publishing organisations. We are told publishers in Africa should give free content to institutions because they can’t afford to purchase our books, but we forget to ask the question of who will generate up-front funding, because authors and researchers in the Global South do not have access to funds like their Global North counterparts do. ‘Free to read’ does not mean ‘free to publish’. Of course, even in Africa there are differences depending on discipline. While medical and science researchers might have funding that will finance publications of their findings, this is usually not the case for those in the social sciences and humanities. One of the strategies we are pursuing includes selling our books to the Global North market at a higher price through online platforms but bringing down cost of access [prices] for institutions in Africa.13

Similar arguments were given by another publisher/editor from Kenya, who questioned how these debates ignore the realities of African based authors, publishers and editors. He argued:

The question many people forget to ask in this debate of OA is this: Who will pay for the cost to produce the works of the authors we work with? We work with authors who do not have enough resources to pay for publications and do not have access to grants that can pay to be published like those in the Global North do. OA is good for increasing access to knowledge, but we must address how to cater for scholars with limited resources in the Global South.14

The third publisher/editor we interviewed has had a long career that spans over four decades in the industry of publishing and editing scholarly materials produced by African-based scholars. He asserts that:

Different solutions work in different contexts. Publishing in the developed world has gone beyond necessity into the realm of freedom, as it were. Publishers in the developing world would require similar financing arrangements as those that are available to Northern publishers to enable them to make open access a realistic proposition and to still remain in business.15

He further indicated that in the Global North, funding for research and publishing of research outcomes is largely sourced from public money and, therefore, the public has a right to free access. He attributed the stunted growth of OA in the Global South to the reality of poor authors depending on equally poor publishers with no access to publicly funded research with publishing budgets.

In a nutshell, these three publishers/editors raise critical concerns regarding a failure to consider issues such as a lack of funding for the publishers, dissemination of the published work and sustainability of OA as a business model. They also echo concerns about the inequality in knowledge production and consumption between the Global North and Global South.

Significance and recommendations

While respondents in this study had varied perspectives on OA in Kenya, a number of factors and realities in the Kenyan context warrant reflection on where the potential for transformation lies. First, in reflecting on our respondents’ experiences it is evident that one’s class,
gender and location (either in a rural or an urban area) determine one's ability to emerge as a researcher in Kenya. As our study found, students and researchers from rural universities faced additional burdens that restricted their access to knowledge and inevitably restricted their contributions. Often, these marginalised actors lack methodological training and mentorship compared to their colleagues who studied in urban and better-funded public universities or private institutions. There is a need to pay particular attention to these dynamics in debates on OA to go beyond those actors – including some of our respondents – that embrace OA often without questioning the underpinning inequalities that exist in the Kenyan context and in other, similar contexts in the Global South.

Second, it is vital that the challenges associated with the lack of OA resources are placed in a broader conversation about systematic, institutional and individual challenges that are realities in Kenya's higher education and beyond. Associated challenges include a lack of rigour in training researchers, heavy teaching workloads, and an inability to secure research grants in national and international competitions. Equally, most of the scholars, including those interviewed in this study, have to take on multiple jobs to supplement their low salaries and therefore do not spend much time doing research. These few examples, coupled with the lack of access to OA journals, contribute directly to imbalances in global knowledge production in Kenya, in Africa more broadly and in other locations where African voices are rarely heard (Zeleza 2013). Thus, those interested in resolving these challenges need to adopt a holistic approach in addition to those captured in this study.

Third, the most significant challenge remains on the side of publishers in African contexts. Given that the neo-liberal models that enable publishers to increase revenues and sustain their businesses face significant challenges on the continent, other funding avenues are needed. These could include national government budgets allocating competitive funding for publishers, promoting publishers to international philanthropists, and developing existing opportunities for co-publishing and revenue sharing between Africa-based publishing companies and those profitable companies based in Global North.

Finally, while it is difficult to give one-size-fits-all recommendations to address these challenges, publishers and institutions in disadvantaged societies in Africa can learn from certain initiatives that bring together regional, international and diaspora organisations that supplement national efforts to valorise research and improve the quality of publishing. For instance, while initiatives such as those that encourage diaspora-based scholars to return and work for a period of time at African universities do not address OA challenges directly, they nevertheless have opened up avenues for innovative thinking and collaborations across geographies and disciplines in the social sciences and humanities. These include the Carnegie African Diaspora Fellowship Program, the CODESRIA Africa Diaspora Fellowship, early career scholar fellowships at the Africa Leadership Centre (ALC), and Africa Peacebuilding Network (APN) fellowships. Such initiatives train and encourage early career researchers from African urban and rural areas to do quality research and support them to find avenues to share their research on OA platforms.

They represent models that publishers on the continent could adopt in finding solutions to meet the expenses associated with publishing quality studies originating from Kenya or other marginalised societies in Africa. As authors experienced in participating in these programmes, we have noticed that these opportunities allow distinguished scholars in the diaspora to mentor and share OA resources between the faculty and students. Like other good collaborative initiatives between scholars in the Global North and South, these
interactions and the co-production of knowledge allow African scholars’ knowledge to spread to wider networks (Bouka 2018). They also allow for mentoring a new generation of researchers, including knowledge brokers (Mwambari 2019; Dunia et al. 2020). In addition, partnerships between university libraries in the Global North and the Global South can facilitate access to information and knowledge exchange. Moreover, African governments need to invest in research and encourage knowledge production by local publishers, scholars and students. Therefore, these governments need to commit more public funds and prestige to locally produced knowledge to encourage a culture of excellence in research. It is through the development of such independent research networks, broadening funding initiatives that enhance the OA infrastructure, that African scholars can continue to work towards ‘epistemic freedom in Africa’ (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018).

**Conclusion**

This study has shown that, even with OA flourishing in Kenya and around Africa, actors have diverse perspectives about its impact on knowledge production and consumption. The Kenyan higher education system explored in this paper still faces a myriad of challenges such as financial constraints for both publishers and authors, and internet connectivity issues (particularly in rural areas). As evidenced in this study, many Kenyans in higher education institutions are frequent users of OA publications. The majority of this study’s respondents – apart from publishers – perceived OA as being of great significance in accessing literature, partially confirming the positive implications of OA for knowledge consumption. However, none showed awareness of the implications of OA for knowledge production sovereignty, which means that researchers cannot continue to consume what they do not produce. More research is needed to better understand the challenges and opportunities that OA presents in knowledge production, especially in Global South contexts that tend to be overlooked in global debates on knowledge production, consumption and dissemination. Researchers also need to explore the complexities around and impact on OA, especially with emerging global powers who are increasingly taking interest in shaping the kind of ‘knowledges’ that is produced in Africa and about Africa. These powers include governments – for instance, from Asia and the Middle East – that are increasingly funding institutions of higher education in Kenya and elsewhere and that sometimes provide models of sharing knowledge that differ from those of the traditional Western partners.

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**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.
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Notes

1. The National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) was established in 2013 by the Kenyan government to facilitate the promotion, coordination and regulation of the progress of science, technology and innovation (ST&I) in the country. It was also created to contribute to the realisation of the Kenya Vision 2030 and other national development goals, which aspire to transform Kenya into a globally competitive, newly industrialised, middle-income country based on a strong foundation of science, technology and innovation, with research playing a key role in generating a critical mass of technical and skilled manpower.
2. Interview, female graduate student in an urban private university, Nairobi, September 2019.
3. Interview, male graduate student in an urban private university, Nairobi, September 2019.
4. Interview, female doctorate student in an urban private university, Nairobi, September 2019.
5. Interview, female doctorate student in an urban private university, Nairobi, September 2019.
6. Interview, male course text librarian from an urban private university, Nairobi, September 2019.
7. Interview, male librarian from an urban public university, Nairobi, September 2019.
8. Interview, male senior librarian from a rural public university, Eldoret, September 2019.
10. Interview, male professor of finance and dean in an urban private university, Nairobi, September 2019.
11. Interview, male assistant professor of peace and conflict studies in an urban private university, Nairobi, September 2019.
12. Interview, female assistant professor of international relations in an urban private university, Nairobi, September 2019.
13. Interview with a female publisher/editor based in South Africa, 26 October 2019, in Nairobi, Kenya.
15. Interview with a male publisher/editor based in Tanzania, 26 October 2019, in Nairobi, Kenya.
16. Interview, female assistant professor of international relations in an urban private university, Nairobi, September 2019.

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