

CREATING AN AFRICAN PUBLISHING FORUM FOR INTERNATIONAL SCIENCE

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ABSTRACT

As we launch the new journal *African Crop Science Journal* (*Revue Africaine de la Science de Cultures Agricoles*) we would do well to bear three key principles in mind: we should publish only results reflecting quality work, reflections and theories which are both appropriate as well as stimulating for human knowledge and those innovative methodologies which comprise singular breakthroughs and events.

RÉSUMÉ

Pour le lancement du nouveau journal, (*African Crop Science Journal*) *Revue Africaine de la Science de Cultures Agricoles*, nous devrions nous rappeler trois principes cardinaux: nous ne devrions publier que des résultats de qualité, des réflexions et théories qui sont appropriées et stimulantes au progrès du savoir humain et des méthodologies innovatives qui reflètent des avancées et des événements marquants nouveaux.

Africa has been in the publishing business for close to 6,000 years. Writing, in pictographic form, was invented around 4,000 B.C. in Pharaonic Egypt, as indicated by carbon-14 dating (Mokhatar, 1981). It developed very rapidly, and became one of the pillars of technological advances in the Pharaonic civilization. Indeed, as Mokhatar (1981) so clearly stated:

“Through its monuments, its texts and the interest it aroused in the travellers of bygone days, it provides us with a large amount of information on African ways of thought,

feeling and living in periods that we could not possibly approach otherwise than through it.”

Yet, in present day Africa, the continent has woefully fallen behind other continents in terms of publishing production, library resources, distribution networking, and marketing outlets. As a major consequence, Africa has an uncertain and unreliable access to the latest advances in the knowledge industry within the continent, and has only tenuous linkage to the corpus of world knowledge. Such a disability has become a symptom of Africa's progressive obsolescence in scientific research and technological development (R&D), where rapid advances have become the norm.

A Guest Lecture on the occasion of the Launching of the *African Crop Science Journal* on 18 June 1993, Kampala, Uganda. Prof. Odhiambo is also the President of the African Academy of Sciences.

As an illustration of the miniscule degree of publishing activity in Africa, let us take a comparatively important publishing country such as Kenya. During the 5-year period, 1985–1989, the Registrar of Books in the Office of the Attorney-General indicated that a total of 1045 books were published in the country, of which 22 were children's books, and 585 all together are actually text books, while religious books comprised 23%. During the same period, 56 periodicals were published. This amount of publishing activity could have been accomplished by a single medium-sized publishing house in the industrialised countries, such as the feminine publishing house, Virago in England which, in 1992, published 1362 books in that single year.

The accelerating tempo of R&D worldwide requires that Africa establishes very high standards for publishing research results in at least three areas of vital importance.

First, only quality results of crucial value should be published. This is the principle of the hieroglyphic pharaonic writing—that only events or discoveries or thoughts of abiding value were preserved in stone or papyrus by painstaking recording by scholars or scribes. Much publishing today is of only ephemeral, or even scatological, worth.

Second, only results or thoughts or theories that are relevant and challenging to the advancement of human knowledge or sparks human curiosity about nature or are crucial to progress in skills or technology should be published to provide a point of reference for discourse and competition. This is the principle of the Socratic debate. Albert Einstein illustrated this principle in an elegant way when, in 1905, he published five papers when he was only 26 years old, each on a different problem in mathematical physics. One of these papers was on the special theory of relativity. In giving a perspective to this achievement, Snow stated that the paper in fact contained very little mathematics; and then he observed:

"This last paper (on special theory of relativity) contains no references and quotes no authority... There is a good deal of verbal commentary. The conclusions, the

bizarre conclusions, emerge as though with the greatest of ease: the reasoning is unbreakable. It looks as if he had reached conclusions by pure thought unaided, without listening to the opinions of others. To a surprisingly large extent, that is precisely what he had done."

Third, only results or sweeping reviews of past studies or innovative methodologies that set new standards or milestones in human behaviour should be given an opportunity for wide distribution through publishing. This is the principle of Moses' tabernacle.

If Africa were to implement these practices as we strive to enhance our publishing productivity and tempo, we should then return to the historic criteria that we established at the dawn of world civilization. There is no doubt that Africa can do it—if it follows its own innate instincts, and its production is lead by the market demands of the times. In this latter respect, one is impressed by the heroic attempts in many disciplines and in diverse institutions to institute the publishing of scholarly and scientific journals in Africa. In spite of many setbacks, this enterprise should be encouraged and nurtured.

It is in this respect that we celebrate the inauguration of the *African Crop Science Journal*. We salute the sponsoring institutions; and we wish the International Science Press, its publishers, courage and perseverance, and innovativeness in assuring the success of this publishing venture. If all parties succeed, then other journal ventures might follow this lead—and we need dozens of these ventures to establish a solid foundation for the science publishing enterprise within the continent.

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