

RESEARCH ARTICLE

How to write about African universities

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He may have died tragically young, but Binyavanga Wainaina's brilliance lives on. His caustic skewering of white journalism – 'How to write about Africa' – was first published in *Granta* in 2005 (Wainaina 2005). It remains a vital anti-guide to sweeping generalizations and cheap condescension. By comparison, writing about African universities should be easy. After all, aren't most of us already insiders within, if not institutionalized by, higher education? There lies the rub. Academography, to use Eli Thorkelson's pithy neologism, is much harder than it looks.

Before she left academia, Thorkelson began publishing parts of her rich ethnographic fieldwork on radicalism in French universities (e.g. Thorkelson 2016a; 2016b), as well as leaving behind a beautifully unfinished manuscript, entitled 'Disappointed utopia'. Writing about the difficulty of writing about universities, she points out that 'forms of academic knowledge used to advocate and evaluate university models are themselves tactics, at once political, epistemological and ideological'. There is always the risk that 'epistemic questions began to bleed into political discourse' (Thorkelson 2015: 210). To her mind, 'all such projects are at best teetering on the edge of ideology, prone to universalizing and thus misrecognizing their own limited, particular point of view' (*ibid.*: 211). Bourdieu's fish are never far from her mind.

What can we take from Thorkelson's cautionary advice when writing about, as well as from, African universities? One response is to stay close to the ground, getting up close to the historical details and ethnographic textures. The first empirical section of Arowosegbe's *Africa* article does just that. His detailed genealogies of Nigerian historians and political science scholars celebrate the ground-breaking work of this post-war generation and their supervisory legacies. This brief 'golden age' is of course all too brief, and Arowosegbe's powerful indictment of the intellectual decline of Nigeria's 'flagship' public universities quickly pivots to describe a rapidly souring political environment. Arowosegbe refers to the 'assaults' by federal politicians and state officials on these new universities, drawing on Tim Livsey's insightful history of Ibadan's early years (Livsey 2017). This then leads to a broader critique of

marketization, student demand, underfunding and repressive leadership. The challenge of scaling such analyses is disentangling cause and effect. ‘Declinist’ accounts also risk valorizing models of the university that prioritize academic autonomy and disciplinary research.

The lack of attention to local contexts and needs was a design feature of what became known as the ‘Asquith Colleges’, the result of a hasty British wartime commission on ‘colonial higher education’ led by Justice Asquith. The historian Eric Ashby pointed out the problems created by the commission’s ‘massive assumption . . . that the pattern of university appropriate for Manchester, Exeter and Hull was ipso facto appropriate for Ibadan, Makerere and Singapore . . . [T]hey would of course be British universities’ (1966: 225). It was no surprise then that these first universities ‘reflected English contemporary academic opinion around 1950’. He perhaps could have gone further and pointed to the heavy shadow that the ‘Oxbridge’ model cast over the architecture, ethos and staffing of these new university colleges. The British paid little attention to other, very different, models of higher education. It is no wonder that Nkrumah and Nyerere chafed at the colonial elitism these institutions exuded, along with their gowns, high tables and Latin graces. Blaming the ‘foreign mentors’ of politicians for these anachronistic models, as Arowosegbe does, seems a little unfair.

The 1960s debate about a ‘relevant’ African university education has now become a debate about access. Across the globe, higher education participation rates have been transformed. In the UK, 4 per cent of young people went to university in the 1960s; today almost 50 per cent do. Meanwhile, Africa’s participation rate remains below 10 per cent (UNESCO 2023). Across the continent, private universities help to meet this immense growth in demand. As of 2024, 149 private universities have been registered in Nigeria, outnumbering the 125 state and federal universities. A further 270 applications for new private universities are currently being considered (Bolaji 2023).

Nigeria’s private universities currently cater for less than 10 per cent of the more than two million students enrolled in undergraduate studies, and for an economically privileged segment at that. This percentage is likely to increase given the huge demand for university places: only 400,000 of the 1.7 million students writing their matriculation exams get admitted (Hile 2023). The inability of public universities to respond is a consequence of sustained underfunding. This is exacerbated by two decades of union strikes and legal standoffs that Arowosegbe describes in the second part of his article. While Nigeria’s TETFund (Tertiary Education Trust Fund) was set up in 2011 to help fund infrastructure revitalization in public sector universities, much of this has not been allocated. It has now started to provide student loans, but students in private universities are not able to apply. With the economy struggling with 30 per cent inflation, the situation continues to worsen.

The reputational rise of the top Nigerian private universities is a corollary of this political stalemate and chronic economic doldrums. Global university rankings – such as those promoted by *Times Higher Education* – are deeply flawed, but Covenant University’s position in Africa’s top ten, just behind the University of the Western Cape, deserves comment.

Established in 2002, Covenant University is a Pentecostalist university with a strong emphasis on societal transformation through moral and spiritual discipline. It

is one of more than fifteen Pentecostal private universities approved by the Nigerian University Commission. Its peers – including Landmark University, Benson Idahosa University, Redeemers University and Crawford University – have growing reputations for the quality of their research and teaching. Supported by their church communities, and charging high fees, they offer attractive salary packages for academics; Covenant also promises in its adverts that one benefit is the ‘maintenance of a stable academic calendar’.

These Pentecostal universities set out to address what they see as the ‘decadence’ of the Nigerian educational system, even as they are criticized for their highly controlled campus cultures (Burgess 2020). Students and staff are expected to attend chapel meetings and sign strict codes of conduct governing dress, behaviour and sexuality.

More than 60 per cent of the private universities in Nigeria are religious foundations, mirroring a trend across the continent. Glanzer (2023) lists more than 103 Christian universities and colleges in sub-Saharan Africa, with more than seventy set up since 1990, mostly by endogenous religious communities meeting a demand for faith-based education. Their glide up the university rankings is driven by incentivizing the quality and quantity of research ‘outputs’. At Covenant, academic promotion decisions are based on the proportion of articles published in ‘Q1’ international journals, as measured by Scopus cite scores.

This returns us to the question of African academic writing, and the future of African journal publishing. In another of his telling asides, Arowosegbe mentions the ‘undermining’ of local publishing presses. Certainly, hard-pressed editors of long-established Nigerian social science and humanities journals struggle to attract high-quality submissions. A number of once-prestigious Nigerian medical journals have gone dormant over the past decade. The paradox here is that many of these new universities – keen to promote their research credentials – are also launching their own online journals. Abdu (2023) estimates that there may be as many as 2,000 journals being hosted by Nigerian universities. Some are still print only, and while some new journals are making use of free open source OJS software, very few are using global journal portals such as the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) to raise their visibility and profile.

While Arowosegbe does not connect the collapse of local presses to the influence of the major international commercial publishers, there is much more to say about their impact on regional research ecosystems, both in the past and today. Davis (2015) points to the toxic legacy of Oxford University Press’s and Longman’s post-independence dominance of the African textbook publishing market, while I have explored more recent controversies around supposedly ‘predatory’ Nigerian journal publishing companies (Mills and Branford 2022).

To help address questions about the future of African research infrastructures, and what Penda Ba calls the importance of ‘Afrostructuring’ (2024), Arowosegbe helped to organize several conference panels at the 2024 African Studies Association of the UK conference, including one on the African publishing landscape. Here, the specific focus was on the increasingly influential role played by commercial actors, such as Taylor & Francis, one of the ‘big five’ publishers.

The panel began with a Francophone perspective. Alain Agnessan pointed to the lack of incentives to publish in African languages, and the way in which African

scholars were increasingly turning to French publishing houses, undermining long-established presses on the continent. He called for 'epistemic survival strategies' in response to this renewed hegemony of the centre, while also highlighting the marginalization of French-language publishing too within African Studies.

In contrast, William Beinart traced the evolution of the *Journal of Southern African Studies* (JSAS) from its early history as a pioneering regional journal to become one of the most influential of the African Studies journals. Describing the participatory and community-building ethos of its editorial collective, Beinart documented its early years with Carfax – a small Oxford-based publisher – and its subsequent growth under Taylor & Francis. He suggested that it had acted as a 'bridgehead' for other African journals, helping some enter into publishing agreements with Taylor & Francis. As the number of papers JSAS published each year increased from ten to more than eighty, Beinart acknowledged that editorial collegiality became harder to sustain. At the same time, the focus turned to attracting more submissions from scholars based across Southern Africa. Benefiting from British Academy-funded writing workshops as well as generous Taylor & Francis editorial support, the journal, owned by its editorial collective, continues to flourish.

Jason Mosley, in his role as managing editor of the *Journal of Eastern African Studies* (JEAS) – again published by Taylor & Francis – cast a more critical note. He reflected on the challenge faced by journal editors in curating knowledge and supporting authors while at the same time having to work within the funding constraints set by publishers. He pointed to the importance of journal ownership for protecting editorial independence and for negotiating the commercial publishing landscape.

The presentations revealed that financial and editorial support from publishers varies widely, depending on ownership, journal status, the subscription base and commercial profitability. The unmentioned – if elephantine – subtext to both these presentations was the confidentiality clauses that are built into commercial journal contracts. These contracts usually come up for renewal every five years. Renegotiations are often fraught. Where journals are held in high regard by their academic community, they often have large numbers of subscriptions or are part of journal bundles. When the editorial board or professional association owns the journal, they are more able to threaten to walk away from a contract in order to ensure a favourable settlement. In the last few years, there have been several high-profile 'defections' of journals and their editorial boards from Wiley, in response to the latter's pressure to expand and publish more frequently. Royalties, editorial budgets, honoraria and other forms of financial support all depend on the leverage held by editors and their boards. Where the journal is owned by the publisher, as in the case of JEAS, it can be almost impossible to switch publishers, and editors/societies are at a disadvantage in renegotiating terms.

My own presentation in this panel highlighted the growing influence of Taylor & Francis on the African academic publishing landscape. As well as publishing more than seventy Africa-focused journals in the social sciences and humanities, it also attracts hundreds of submissions each year from African authors to its new Open Access mega-journal, *Cogent Social Science*. While this journal charges APCs (author publishing charges), it offers a generous fee waiver or fee discount agreement through EIFL (Electronic Information for Libraries), which in turn is supported by major philanthropists. Of the almost 2,000 articles published since 2016 in this journal

alone, a third were from academics based at universities in four African countries, including more than 100 from Nigeria and more than 150 from Ghana. In 2023, this journal published more than 200 articles by Africa-based authors, a similar number to those published in all fifteen ‘core’ African Studies journals published by Taylor & Francis. One reading of this development is that it is a marker of the success of West African universities – including Covenant – that are topping the table with the highest number of submissions. These ‘outputs’ seem to signal the rise of a new generation of highly active African researchers. Yet such moves to scale up – and speed up – social science publishing risk undermining the role of peer review and editorial feedback in helping authors develop their work. In my own research, I aim to explore these issues further with interviews with authors and editors. Either way, this trend is siphoning away submissions from Nigerian journals, and so is undermining the region’s own research and publishing infrastructures.

I made the case that there were three different, if opaquely entangled, publishing economies at work: a ‘credibility economy’ (Mills and Robinson 2021), an ‘output economy’ and a ‘data economy’. The first, perhaps exemplified by journals such as *Africa*, is characterized by editorial curation, careful peer review and a focus on quality. The second is marked by publishing speed and volume: a culture of productivism. And the third capitalizes on the increasingly commercially valuable journal metadata that the first two produce. The elite ‘core’ African Studies journals published by Taylor & Francis provide the brand imprimatur that then attracts African authors to publish in journals such as *Cogent Social Science*. That this latter journal is listed in the two dominant citation indexes is also attractive. The publisher also has an internal ‘cascade’ system to ensure that articles rejected from the elite journals are transferred to other Taylor & Francis journals where possible. Couple this with the increasing value of research metadata itself, and it is no surprise that some see this as the rise of ‘surveillance publishing’ (Pooley 2022).

This is a rapidly evolving policy and funding landscape, and the attractiveness to African authors of ‘international’ journals owned by commercial publishers needs further analysis. At the same time, European policy actors, along with UNESCO and a ‘diamond Open Access movement’, continue to advocate for a community-owned, not-for-profit publishing infrastructure. They sponsored the second ‘diamond Open Access summit’ in Cape Town in December 2024. A panel at the European Conference on African Studies in Prague in 2025 will address this topic in more depth. Arowosegbe ends his piece by asking whether the future of higher education in Africa belongs to private universities. Will the future of research in Africa also belong to commercial publishers?

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