September 2001

A View from Africa-A look at the positive and negative impacts of e-commerce in Africa

Digby Sales

University of Cape Town, South Africa, digby@uctlib.uct.ac.za

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>

Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Sales, Digby (2001) "A View from Africa-A look at the positive and negative impacts of e-commerce in Africa," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 13: Iss. 4, Article 36.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.3626>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

International Dateline from page 86

published by **Infonortics Ltd.**)

Another important issue is that of information literacy, which as you can imagine is of crucial importance in raising the educational standard and economic performance of South Africa. The feeling that I gained was that there were many information literacy projects underway, but that senior management support in both the universities and in the corporate sector was poor. A feature of the university sector in South Africa is the extent of distance learning, given the geographic size of the country, and the highly dispersed centres of population. The challenges in providing access to both Web and online resources against a background of high telecommunications charges and expensive and inflexible subscription policies from information vendors are considerable. There is a Centre for Information Literacy at the **University of Cape Town**, under the direction of **Peter Underwood** (<http://www.uct.ac.za/depts/sol/default.htm>).

There are of course a number of library consortia in South Africa, the largest of which is the **Gauteng and Environs Library Consortium (GAELIC)** (www.gaelic.ac.za) which represents the interests of the **University of Pretoria**, **University of Witwatersrand**, **Rand Afrikaans University**, **University of South Africa**, **Medical University of Southern Africa**, **Technikon Pretoria**, **Technikon Southern Africa**, **Technikon Witwatersrand**, **Vista University**, **Technikon Northern Gauteng**, **Vaal Triangle Technikon**, and **Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education**, amongst others. There is also the **Western Cape Library Cooperative**

Group Therapy from page 83

porting these products. But frankly, it has not been a problem since many patrons ignore the material or don't know it exists, have little need for help, or else try to use the products and can't but give up and do not ask for help. It's hard to know exactly how much use is going on, but periodicals service staff report that the accompanying materials are not requested by patrons.

In my opinion, such accompanying materials are often not so useful, but serve as "bridge" products to Web-based materials. More and more publishers are finding that Web-based materials are easier to control and update, and are not so platform-dependent. I would encourage publishers to focus on Web-ready supplements and forget the CD-ROMs. I think this discussion will be moot sooner rather than later.

(**Calico**), the **Free State Library and Information Consortium (Frelico)** and consortia in the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal.

Information science education and research is a feature of most of the ten major universities in South Africa, though there are concerns about just where graduates from these courses will find jobs. There are some initiatives underway to amalgamate and streamline tertiary academic institutions to create "centres of excellence" and these may result in fewer schools of information science in the future.

In conclusion, if you do have the opportunity to visit South Africa then do take it. You will be assured of a very warm welcome by professionals who are doing their very best to provide the highest quality of service in difficult economic and social conditions.

Reed acquisition of Harcourt

In the June 2001 issue of *ATG*, p. 10, there was a reference to the fact that the potential acquisition of the STM business of **Harcourt** had been referred to the **Competition Commission** in the UK. The report of the **Commission** was published on 5 July and concluded that the merger was not against the public interests.

However, it was only by a majority decision of 2-1 by the three-person panel of **Commission** members, and the dissenting member of the panel insisted that his views were included in the report. This 152 page report is well worth purchasing if you have any interest in STM publishing. It contains a wealth of information on the background to the STM business, and sets out very clearly the issues about pricing, substitution and market position, with some very useful tables that the staff of the **Competition Commission** developed from many different sources. Some commercially sensitive information about the business activities of the companies has been deleted from the published report.

Included in an appendix is the evidence from a range of university libraries and

25% DISCOUNT FROM BRILL

Sept. 1 until Dec. 31, 2001
North American direct orders only

Biblia Hebraica Leningradensia

Prepared according to the Vocalization, Accents, and Masora of Aaron ben Moses ben Asher in the Leningrad Codex, with adaptations to Halakhic requirements.

Edited by **Aron Dotan**

ISBN 0-391-04104-5
Trim size 6 1/4 x 8 1/4"
1296 pp., Cloth
List Price \$200.; Discount Price \$150.

Professor Emeritus, Tel Aviv University, and winner of the Bialik Prize for Jewish Studies, renowned masoretic scholar **Aron Dotan** offers the most accurate print edition of the Leningrad Codex—the oldest complete manuscript of the Hebrew Bible. The *Biblia Hebraica Leningradensia*, thoroughly revised, retypeset, and redesigned, follows meticulously the text and layout of the original codex. Also designed for Jewish liturgical use, *BHL* is divided into weekly portions and subdivisions for synagogue reading.

To order call 1-800-337-9255,
fax 703-661-1501, or
e-mail cs@brillusa.com
Specify source code **BHL1**

www.brill.nl

other organisations and individuals. Almost without exception these organisations were against the acquisition going ahead. I did find some of the comments given in evidence by **Reed** and **Harcourt** a little disingenuous, and it will be very interesting to look back on the report in a year or two. In the UK the report costs just over \$25, and is excellent value for money. The details that you will need is that it is **Command Paper Cm5186** and the title is *Reed Elsevier plc and Harcourt General Inc. – A report on the proposed merger*. The report is published by **The Stationery Office** (the UK equivalent of the GPO) and the Website is www.clicktso.com.

A View from Africa

by **Digby Sales** (Collection Development Manager, Chancellor Oppenheimer Library, University of Cape Town, Rondebosch, South Africa) <digby@uctlib.uct.ac.za>

At the end of last year I returned full of enthusiasm from my second **Charleston Conference** (the first one being in 1993). It remains an important forum for discussion on acquisition issues despite the increase in its size. However, I am very worried about how we in Africa (and many other parts of the Third World) are going to keep up with the trends in scholarly publishing. Hav-

ing also attended **ALA** in San Francisco this June, my concern has only increased.

The push, especially on the STM front, is for journal publishing to appear in only the electronic format, as this will reduce the publishing costs. The change may be welcomed by First World countries, but lack of access to the Internet will side-line many African academics.

continued on page 88

A View from Africa from page 87

The following figures from an article on e-commerce in the local **Cape Town** newspaper (*Cape Times Business Report*, 15 November, 2000 p. 11) highlight the problem. There are about 3 million Internet users in Africa, of whom about 2 million are in South Africa. That means that there is about one Internet user for every 250 people in Africa, compared to the world average of one for every 35 persons. Africa's 780 million people have as many Internet hosts as **Latvia's** 2.5 million people.

The main problem is that the communications infrastructure is not in place. For most African governments, providing basic housing and education has had to be a higher priority than building communication links. Telephone densities are below one for every 100,000 people. Even if people had the money for computers, there is not the infrastructure to provide access, and what access there is, is expensive. To use the Internet is very costly. A typical charge for about 5 hours a month would be around \$50, compared to about \$29 for 20 hours in the United States of America.

My own institution is the **University of Cape Town (UCT)**, where I am fortunate to work in a relatively well-endowed library, by African standards. We have Internet access and, therefore, are able to give our users elec-

tronic resources. However, these resources are expensive, and we face fiscal obstacles which make it difficult for us to deliver the services our users need.

Though financial issues have clearly had an impact on library collections worldwide, South Africa faces its own set of additional constraints. First, South African academic libraries have to import over 85% of materials purchased, and thus have to pay additional costs to those of American libraries. Apart from having to pay First World prices with very small discounts, there are shipping costs, as well as a 14% value added tax imposed on goods and services. Unlike many American institutions, universities are not exempt from this taxation, even though they are partially state-supported. At **UCT Libraries**, we estimate that any item acquired from First World publishers in fact costs about 125% of the cost to North American buyers.

Two other factors have a major impact: (1) the annual price hikes by journal publishers which affect academic libraries worldwide and (2) the localised depreciation of the South African currency, the Rand, against First World currencies. In 1993 3.33 Rands bought \$1 worth of library materials. By the time of the **2000 Charleston Conference**, it took 7.66 Rands to buy the same \$1 in materials. (By the time of **ALA 2001** the Rand had devalued further

to 8.14.) **UCT Libraries'** materials budget for 2000 was R17 million (\$2.22 million), which was more than double the 1997 budget of R7.6 million (\$2.3 million), but less in dollar terms. Despite regular journal cancellation exercises, the ratio of books to journals continues to be very unbalanced. A decade ago the ratio of books to journals was 31:69, at present it is 15:85.

South Africa is one of the most prosperous countries in Africa, and **UCT** one of the top ten endowed African universities, so that the problems **UCT** faces are small compared to those of the majority of African universities. Fiscal and technological constraints result in only a privileged few in Africa having access to electronic information. Without the hardware and software infrastructure to work effectively, many African academics look to the First World for jobs, further impoverishing the intellectual capital of Third World countries.

It is in this context that I am concerned about more and more information becoming available exclusively electronically. The publishers are publishing this way with their primary market, the First World, in mind. If the publishers do not make provision for this other market, Africa will literally become the "Dark Continent," excluded from cutting edge ideas because of poor technological infrastructure and weak purchasing power. 🌿

Report from Fiesole III: The Fiesole Collection Development Retreat Series

by Alex Holzman (Cambridge University Press) <aholzman@cup.org>

Seventy-five librarians, publishers, and aggregators were fortunate enough to participate in the third **Fiesole Collection Development Retreat**, held at the **European University Institute**, March 22-24, and hosted by the good folks at both the **EUI** and **Casalini Libri**. A slightly different group also enjoyed the hospitality of the **University of Florence** at a preconference on Scholarly Communication and University Presses, which also included many people from the university community.

The preconference keynote address was delivered by **Michael Keller**, University Librarian and Director of University Presses and HighWire, **Stanford University**. As someone who is both librarian and university press publisher, **Mike** was able to provide a capsule review of how both professions have evolved over the past fifty years, and a peek at how they might co-operate in the future. He noted that electronic publishing can help both communities in both defining new audiences and in focusing their

efforts on areas that sell and are used.

Stevan Harnad of the **University of Southampton** then updated the audience on the Self-Archiving Initiative, presenting his impassioned plea that authors publish only with journals that allow them to post "free" copies of their articles on their own Websites. By so doing, he argued, the availability of scientific knowledge would be enhanced enormously. **Professor Harnad's** talk sparked frequent and occasionally heated responses from publishers and librarians alike.

Subsequent presentations provided summaries of a wide variety of scholarly publishing initiatives, including the **Roquade** project in the Netherlands, the **European Partnership on Scholarly Publishing**, the **European Mathematical Information Service**, the fascinating launch of **Firenze University Press** as an electronic-only publisher, and other recent developments in scholarly publishing. In addition, **Anthony Watkinson** discussed the legal deposit of electronic publications and associated archiving problems

as well as presenting an overview of the publishing role in the communication of knowledge in which he argued that publishers help organize knowledge and its presentation.

The **Fiesole** group convened the following day at the **European University Institute**, where it was welcomed most graciously by **EUI** president **Patrick Masterson** and the **National Library of Florence** Director, **Antonia Ida Fontana**. The subsequent program was divided into sessions on "invisible communities" involving libraries and scholarly communication; the evolving role of consortia; and electronic teaching materials -- in short, the various impacts of digital communication. Invisible communities involve users who can come to supposedly academic information from communities of activists, professionals, government people, and the like. Examples ranged from desalination communities to astronomy communities to clinical medicine -- all presenters were enthusiastic about the ways the Web is allow-

continued on page 89