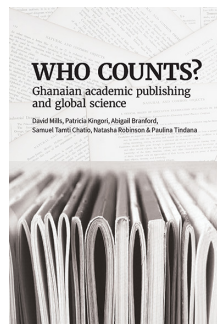


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# Beyond 'publish or perish': Unpacking the complexities of academic publishing in Africa

In the book, *Who counts? Ghanaian Academic Publishing and Global Science*, David Mills and colleagues thoughtfully examine and critique the African academic publishing landscape, drawing on the experiences of academics at two Ghanaian public universities and from journal editors in Africa more broadly. Based on the findings of their qualitative study, they interrogate the slow but growing area of scholarly writing on the continent by first discussing the historical precedents of academic publishing on the continent and then looking at current perspectives and experiences. By examining local and regional publishing cultures and the challenges and opportunities that exist for African academics seeking to contribute to global science discourse, the authors delve into the complex and multi-layered factors which drive the African scholarly writing agenda.

The book's 10 chapters provide critical discussions on issues that are familiar to many budding academics on the continent, from the ever-popular 'publish or perish' mantra which has arguably resulted in an emphasis on quantity over quality of scholarship in many universities, to the spectre of predatory publishing and the influence of the global bibliometric economy and how this has potentially undermined the growth of the African publishing agenda.

In Chapter 2, the authors offer a critical perspective on the historical context of academic publishing on the continent, from the rapid growth of African journals in the immediate postcolonial era, to the struggle for credibility by emerging African journals, and the impact of the political and financial turbulence of the late 20th century on universities and research more generally. They also discuss the emergence of stricter criteria for ranking universities and the increasing use of indexing metrics which have resulted in an emphasis on broadening the quantity of visible research outputs over quality and contextual relevance. The chapter also provides a striking perspective on the utility as well as the consequences of the burgeoning open-access model of publishing, showing how this model can provide increased visibility to research writings of Ghanaian (and African) authors, but also remains largely inaccessible for most researchers from the Global South due to the high article processing fees. As the authors critically explain, this model reinforces colonialised systems of exclusion of less-known voices in discourse about Africa.

Chapters 3, 4 and 6 examine the study participants' perspectives and experiences of why it is important for Ghanaian researchers to be visible in the publishing space, and the regard placed on such visibility in international journals which are considered credible or reputable. This was described as necessary for career progression despite the very real constraints experienced in university systems which do not provide much support but require results. This situation sometimes makes authors easy 'prey' for so-called predatory journals. The authors offer a thought-provoking analysis of the impact of reforms and policies which have transformed the way the (global) academy operates. These changes have been reported by other scholars to have had significant impacts on lesser-resourced institutions or contexts as well as on the work of individual academics, especially female academics. Within an increasingly globalising research landscape, scholars in critical higher education science have long argued that the shift towards a business model for higher education can result in greater precarity of careers, fostering unhealthy competitions and rivalries.<sup>1</sup> This was clearly seen in the narratives of the book's participants.

The second half of the book looks at the editorial side of publishing by sharing the experiences of Ghanaian and African journal editors, including their views on sustaining their journals within a competitive scholarly economy. In Chapter 7, editors of various Ghanaian journals share their struggles for legitimacy, funding or financial support, and the difficulties of maintaining standards when most of the required work is conducted on a voluntary basis. The book also highlights the support that platforms like African Journals Online (AJOL) provide to local journals, by facilitating the establishment of publishing rigour and building editorial capacity. As Mirowski<sup>2</sup> argues, with the dominance of international publishing houses that are increasingly taking over regional publishing opportunities, smaller local journals have to prove their relevance, and often have low impact factors, but collectives such as AJOL and AOSIS can help to improve this.

The two concluding paragraphs of *Who counts?* provide an optimistic view of the future for Ghanaian (and African) publishing culture if proactive and sustained measures are taken, such as diversifying journal metrics systems and university rankings to include citation indexes that have been developed by and for African journals. As the authors indicate, "The future of Africa's research ecosystems depends on strong and well-funded national research systems, bibliodiversity, multilingual publishing, and alternative circuits of academic credibility." (p.201)

The authors also emphasise the importance of Ghanaian universities moving away from the reliance on metrics and impact factors for career advancement. This was anticipated to reduce the need to 'publish at all cost'. Essentially, the book's participants advocated for an evolution of the research and publishing cultures of African universities and for a recognition of local contextual determinants in the global research economy.

The core message of the book then, is that the requirement for African academics to be more visible in the publishing space is not one that will likely disappear. However, this needs targeted transformation in order to emphasise the voices and experiences of African scholars in a manner that enhances the contribution to and development of global science by Africans for Africans. As the authors indicate, the prestige of both African authors and African journals is rooted in "postcolonial history, geopolitics, and an increasingly transnational research agenda" (p.8), and the increasing digitisation and commercialisation of academic publishing has



further deepened North-South inequalities. And yet, as this book shows, African researchers are navigating this space in an effort to survive and even thrive in spite of the inequalities. Ultimately, a thriving global research economy must include the active and equitable participation of voices from Africa, but this can only be achieved when the publishing landscape in African universities evolves to reflect the reality on the ground.

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