

# Twenty-five Years of Open Access Publishing on Africa: Past and Future Challenges

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## Abstract

*African Studies Quarterly*, the first open access journal which deals with issues related to Africa, has maintained a unique publishing model for over 25 years. During this period, academic publishing on Africa has evolved significantly. This piece examines these changes through the experience of a single journal: *African Studies Quarterly*. Through the lenses of community, infrastructure and resources, the article explores vulnerability and resilience. While challenges persist for *African Studies Quarterly*, and indeed many other Africa-focused journals, there are reasons for optimism.

## Keywords

Open access, multidisciplinary, publishing, Open Journal System

## Introduction


In 2022, the *African Studies Quarterly* (ASQ) celebrated 25 years of publication<sup>1</sup>. Founded as the first open access journal in African Studies, ASQ remains committed to the publication of peer-reviewed research on Africa. Over this initial quarter-century, ASQ published a wide range of scholars, many well-known to the African Studies community, such as Korwa Adar, Florence Bernault, Mbye Cham, Gracia Clark, Joost Fontein, Karen Hansen, Goran Hyden, Abiola Irele, Sean Jacobs, John Janzen, Lauren MacLean, D.A. Masolo, Ali Mazrui, Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Moses Ochonu, Elliot Skinner, Aili Tripp, and Kwasi Wiredu. The initial five volumes contained over 45% African authors (articles and at-issue pieces), whereas in the most recent five volumes that number

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<sup>1</sup> Some parts of this article previously appeared in Leedy (2018).

reached nearly 75%<sup>2</sup>. Throughout these last volumes, geographic coverage remained robust with pieces on over twenty countries as well as many multi-country or continental studies. The final issue of 2023 featured book reviews from scholars across eight African countries—Botswana, Ethiopia, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, South Africa, Tanzania, and Uganda—as well as China, Germany, Hungary, India, Turkey, and the UK. *ASQ* readership also retains a strong African footing, e.g. analytics for 2023 revealed the top ten access locations (ranked by number of users) to be: Lagos, Abuja, Accra, Port Harcourt, Nairobi, Kampala, London, New York, Dar es Salaam, and Cape Town.

Just two years prior to the founding of *ASQ*, Paul Zeleza argued that “African scholars cannot continue being unwelcome guests at other people’s intellectual table” (Zeleza, 1995). Based on the above numbers, perhaps one could argue that—at least in the case of *ASQ*—African scholars were always welcome but now actually shape the table. In this and other ways, the landscapes of academic publishing on Africa have changed substantially over the past quarter century – this piece attempts to look critically at these changes through the experiences of a single journal. Through the broad lenses of community, infrastructure, and resources, the article explores both vulnerability and resilience.

## Community

Attuned to the possibilities that an explosive growth in web-based applications might bring to academic publishing in the mid-nineties, several graduate students approached the then Director of the Center for African Studies (CAS), Michael Chege, with an idea that many thought unrealistic at the time: To publish a fully online multidisciplinary journal that could be accessed for free by anyone with a web connection. In 1997, Chege took this idea forward to the Dean of UF College of Liberal Arts & Sciences (CLAS). Twenty-five years later, we remain immensely grateful for the continuing support from CLAS.

The founding editorial staff consisted of Chege as editor, supported by fellow political science faculty Errol Henderson and CAS office manager Carol Lauriault who supplied her red-ink expertise at the copyedit stage. Doctoral students Christopher Johnson and Richard Marcus became the first managing editors, supported by other graduate students who provided both internal review of submissions as well as technical support. The initial external advisory board consisted largely of scholars from the founding editor’s network, spanning Africa, North America, and Europe.

Editorial committee (EC) membership continues to be made up of volunteer UF graduate students from a variety of social science and humanities disciplines. The EC readers provide a preliminary review of new submissions and a recommendation to the editor or how to proceed with the manuscript. Reports are discussed at a weekly meeting and subject to EC discussion or query. This process not only assists with moving submissions through the evaluation process, it also provides students with experience in critical reading outside their discipline and insights on how publishing decisions are made.

After nearly a decade of publication with the subsequent director of CAS as editor, professor emeritus Hunt Davis Jr. took on the role in 2010 and moved quickly to reconstitute the advisory board. With UF producing an average of nine doctoral degrees on Africa each year since 1985, we looked to this extensive pool of alumni to choose a diverse, multidisciplinary group based in institutions in Africa, Europe, and North America. Similarly, after i took over editorship in 2018, i added a group of associate editors from amongst UF alumni.

The inaugural issue featured three articles—two authored by UF faculty—and a handful of book reviews written by UF faculty and postgrads. Issues for the first several volumes remained small, typically 2 to 3 articles with 5 to 10 book reviews. Janet Puhalla remembers: “During the first few issues it seemed like feast or famine. Would we have submissions? And could we get everything done

<sup>2</sup> This trend runs contrary to findings for other journals e.g. *African Affairs* and *The Journal of Modern African Studies*. See Briggs and Weathers (2016).

on time to make a quarterly deadline?”<sup>3</sup> One strategy to raise the profile of the young journal would be through production of targeted special issues. The first in 1997—“Crisis in the Great Lakes”—featured pieces by René Lemarchand, Thomas Turner, Will Reno, and Tony Waters.

A multi-disciplinary focus probably compounded the early growing pains faced by any new journal. Perhaps less anticipated however, many scholars remained reluctant to publish in an online-only medium despite *ASQ*'s standing as a fully peer-reviewed and indexed journal. What seems ubiquitous in 2023 really did challenge the academic publishing status quo in the last years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Relatively small numbers of unsolicited submissions created an editorial culture of working very closely, and patiently, with some authors to bring their work to a publishable standard. This culture flourished under subsequent editors such as Leonardo Villalón and Hunt Davis, and continues still despite recent dramatic increases in rates of submissions.

*ASQ* is of course also part of the broad community of academic journals dedicated to publishing on Africa. For the past decade, a rotating coterie of editors worked to expose emerging scholars in particular to both practical and esoteric knowledge(s) about journal publishing. These efforts took the form of regular public sessions at major international conferences e.g. African Studies Association (ASA), African Studies Association of Africa (ASAA), and the European Conference on African Studies (ECAS). These sessions addressed both general queries regarding journal selection and submissions processes as well as specific concerns about language usage, acceptance rates, and editorial communication. Group workshop sessions organized by *African Studies Review* (“Pipeline for Emerging Scholars”) and *Journal of African Cultural Studies* (“Journal Academy”) also offered focused critical readings of new works along with written feedbacks and individual mentorships. All of these opportunities placed editors in conversation with not just prospective authors but also with each other.

## Infrastructure

Initially, *ASQ* did not possess anything more than human resources and website hosting by the University of Florida. Within two years, however, there was an office with a dedicated desktop PC and printer. Another office and computer came along with Davis' assumption of the editorship. COVID-19 prompted a separate office space for the book review editor. Additional infrastructure in the form of IT support from CLAS as well as regular advice from Africana librarian Daniel Reboussin also contributed to a slow but continued growth.

For more than a decade, *ASQ* appeared only in HTML format to optimize accessibility. Although difficult to imagine today, access to Adobe Reader was not universal and the size of PDF files certainly challenged dial-up users. The transition to an increasingly popular PDF-based format would wait until staff felt that bandwidth availability for scholars and students at most African tertiary institutions had improved enough to have a negligible impact on access. Richard Marcus remembers: “We spent a lot of time early on discussing format. It was not just about trying to produce a high quality, peer-reviewed publication online, it was about the technology. We wanted it to be low bandwidth for accessibility. Even in the U.S. internet was still through dial up...our African colleagues generally only had dial up access paying by the minute.”<sup>4</sup> While abstracts remain available in HTML, a CAS graduate assistant developed a template—still in use today—and converted all back issues to PDF during 2013-2014.

At the outset, journal management software either did not exist or was beyond the very limited budget available to *ASQ*. Our “house-built” system was far from paperless! While most communication amongst staff and with authors occurred over email, everything got printed and stored. This was common practice in the early 2000s. Submission tracking spreadsheets could grow to several pages. By 2008 our office contained two full four-drawer cabinets of manuscript files, some even holding 3.5” discs mailed to *ASQ* in the late 1990s. That year, our managing editor shifted to what

<sup>3</sup> Janet Puhalla, personal communication, 27 February 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Marcus, personal communication, 26 February 2018.

became essentially a gmail-based system using the labelling function to tag and individually folder everything for each submission. In 2024, ASQ will finally transition to the latest Open Journal System (OJS) environment.

While today ASQ is hosted on a Wordpress-driven website, content management systems did not exist in those early years. Furthermore, “there was no Javascript, no Dreamweaver so we had to learn to work in HTML.”<sup>5</sup> This created potential challenges in that any managing editor candidate needed to have HTML proficiency in addition to strong organizational and communication skills. The format also proved off-putting to certain authors who wanted paginated offprints to include in their promotion packets.

ASQ’s solely digital “footprint” has long been maintained locally by UF CLAS and nationally by the US Library of Congress. We have not invested in a DOI service. While the annual fee and separate content registration fees are not a substantial obstacle for ASQ, they might well be for a small journal with less (or no) institutional support. In practice, almost none of our authors include DOI information in their references and there has simply been no demand for DOI from our authors or readers. However, after the move to OJS—with technical support by both UF Libraries and Florida Virtual Campus (FLVC)—implementing DOI for all forthcoming issues will become standard. UF Libraries even provide a small budget for DOI services to the journals it supports.

## Resources

After more than twenty-five years, ASQ is still available free of charge to anyone with a web connection. We maintain this diamond standard of open access on the front end as well—authors are never charged to publish in ASQ. “Open access” was not in common usage at our founding—we simply used the terms “online only” and “free” which seemed radical enough at the time. While some aspects of resources are outlined above—office space, site hosting and archiving—what are the more immediately “real” or tangible cost commitments that undergird the production of a fully open access journal? As with so many parts of an academic institution’s budget, salaries consume the bulk.

Although the first several years more resembled a collectivist enterprise, with student volunteers supplemented by prying time from full-time salaried faculty and staff, as submissions grew it soon became apparent that a single point of contact would be critical. This led to a successful request for CLAS to fund a part-time graduate assistant appointment as managing editor. The managing editor handled all daily operations for a number of years before growth led the editor and Director to again approach CLAS for additional support in the form of a second assistantship appointment as a book review editor. This dual funding model has remained in place since 2011 with both positions largely held by African graduate students (from Eswatini, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Zambia, and Zimbabwe) working towards degrees across the university, including: communication, geography, horticultural science, political science, sustainable development, and wildlife ecology. As of 2023, these two appointments constitute upwards of US\$ 70,000 (stipends plus tuition/fees) annual outlay by CLAS in support of the journal.

The editorship transitioned through several variations over these decades. For the initial eleven years, the ASQ editor (Chege, Villalón) was also director of an active academic center at a research university. This structure worked in the early days when submission rates remained low and editor workflow relatively light with Corinna Greene taking over copyediting from Lauriault and handling production duties. However, as the journal grew during the early 2000s so did activity levels at the Center such that ASQ frequently had to take backseat to other directorial responsibilities. So, when Davis—after guest editing a special issue in 2007—offered to take over as editor, having previously served as editor of the *African Studies Review* throughout the 1980s, agreement came immediately<sup>6</sup>.

5 Marcus 2018.

6 Hunt Davis, personal communication, 12 October 2023.

This structure lasted another ten years with CAS deputy director Leedy as sole associate editor. Davis supervised both the managing editor and the book review editor while copyediting all accepted manuscripts. Leedy handled final proofreading and irregular manuscript reviews. These roles reversed in 2018 with Davis stepping down but remaining involved on a weekly basis. At this point, Leedy added the group of associate editors with the goal for a sustainable distribution of manuscript management.

## Vulnerability and Resilience

As the above outline of resource commitments well shows, producing a free journal can be far from free of costs. While certainly not impossible, it is difficult to imagine a fully volunteer operation in today's university environment. Faculty and students appear more guarded with their time and commitments, more transactional in their decision-making. This trend intensified during and after the pandemic, further echoed outside our institution with increased challenges in securing willing external reviewers. So, financials are a central vulnerability. While *ASQ* has successfully transitioned through no less than four college deans and five center directors, at any point a dean could cut funding for—or a director re-assign—existing assistantships. Likewise, the editorship currently sits within the portfolio of a full-time academic staff member, but this could end if unit priorities shift or that staff member is eventually replaced by someone without the required interest and expertise.

At the time of *ASQ*'s founding, many African scholarly journals faced an uncertain future amid financial and other constraints. Would technology improve the situation or only further entrench European and North American journals? In 1998, Damtew Teferra seemed optimistic: “With emerging new technologies, it is hoped that many undermining factors will be eliminated, and that the life and condition of African journals can be improved” (Teferra, 1998). Nearly a decade later, some 62 journals had full electronic access through African Journals Online (AJOL) yet all but one still maintained a print version (Aina & Mutula, 2007). This meant that the full promise of new technology to “offer some hope to journal publishers struggling with exorbitant printing and distribution costs” still largely went unrealized (Hussein & Smart, 2007). As the experience of *ASQ* should attest, production and distribution are not necessarily the most limiting cost constraints. The human resources required for journal production also have real costs despite longstanding parallel systems of voluntary labor, with this already tenuous relationship further strained for many African scholars who frequently face heavy teaching loads and low salaries thus making journal work that much more difficult.

Still, there are indicators for optimism. In 2024, AJOL features over 700 journals from 39 countries, of which nearly 500 are open access<sup>7</sup>. This indicates a significant shift in both connectivity and innovation since 2007. As *ASQ* moves through its third decade, participation in weekly editorial committee meetings has largely recovered after a significant slump during the pandemic when meetings went online. Our submission rate from Africa-based scholars remained steady during those years and has strengthened since 2022. Regular inclusion of *ASQ* in editor forums and roundtables is entering its second decade, providing exposure and contact with another generation of emerging scholars. The *ASQ* editor recently consulted on several other journal startups, both in Africa and North America. Lastly, a newly appointed center director recognizes the value *ASQ* adds to this institution locally and to the field globally, as well as the effort and resources needed to keep it moving forward. While open access journals have proliferated since the late 1990s—and the model of *ASQ* is certainly not the only path—hopefully this reflection will provide a useful addition to the history and current state of publishing on Africa.

7 African Journals Online. <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/ajol> (accessed on May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024).

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