Research Africa Reviews Vol. 5, No. 3, December 2021

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https://sites.duke.edu/researchafrica/ra-reviews/volume-5-issue-3-dec-2021/

RAR's Editorial Voice:
Calling Back the Past, Casting Sights on the Future

By the Editorial Team

Looking Back

In 2016, it was decided to create an open digital scholarly platform focusing on Africa. Colleagues who came from US and African universities envisaged that the platform would be an academic portal that would encourage and stimulate research on and within the continent; this would, however, take place via writing reviews of books, films, exhibitions, artworks, and other scholarly media. The platform was viewed as a viable pathway to engage with various kinds of intellectual outputs such as non-fiction/fiction publications and creative/inventive artworks. The project was thus named *Research Africa Reviews* (RAR); during 2017, it got off the ground and remains active to this day.

Table 1: RAR's Five Years

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RAR 1 = 9	RAR 2 =	RAR 3 = 8	2017: 30
RAR 1 = 8	RAR 2 =	RAR 3 =	2018: 33
RAR 1 =	RAR 2 =	RAR 3 =	2019: 34
RAR 1 =	RAR 1 =	RAR 3 =	2020: 33
RAR 1 = 5	RAR 2 = 7	RAR = 9	2021: 21

Since then, this platform has engaged with reviews of books, films, and exhibitions. Over the past five years, RAR has published a substantial number of reviews and reports that addressed themes and topics related to Africa. The Table above provides the numbers of coverage during the past five years; RAR appears three times a year, and that each issue has on average about 11 reviews/reports per annum (from 2017 to 2020).

A brief analysis of the Table reveals the following facts: During 2017, an average of 10 reviews appeared; and during 2018, the entries was about the same. In 2019 and 2020, the figures did not differ much either; it was observed that the total number for 2019 was 34 and for 2020 it was 33. But when assessing 2021,

it was noted that the number of entries dropped by a large margin; from an average of 33 during the previous 4 years, the drop to 21 during 2021 is quite conspicuous.

While the editorial team has generally been satisfied with the number of entries that it has had per issue between 2017 and 2020, the team is concerned about the low number of entries per issue; in fact, the attempt is to cumulatively keep it around 30 per annum. From the team's perspective and understanding, this platform is indeed a feasible scholarly avenue via which emerging and even established African scholars/researchers across the continent have the chance to share their ideas.

Figure 1: Catalogue of Questions
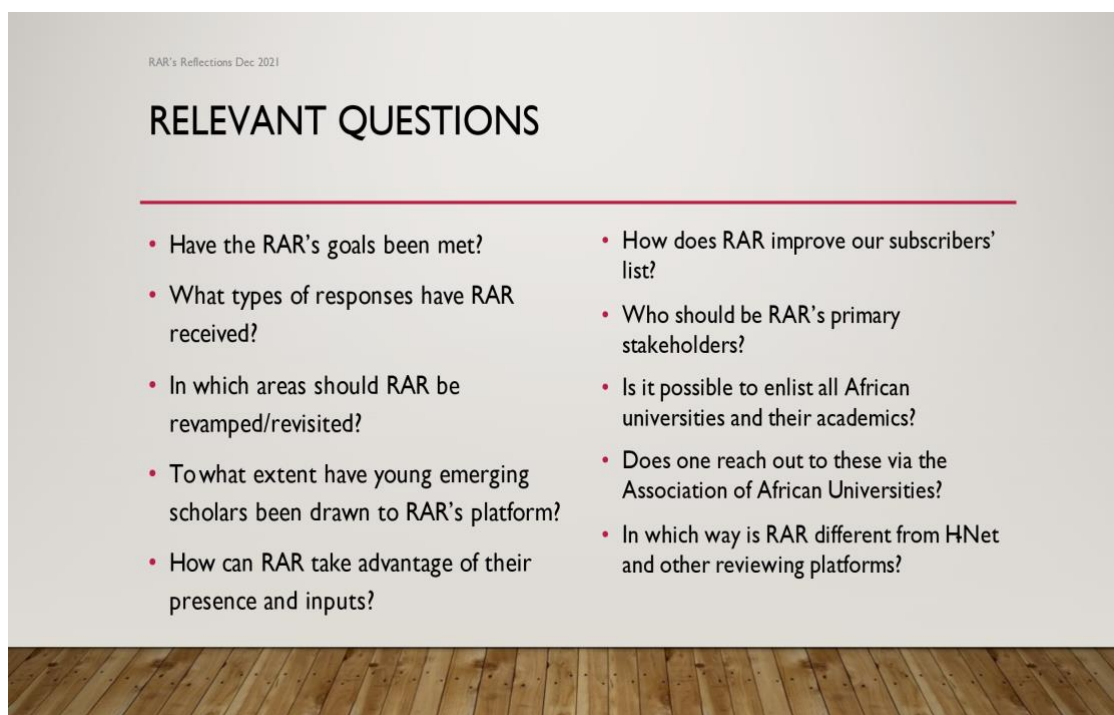
Related to the latter, the one critical question that comes to mind is about how to help institutions and scholars make use of this open digital platform to demonstrate their acumen and interest in engaging with scholarly works that have been published in their countries/regions or that have been published by publishing houses that specialize in producing scholarly works on Africa? Accompanying this question, numerous others should be raised so that one may be able to detect the trends in, among others, book publishing, intellectual engagement, and scholarly creativity at African universities.

As the RAR team weighs the options and seeks answers for these questions, it may be stated that there are many other factors that have affected the intellectual outputs (such book or journal publications) in Africa's academic institutions; if one uses the world university ranking system as a measure, one observes that African universities do not feature at all in the first 100 (see link here).

Regarding university ranking, it is informative to visit a few of the following sites; these rank Africa's best universities. The sites offer an overview and an insight into these; and they are helpful to understand the state of these institutions continentally and globally: see this link and also here.

Leaving that aside, one of the factors that may be attributed to these universities' poor performance is, of course, their lack of funding. African governments dismally fail to address educational matters, failing to adequately channel funds to institutional endowments; beyond fiscal restraint, these institutions are often understaffed, many scholars not holding doctorate degrees. Alongside these factors is the fact that most of these African universities – with a few exceptions - have poor internet connectivity.

Africa's Universities and Their Internet Networks

For more than a decade, Africa's weak internet connectivity and the efforts that are on the cards to change this scenario have been widely covered. Leah Ngari & Shira Aliza Petrack (2019) reported that only half a billion Africans accessed the internet; and they stated that they are unevenly spread and generally unreliable across the continent (see link here). Despite these negative scenarios, Miriam Tuerk (2020) seems to be upbeat about the continent describing 'Africa (as) The Next Frontier for the Internet;' disregarding the bottlenecks that persist, she maintained that the demands are there and that the supplies are growing at a rapid pace since technology assists in fueling the economy (see link here).

During the past few years, African companies have partnered with Americans, Europeans, and Chinese in tackling the issue. But while infrastructure is being addressed and services are being improved, the question that remains is: are our continental-based scholars so dependent on internet connectivity that they are not in the position to produce good reviews of books or films that were churned out by their country's publishing houses or film units? And a follow-up question is: If one reflects on the distant past, how did some African authors make their mark without having had access to the internet? Considering various issues, one may wish to argue that there are certainly ways of being creative and inventive despite the absence of the internet or an ineffective internet network.

Now since RAR has a presence in cyberspace, it was assumed that scholars and researchers in Africa would be able to easily access it. Careful reading about the developments suggests some limitations due to factors of language, access, and internet connectivity. It seems that the poor and expensive connectivity caused African based institutions to be out of range in many situations, or rather, they just cannot access RAR's site because of their weak operation systems.

If one zooms in on a few East or West African countries, then it is obvious that their academic institutions are still struggling to have reasonable systems in place. In their defense, these developments do take time to be addressed and the

current attempts are trying their best to overcome these challenges even though they have limited funds.

Even though internet is present in all African countries, many of these countries' cyberspace operating systems are slow or inconsistent. Educational institutions such as universities have been challenged by poor internet connections; as such, they have not been able to produce competitive and high-quality research in an increasingly connected global space.

The outcome of this has been that African institutes rely heavily on donors' funding and non-African academic partners to assist their scholars and postgraduate students to conduct meaningful research. Numerous African governments do not channel sufficient funds into the Information Technology nor the education systems. Unfortunately, a quick scan of many academic institutions located in West and East African countries reveal that they lag academically behind because of this lack of funds and access.

Figure 2: Africa's Internet
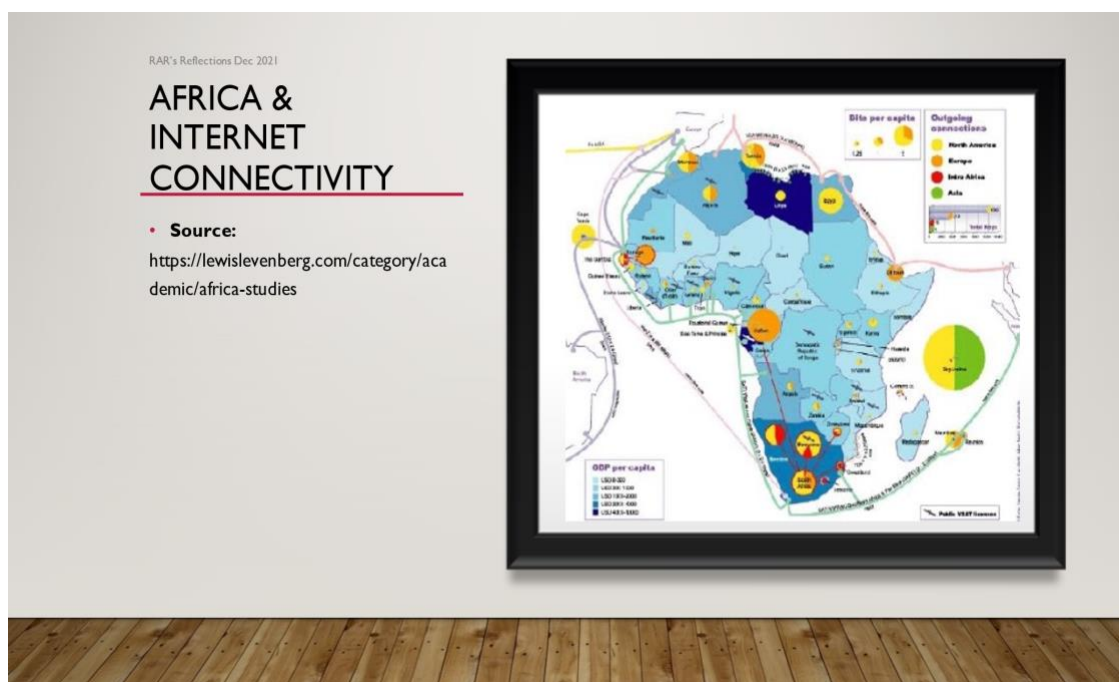
African Universities & Their Partners: Enhancing Relations, Advancing Research

While one is aware of the negative circumstances in which our African universities function, there are ways to circumvent these. One method is partnering with institutions that are located outside the continent; that relationship should, however, be a win-win partnership so that both institutions may mutually benefit. Through this partnership the infrastructure can be transformed, and the network can be strengthened with the partner's resources.

In this manner, the impact will be felt within the university structures at all levels; one of the sectors that should gain from the partnership is funding for research and this would include writing book/film reviews and composing conference reports; these act as ways in producing relevant and applicable knowledge within the university for the nation.

The other method to adopt is to attract financial institutions; their task is to invest sufficient funds for the institution. Besides the funders investing in distinct African universities and having a hall or a lecture theatre named after the donor, the investments can generate further funds through research findings for the government and other outside stakeholders. In addition, these investments can provide the necessary financial support that are needed by the institution's cohort of researchers to undertake their research and that would include penning reviews and completing reports. And it should be stressed that the relationship should be one that benefits both partners (that is, the university and the investment company) and all stakeholders (including the government) that are directly or indirectly associated with the partnership.

The suggested methods would be able to enhance the partnerships and advance the research projects that are on the university's academic menu. These collaborations can be positively implemented if the partnerships form collegial academic teams to work on identified research projects.

Figure 3: Partnerships and Stakeholders
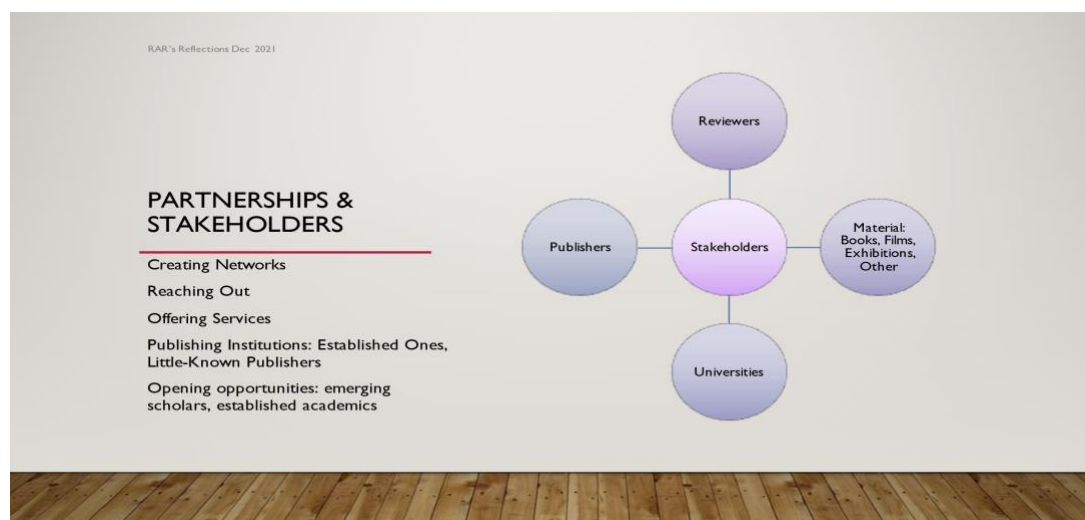
Perhaps it is appropriate to re-state that when Duke University academic staff broached the idea of setting up this platform in 2016, they had in mind creating partners at different levels. One of which was selecting a team of reviewers who will run with the review project. As a result of the groundwork that was laid, the Duke University-based scholars identified a few scholars who were attached to African universities. In this way, they 'partnered' with them and have taken this project forward.

For this project, they – together - worked out a set of useful guidelines that targeted the potential reviewers. The idea was to give them an idea of what types of reviews were expected from them. The review team was, however, aware of the challenges in writing reviews or putting together reports; this, they knew, was not 'a walk in the park.' Be that as it may, the shared online guidelines identified various kinds of contributions; these included, among others, short reviews, review essays, and reports.

Our Review Process

RAR's review process starts with call for reviewers, communication with publishers, and collaboration with reviewers on their pieces. This format is based on open access, empowerment, and the disseminating of knowledge as well applying their critical skills and enhancing academic literacy. RAR believes that encouraging the culture of review, civil discourse, and public exchange of ideas is good and healthy for scholarship, and it is also vital for research-oriented universities. Much of the editors' work depend on reaching out to both seasoned and new reviewers or reaching out to collaborating publishers to make their titles available to our growing and dedicated reviewers.

Now that RAR has reached its sixth year of existence, the team hopes to draw on lessons learned to offer seasonal training on matters of review to interested African-based scholars. *Research Africa Reviews* also foresees the possibility of spearheading events that can add substantive values to the academic and non-academic communities. These new steps will allow for exploration of fresh ideas and advancing networking opportunities for its members and others. The team thus takes this occasion to welcome suggestions from our community of readers.

Before this editorial voice concludes, it wishes to emphasize that its team and partners look forward – as it casts its sights into the future - to it growing and expanding its academic footprints. While it hopes to see an increasing number of entries that includes reviews and reports, it too would like to see academic institutions across the continent joining as members and opening their doors where RAR can conduct workshops and related events.

The team would want to see these academic partners partially owning the platform; this may happen through their contributions and inputs and via their relationships with national publishing houses; ones that would help reinforce the quality of African scholarship in and beyond the continent.

As the team starts a new year the Editor-in-Chief is delighted to express sincere thanks to the editorial team for their continued collaboration to make this platform a success; they are:

Research Africa Network **Team:** List of editors and coordinators

- **Wallace Peaslee**, Duke University, (wallace.peaslee@duke.edu), Lead Editor.