

## **Digital Publishing in West Africa: Technology and the Future of the Book**

**Summary of Information for Change 2011, Lagos, Nigeria, 11<sup>th</sup> May 2011**

*Robert Cornford, Communications Manager, Oxfam GB*

Wednesday, 11 May 2011, saw the fifth Information for Change workshop, held in Lagos as part of the 10th Nigeria International Book Fair.

The range of speakers and participants at the workshop demonstrated the range of digital experience and passion in West Africa. Three main speakers, from Cassava Republic Press, from the National Library, and from the Nigerian National Information Technology Development Agency, supported by four case studies, presented a publishing industry on the brink of major digital development, but held back by a mixture of uncertainty and practical constraints. During the workshop, participants were asked to reflect on what works and what doesn't work in the digital publishing sector in Nigeria and the region.

### **What works?**

Amongst the many examples discussed during the workshop, the following stand out:

- Nigeria is no. 1 in Africa for internet usage, with nearly 44 million users or 37.1% of all internet use in Africa.
- Nigeria has the largest number of mobile phone owners in Africa, at 73.1 million, or just under half of the total population and the largest Mobile Network Operator (MNO) in Africa is currently MTN Nigeria.
- The use of social networking (primarily Facebook and Twitter) is increasing rapidly, especially amongst urban and young audiences.
- Effective online payment systems are being introduced and online bookshops are beginning to emerge.
- The local film industry – “Nollywood” – is expanding rapidly and, with it, the supporting digital and communications infrastructure.
- The Nigerian government recognizes the need to develop an enabling infrastructure and consistent legal framework to encourage the development of digital publishing.

### **What doesn't work?**

Overwhelmingly, the “doesn't work” list was headed by “power” – not as in power relations, but as in power cuts and availability of electricity. Without a consistent power supply, it is hard to make the digital revolution happen.

Other answers to this question were unsurprising, with one exception:

- Piracy is a big issue. There is a distrust of digital formats because they are easy to pirate. As well, the legal framework to administer digital publishing (and issues such as piracy) is ineffective.

- The high cost of hardware and software, when compared with costs in Europe or North America.
- E-readers and other digital devices are unaffordable, unavailable, and/or unmaintainable.
- There is currently a lack of widespread broadband and WiFi (although the mobile phone companies are now addressing this problem).
- The digital infrastructure is working, but there is no redundancy or back-up capacity in the system. When the optical cable out of Lagos into the rest of Nigeria was severed a few weeks before the workshop, there was no alternative, and the rest of the country was cut off for many days.
- There is a shortage of trained and skilled professional in digital publishing.
- Various “physical” problems in intra-Africa trade limit the effectiveness of marketing and promotion across borders. This negates the benefits of global reach, which is inherent in the web.

And, finally, the one that surprised me: the issue of quality.

- There was a general concern that digital publishing (or at least digital production and printing) has made it too easy for poor-quality material to be self-published. Many “publishers” in Nigeria are actually printers who take on self-published works, such as memoirs and autobiographies, and the quality of content, design, and production of such work is inevitably quite poor. Although most of this is at present in print, participants could see how the ease of access to digital platforms could worsen this problem.

Establishing and conserving standards and quality is at the centre of a very fierce sense of professional pride amongst publishing and information professionals in Nigeria and, more broadly, West Africa.

## Looking to the future

The workshop was uncertain about the immediate future for digital publishing in West Africa. There is plenty of digital promotion and marketing, including through social media. There is a lively blog universe, and there is a vibrant multimedia and mixed media sector. Publishers in the region have been using digital production and work-flow technology for some years, and some are creating files for digital print-on-demand for global markets.

Taken together, the ingredients for a lively digital publishing sector in the region seem to exist. The question is: how and when will all of these ingredients come together to create a new recipe for digital publishing in West Africa.

Will there be any substantial publishing programs for e-books in Nigeria and beyond in the next few years? No-one at the workshop could say when, but all agreed it would happen, and probably sooner than we think.

## Robert Cornford

Communications Manager, Policy and Practice Communications Team

Oxfam GB

7 July 2011

**Information for Change** is a series of workshops about publishing for development, organized and support by various international NGOs, and sponsored by Oxfam, CTA, and Canada's International Development Research Centre. The workshops provide a platform for all who create, communicate, publish, disseminate, or use information, and are caught up in the changes brought about by the digital revolution. They are intended for a broad spectrum of information professionals, including researchers, authors, print and online publishers, booksellers, librarians and resource centre managers, advocacy organizations, academics, civil servants, policymakers, and those campaigning for social change. For detailed information, visit the website, [www.informationforchange.org](http://www.informationforchange.org).