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Digital media,
literacies and
African literature

In this article, we explore the impact of digital media on African literacy practices and literature. As our starting point, we want to problematise the notion that digital media spell doom for reading generally and for African literature in particular. Versions of this argument include perturbations that 'African readerships are under siege' by 'the cost of books, varying degrees of general literacy, inadequate library services and the seductions of the web and social media' (Ojwang and Titlestad, 2014). The latter are held responsible for the decline in modes of attention attuned to 'older forms of "deep" and refined literature,' in favour of 'visual salience, speed, brevity and the predominance of surface over depth.' In this view, the information flow of new media has rendered the pastime of reading fiction, with its affects and 'stylistic or literary pretensions to beauteous form, […] seem evermore superfluous' (De Kock, 2015).

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Anxiety about technology is nothing new among traditional intellectuals. The Greek philosopher Plato worried that writing would produce forgetfulness – if you can write things down there is no need to remember them – while the English poet Alexander Pope described the invention of printing as a 'scourge for the sins of the learned.' Narratives about literature being shunted aside by other media go back to the advent of visual media such as movies or television, long before the rise of the internet.

Then as now, the view of a present where deep thinking and reading are relegated to the margins of cultural life by new technologies is overstated. Firstly because reading, and especially the reading of high literary forms, has always been an activity for a minority with a particular set of literacy skills, surplus money and the leisure time to pursue it. As US media scholar Kathleen Fitzpatrick notes, narratives of cultural decay have more or less overt ideological motivations. The subtext of recent statements about the decline of a reading culture in the age of digital and social media is usually something like: 'No one reads [anything (I think is) good] anymore' (Fitzpatrick, 2012, p. 42).

It is not that people, including Africans, who are active online do not read, and write, anymore. The digitally connected tend to read and write a lot. It is just that they often read and write short, small size chunks of text: WhatsApp messages, tweets, and Facebook and Instagram posts. The key shift here is that digital media users bypass the divisions between the written, the visual, the oral and the aural. We read and write texts, look at images, play videos and listen to music or speech on the same device, often at the same time. We have created new ways of communicating in

which the written, the visual, the oral and the aural are constantly mixed and remixed. The results are hybrid and complex messages that produce their own discourses, modes of engagement, codes and forms of attention (Frassinelli, 2019, p.16-17; 67-71).

Ng gĩ wa Thiong'o has theorised the implications of this mixing of modes, codes and forms for African literature. In particular, he has highlighted the challenge cyberspace poses to 'aesthetic feudalism:' where, in modern western culture and its colonial outposts, a hierarchy is established between the written and the oral whereby the latter, 'even when viewed as being "more" authentic or closer to the natural, is treated as bondsman to the writing master' (Ng gĩ, 2012).

The multimodal and transmedia forms of expression and communication that we encounter online interrupt the hegemony of writing and open up new possibilities for its hybridisation with the oral:

> The lines between the written and the orally transmitted are being blurred in the age of internet and cyberspace. This has been going on for some years with the writing down of the orally transmitted; the electronic transmissions of the written as spoken through the radio and television; or simply the radio as a medium of speech. But it has surely accelerated with all corners of the globe becoming neighborhoods in cyberspace. Through technology, people can speak in real time face to face. The language of texting and emailing and access to everything including pictures and music in real time is producing a phenomenon that is neither pure speech nor pure writing. The language of cyberspace may borrow the language of orality, twitter, chat rooms, we-have-been-talking when they mean we-have-been-texting, or chatting through writing emails, but it is orality mediated by writing. It is neither one nor the other. It's both. It's cyborality. (Ng gĩ, 2012)

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The first example that comes to mind is the

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internet celebrity status of Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. At the time of writing, in October 2019, Adichie's talk 'The Danger of a Single Story' has hit over twenty million views on ted.com and over five and a half millions on YouTube, with well over one thousand comments for each video, while her TedxEuston talk 'We Should All Be Feminists,' sampled in Beyoncé's 2013 single '***Flawless,' has scored over five and a half million views on YouTube.

Digital media also finds its way into and out of African and diasporic authors' books. Again, the best known example comes from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013, p.418-423), whose main character, Ifemelu, sets up a blog called 'Raceteenth or Various Observations about American Blacks (those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black.' Her anonymous blog postings, typed in a different font from the rest of the text, provide a counterpoint to the unfolding story, in which Ifemelu first migrates to the United States and then comes back to Nigeria, where she starts a new blog, 'The Small Redemptions of Lagos' (Adichie, 2013). The second blog has had a life of its own outside the covers of the book. Between 27 August and 2 November 2014 a series of posts on topics ranging from everyday life in Nigeria, to responses about the representation of Africa in western media were uploaded, as if Ifemelu had written them, at https://americanahblog.com/, where they are still accessible.

The impact of digital media on this body of literature, in fact, goes beyond this description into other uses and references. Contemporary narratives of migration by African authors have articulated the complex relations between the rupture produced by migration, and the role and limits of new communication technologies in bringing separate worlds together. The phrase

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'new-media-driven narratives' has been used to describe how novels such as *Americanah* and NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2013) address 'issues of affect and access, which the influence of expanding virtual networks on social relations is making increasingly visible' (Isaacs, 2016, p. 174). US critic Caren Irr theorises a new subgenre that she labels the 'digital migrant novel' – in which she includes the 'African migration fiction' of Teju Cole's *Open City* (2011), Chris Abani's *Virgin of Flames* (2007) and Dinaw Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears* (2007) – where digital media provide a representational template and spatial sensibility that enable the move 'from the discrete geography of nations to the overlapping and virtual spaces of communication technologies' (Irr, 2014, p. 26).

But digital media are not only the playground of African literary stars who use them as narrative devices or to enhance their visibility. What Shola Adenekan calls 'the internetting' of African literature dates back 'to the mid to late 1990s, when many young African writers, wanting to escape the politics of book publishing, began to publish poetry, short stories, and essays on African listservs, personal blogs and creating writing websites' (Adenekan, 2016, p. 3). Today, 'there are dozens of poetry and creative writing communities online.' They testify both to the possibilities opened up by digital media for hybridising written and oral forms of expression and to their complex imbrication with the offline world:

> ...poetry posted on Facebook may be performed for members of the public in the real space of Lagos and Nairobi, and the recording of those performances may be posted on YouTube and Facebook for consumption by the online public. Young poets such as David Ishaya Osu (Nigeria), Dami Ajayi (Nigeria), and Redscar McOdindo K'Oyuga (Kenya) publish poems almost every week on Facebook, many of which later form part of print collections. These works may also appear as part of a collection of a creative book project. These processes arguably involve reshaping the text for different formats, and through this process the creative piece is unfixed and susceptible to changes. (Adenekan, 2016, p.3)

Digital media have offered a platform for the production, circulation and reception of diverse texts and performances through modes of delivery that make them travel outside of the literary establishment and move away from canonical literary forms.

In June 2019, the number of African online users was 'already larger than in Latin America (448 million) and at current growth rates could eclipse Europe (719 million) as internet penetration on the continent grows.' Still, a note of caution about the scale and reach of these developments is in order. In June 2019, less than 40% of Africa's population used the internet, contrasting with more than 60% of the population in the rest of the world (*Business Insider*, 2019). Although internet penetration and mobile telephony are growing exponentially in Africa, giving many access to digital and social media platforms, the digital divide remains a reality linked to class, age, gender, geographical location and language. The majority of internet sites are only available in English or in other former colonial languages. Smartphones and data are still too expensive for the continent's poor and working class people. In South Africa, for instance, only 32 of over 58 million citizens have internet access, while the cost of data is more expensive than in higher income countries such as Australia (see Mutsvairo and Ragnedda, 2019).

African digital literary networks are largely middle-class and elite spaces. As Adenekan underscores, the 'poets, novelists, critics, and consumers of [African literary] works [that circulate online] are people with the language capability to enjoy them. They can afford fast and reliable internet, are often based in metropolitan centres of Africa, Europe, and America, and some even spend much of their time in these

places.' The listservs Adenekan surveys, such as ConcernedKenyanwriters, Krazitivity, USA-Africa Dialogue and Ederi, do not exceed a few thousand active users (Adenekan, 2016, p. 3).

There is no disputing the digital divide on the African continent, where a minority of people have access to digital technologies – to devices, software, data, effective connection and digital literacy skills (i.e., computer and other proficiencies). Where people only have access to the cheapest type of devices – 'dumb' or 'feature' cell phones – they are more likely to be using them for oral communication than for enjoying the other affordances of digital media. It is not just a matter of access, but of meaningful and effective access, unimpeded by the cost of data and lack of digital literacy.

Even so, despite unequal access to digital technologies, and despite the current constraints on digital connectedness in Africa, digital media can and do play a significant role in promoting reading practices and cultures across the African continent, in a multiplicity of African languages. Examples of this can be found in work promoting children's literacies – critical to developing lifelong readerships – by African Storybook. Now in its fifth year, African Storybook uses traditional and digital publishing processes to create and distribute print and digital materials that support multimodal reading engagement.

The African Storybook initiative 'aims to address the shortage of contextually appropriate books for early reading in the languages of Africa.' Its goal is 'for all young African children to have enough enjoyable books to read in a familiar language to practise their reading skills and learn to love reading'.1 Central to African Storybook is a website that is a repository of openly licensed digital storybooks written by African educators, and available in a multiplicity of languages ranging from Acholi (Uganda), Afaan Oromo and Amharic (Ethiopia), Akwapem Twi and Asante Twi (Ghana), to isiXhosa (South Africa), Yoruba (Nigeria) and Zarma (Niger).

Storybooks are freely available for reading online, and for downloading as PDFs (print-ready or for projection) and EPub files. At the time of writing, a total of 5851 digital storybooks had been published on the website, in 183 languages

– mostly indigenous African languages, but also in English, French and Portuguese. Some of the languages represented previously had little or no reading material published specifically for children. The total number of storybooks available on the website consists of those classified as original, plus the number of translated or adapted versions of the original storybooks.

There are two main categories of original storybooks on the African Storybook website: those that are created and published by independent users of the website, and those that are created and published with African Storybook resources (which have gone through a basic editorial process and are illustrated by artists commissioned by African Storybook). Publishing tools for making storybooks are available both on the website and offline, and in a storybook maker app. While the quality of independently-produced materials may vary, this represents an important shift from publishing being the preserve of expert professional publishers to publishing being accessible to anyone with a computer and access to online publishing tools (and the ability to use them).

The story manuscripts illustrated and published by African Storybook have been developed and written mostly in workshops with teachers, librarians and education students in Uganda, Kenya, South Africa, Lesotho, Ethiopia, Ghana, Nigeria and Rwanda. In other words, the majority of storybooks are authored by African educators who create the storybooks for their particular contexts of use. Contributors of stories are asked to write in their preferred language, and to submit two final texts – the story in an indigenous African language and another version usually in English (either the writer or someone else translates as necessary). The English storybooks are seen as the 'seed texts,' which can be accessed and translated or adapted by translators with proficiency in that language. This means that one illustrated storybook in one language can potentially be used by many different readers because it is possible to replace the written text on the digital pages and publish new translations and adaptations of any storybook. This can be achieved with the website publishing tools by any registered user.

The economy of scale in (re)publishing storybooks on the African Storybook website is enabled by the open license publishing model. All storybooks are

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1   See www.africanstorybook.org. African Storybook is an initiative of Saide, https://www. saide.org.za.

A very tall man

published under a Creative Commons CC BY license, which means that anyone is 'free to download, copy translate or adapt this story and use the illustrations,' as long as they include the attribution on the back of the storybooks they produce. Thus, the core collection of approximately 400 original illustrated picture storybooks published by the African Storybook initiative is available to anyone to translate or adapt online or offline and then upload in any language that has a written form (and, ideally, that has a keyboard).

For example, a storybook written by Cornelius Wambi Gulere in Lusoga and English, 'Omusaadha Omuleeyi Einho' – 'A Very Tall Man,' has been translated into over 45 African languages, as well as into multiple non-African languages (via Global Storybooks). This storybook – and others with similar high numbers of translations and adaptions – is a good example of the affordances of open license digital publishing for multilingual cultural production.[2]

We are reminded here of another digital publishing project by *Jalada Africa*, an online journal out of Nairobi that published a short story originally written in an African language and subsequently translated into 30 other African languages. Titled 'Ituĩka Rĩa Mᵣngarᵣ: Kana Kĩrĩa Gĩtᵣmaga And Mathiĩ Marᵣngiĩ,' and authored by Ngᵤgĩ wa Thiong'o, the story was published in March 2016 in Gĩkᵤyᵤ and translated into English as 'The Upright Revolution: Or why Humans Walk Upright.' According to Mᵤkoma wa Ngᵤgĩ, this is 'the most translated African language story' and the translation initiative is an important contribution to 'decolonization' (Mutsvairo and Ragnedda, 2019, p. 13-26).

The examples of 'internetting' of African literature, as well as of African Storybook and the *Jalada Africa*'s translation initiative illustrate some of the possibilities at the interface of digital media, literacy, literature, storytelling and African cultural production. They also underscore the complexity of theorising reading practices and creative expression in contexts where linguistic diversity and plurality are the norm, thereby inviting us to question what, in African contexts, constitutes the value of constructs such as 'literacy,' 'literature' and even 'language.' ∎

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2   For a link to 'Omusaadha Omuleeyi Einho' – 'A very Tall Man,' see www. africanstorybook.org/reader.php?id=918&d=0&a=1. Global Storybooks (https://globalstorybooks.net/) and Storyweaver (https://storyweaver.org.in) also offer open license storybooks in multiple languages