

Keynote Speech: Technology and the Future of the Book

Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, Co-founder, Cassava Republic Press

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Thank you for the invitation. I'm both honoured and humbled to be the keynote speaker for this important and timely event.

Despite some of the challenges of publishing on this continent, I am inspired by the power of publishing to perennially question and change the configuration and facilitate critical thought. I'm continually excited about what we publishers have achieved and provoked by what is still possible. It only takes a moment's reflection to see that some of the most important social transformations in global history have been empowered via publishing, whether it's the printed version of the King James Bible or the Communist Manifesto. Books, or rather, what lies inside them, have been so deeply interwoven into the fabric of social change that we sometimes forget how significant they are. Publishing is one of the key ways in which socio-cultural narratives are transmitted from generation to generation. It is also often the way in which those socio-cultural narratives can be reworked or disrupted. Books have historically been a significant part of the democratic process, impacting information and knowledge, turning subjects into citizens, and reshaping the status quo into a set of questions in search of an answer.

In the wake of political upheaval in North Africa, Africans across the continent are more conscious than ever of the possibility of social change. Most recently, Ugandans have been in revolt against the longstanding dictatorship of Museveni, which was described to me a few days ago as "Mugabe-lite with a dash of Syria mixed in". Here in Nigeria, there are 100 million people under the age of 30 – more than the combined population of Libya, Egypt and Tunisia. Again, there are 75 million Nigerians under the age of 20. Every year, 800,000 Nigerians pass their JAMB but do not get into university because there is no space for them. Those that do get to university almost universally suffer a grossly substandard tertiary education. It is the continual refrain of employers that new graduates are increasingly unemployable; they have no transferrable skills, they are not able to write, they have no knowledge of Nigerian history and apparently no curiosity for the world and with a poor attitude to work. In my experience, it is common for recruitment drives in the private sector to attract tens of thousands of applicants, with only a handful who are deemed potential candidates.

There is therefore a need for a revolution in the education sector, both in Nigeria and across the continent. There's a huge need for content and information to be served to students who lack access to good quality teachers and teaching materials. Technology would seem to provide a potential answer. There are several submarine cables that now connect west, east and southern Africa to the global internet infrastructure. Millions of Africans are now going online, discovering Google, Wikipedia and social media. There are an estimated 40 million active internet users in Nigeria,

making it the largest internet population on the continent. Again, there are an estimated one million Blackberries in use in Nigeria and 5 million Nigerians on Facebook.

However, the cut to the main cable from Lagos to the rest of the country a few days ago put most of the country out of bandwidth and shows how precarious the internet infrastructure can still be. The question remains as to whether technology-enabled solutions can significantly address the yawning knowledge-gap. While technology can revolutionise the practice of citizenship (as we saw to a limited extent in the recent elections in Nigeria) and lead to a demand for full participation/awareness of rights, we have to be careful not to turn to technology into a form of fetish, or a set of magic bullets that can cut through sedimented practice and outmoded ways of being.

Sometimes, I wonder if we are not experiencing too much information. From a Western perspective, apart from the information overload of the Internet, too many books are being published that will only ever be consumed by a handful of people. According to a report in the Daily Mail, 59,000 of the 86,000 new titles published in the UK in 2009 sold an average of 18 copies and more than 90 per cent of editions sell fewer than 3,500 copies. It's not as if the increasing amount of information available in the world is broadening tastes and leading to an increased eclecticism or appreciation of difference. It is still dominated by Western myth-makers or those that has been authorized by the West. Recent studies in social media consumption often show that far from widening users grasp of the world and social connections across difference, social media simply confirms prejudices and boundaries that exist in the world, whether they are based on race, class, gender, language, geography or ethnicity.

Here on the continent, for all the excitable talk of an emerging African middle class, the reality is that the majority of Africans are still not online and if anything at all, "Amazon" remains a large river in South America. E-commerce (and e-books) are a middle-distance dream. The need for printed books will remain the key issue for years to come as the rising consumer class expands. Unlike the West where there is a glut in book and knowledge production, we simply don't have enough books providing quality information about our society today and in the distant past. In contrast to their Western and Asian counterparts, many African children grow up without ever having seen, let alone owned, beautiful, well-illustrated books which inspire them to a life of reading, beauty, learning and curiosity for the world. With a youthful population, there is a pressing need to produce more content that will invite children to dream, to question, to imagine, to look to the past with a view to understanding the present and provoking the future. There are simply not enough publishers on this continent catering for the kind of varied tastes required to transform this continent. We need not only literary fiction or educational books, but books ranging from romance, fantasy fiction, crime fiction, creative non-fiction to history books.

It is often said that the problem in Nigeria (and elsewhere on the continent) is a problem of leadership. I've often felt that to be a somewhat simplistic response. Clearly, the problem is also a problem of followership. Citizens are insufficiently aware of their constitutional rights, their capacity to make demands on their leaders as well as the option to interrogate their leaders' decisions and their own choices. It is almost as though people are just allowing existence

to pass them by so that they can later outsource the task or responsibility to an external figure – religion, political leaders etc. It is as if we have forgotten how different things were in the past and we have no knowledge of different times and places and we are perpetually stuck in the present. Publishing is a powerful way to intervene here. Books are an excellent way to provide the resources to imagine that a different future is possible. Books can change minds and prompt fundamental social questions. This is why writers across time and space have often come under criticism and faced imprisonment.

As a publisher on the continent, it is the best of times and also the worst of times. It is the best of times because first of all we have a youthful population that must be educated and must read and become better informed about where we have been and where we should be going. These youths will require both educational materials as well as other reading materials that will fire their imagination as well as provide a form of escapism. As we can see from the popularity of Nollywood films, there is a huge desire to escape from the daily grind of existence and deep existential uncertainty. We need to develop more escapist and fantasy literature than we have produced in the past. Popular fiction is the mainstay of fiction publishing elsewhere in the world; it is a huge gap in the market here and an opportunity to wean Nigerians off James Hadley Chase and Danielle Steele and towards similar local stories. Escapist popular fiction offers a reprieve and a retreat from life, all the better to return to the world anew – bringing with it the cultural confidence that comes from seeing yourself represented.

Secondly, there's a huge opportunity to produce children's books, which are so crucial in terms of children's relationship to ideas and myth-making. Children's books are a powerful way to create revolutions in thought. In one of our children's books, we have a story which features a female mechanic and a male nurse. This confounds expectations in a place like Nigeria, but at the same time, lays the seeds of possibility for rethinking gender relations and opportunities for women in the minds of girls and boys. Again, in another of our children's books, we feature a physically challenged child, giving representation to the unrepresented in society and showing children that difference is not to be feared or shunned but to be embraced as part of their variegated world.

As publishers, we must get better at tapping into the oral culture which structures society in Nigeria and elsewhere on the continent. While there may sometimes be a lack of enthusiasm for reading, there is never anything other than joy in the all too human practice of telling and listening to stories. We need to find a way to marry text with voice to bring back the power of storytelling. Digital technology allows us to do so and we must embrace it fully even if Internet infrastructure remains a challenge.

Again, more people are getting educated, even if inadequately, and there's a real hunger for learning or at the very least to be literate. Even the house-help wants to learn to read and write because she knows that she has to be able to send text messages to her friend because it is cheaper than using voice calls. The motor mechanic wants to be able to ask if he can join you on Facebook. Again, this requires a certain level of literacy. Many disenfranchised youth (the so-called 'almajiris') in northern Nigeria dream of reading; some constitute part of the people that buy the Hausa

market literature – only that they have to get others to read it to them. We shouldn't forget that far more fiction books are bought and read in Hausa than in English, with romance stories sometimes selling in the hundreds of thousands. In addition, as a result of the youthful demographic, more and more young people are technologically savvy and are quickly soaking up the latest tech that comes along. Many young Nigerians are writers of open source code, even if they do not yet write other forms of story. However, the technology is still not sophisticated enough to allow for serious data mining and, as I have said, e-commerce has yet to kick-off. But e-commerce *will* become a mass-market phenomenon in time here, as it did nearly ten years ago in the West, and publishers or producers of content have to be ready for the platforms that will become available. Finally, the increasing status of celebrity Nigerian authors such as Teju Cole, Chika Unigwe, Helon Habila, Chimamanda Adichie etc. and alongside media attention and publicity for companies such as Cassava Republic through our book parties is encouraging more people to think about writing and open up a new Word document. With careful nurturing and direction, this will help to develop the next generation of content producers.

However, being an African publisher is also the worst of times because first of all, there's economic recession globally and people are not necessarily thinking about books, at least not literary fiction. Attention is often turned to other, more immediate forms of entertainment. However, I see this as an opportunity. Rather than just produce content in book format, we should be thinking how of how to produce content from a hybrid, multi-platform perspective, drawing upon the different talents in the culture industry. Although there are now many different devices (Kindle, the Sony Reader, the Nook, tablets such as the iPad etc.) which provide a variety of platforms for accessing and buying books, many of these are a long way from the lived realities of Africans. At the moment, it is more feasible to consider accessing content through mobile handsets. The increasing use of smart phones such as Blackberries and their equivalents that enable access to the Internet and data will be the key opportunity for years to come. So we have to explore different strategies simultaneously to produce content for the different markets/classes to access using the most appropriate platform for that market segment. Sometimes it will be in the traditional book form, other times through audio books that can be downloaded on mobile phones or read as ebooks, or narrated on radios. We however have to be careful that our strategies do not fall into the hands of pirates or the value of the content is not diminished in the process of digitisation. With so much free information on the internet, it is necessary to communicate to consumers that developers/producers of content must be adequately remunerated because the production of ideas, knowledge, entertainment, creativity takes time and resources. We cannot assume that because content has become digitised that the cost necessarily must be reduced. Someone still has to pay for the cost of the content of which printing typically only takes up between 15 -25% of the total cost of a book. When content is transferred from a physical book to other platforms such as mobile content, audio forms, radio plays, gaming etc, all the participants must still be compensated. Migrating to a multi-platform form of production incurs additional cost.

So rather than thinking of books as merely something on the printed page, in the age of the digital and social media, we should be thinking of stories as a site for certain form of sociality and congregation, where readers and authors and other content producers come together to produce a content or discuss the content that has been produced and taking it to a different direction. Digital publishing therefore should not just be about platforms and e-devices, but

about the opportunity to create a social space gathered around certain stories and forms of narrative. On this continent of fantastical storytellers, this becomes a vital opportunity for communal participation. Imagine a book set in Nairobi, and a reader reads it and decides that they want to inflect that story with a Lagos sensibility. Imagine inviting readers to retell the ending of *Things Fall Apart* or what would have happened if Okonkwo had a sister, what would she have done? In this way, writers and readers are engaged in a highly collaborative mode.

Through technology, publishers can increasingly deliver rich content using a variety of media. We can talk also about ebooks and the possibility in terms of sales and better access etc. However, I am skeptical about the immediate opportunities here in Africa. Nonetheless, digital allows us to challenge the notion of the narcissistic authorial voice or the cult of the 'genius' that is at the heart of book production with its obsession over the individual celebrated author which masks the collective efforts that is involved in any act of creation. However, with digitalisation and socialising media, especially where online text, art, music, film are combined, a dynamic and collaborative way of creation and learning becomes available. In societies like ours where we have mis-educated and under-educated individuals whom we allow to transmit their own mis-education to future generations, interactively produced and inherently participative content can reduce that and offer teachers and learners a new way of learning and ultimately enable a re-discovery of the joy of the 'book'. There is much work to be done.

Thank you.