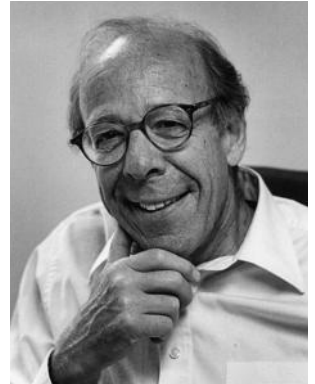


A Real Cultural Revolution

By Per I. Gedin

In the evolution of electronics, particularly the new technique of digital printing, Per Gedin sees a process that 'will change the face of publishing in every country' and whose advent means that 'African countries can make a great leap forward, catching up on several decades'. Arguing that the new techniques seem almost to have been invented for book production in developing countries, since they obviate the need for long print-runs, warehouses and transportation, he calls on the African Publishers' Network (APNET) to undertake a study of these techniques as a matter of priority and to investigate their full potential for the development of indigenous publishing.

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Introduction

When the first Arusha seminar was given the title, 'Developing Autonomous Publishing Capacity in Africa', these were not intended just to be fine-sounding words; we wanted real results too. It was not to be simply another seminar ending in lofty promises and nothing else, but to have a clear and identifiable outcome.

Twelve years later, we can evaluate what has happened. The Loan Guarantee Programme has been launched, probably the first of its kind in the developing world. In Kenya over a dozen indigenous publishers have been involved. A few have fallen out, but the majority have used the possibilities offered and done remarkably well.

As we assumed at the time, there was no lack of publishing capability—on the contrary. During these years publishing companies have been built and grown with a professionalism and vitality that is most impressive. The main problem was finance. There was, though, from the beginning, complete agreement between the publishers involved and those setting up the scheme that necessary funds should be provided as loans on a commercial basis with

market interest rates and not provided as grants by donor countries—which was the usual pattern.

The necessity of indigenous publishing is obvious. As the organisers of the first Arusha seminar emphasised, the publishing industry is ‘the backbone of a nation’s literacy, educational and literary programmes’. Since then indigenous publishing, from being hardly acknowledged at all, has become a focal point of interest in various ways and has been much strengthened. The infrastructure it has developed is impressive: there is the African Publishers’ Network (APNET), which links national publishers’ associations and has raised the industry’s profile on the continent generally; there is the African Publishing Institute (API) for professional training and there is ABC, the African Books Collective, for distribution worldwide. Nothing of this was in existence when we met at Arusha the first time.

So far so good. It is also important, though, to look at what has *not* been achieved.

Finance

The financing of indigenous publishing is still weak. With one or two exceptions African publishers can hardly put up any resistance when the transnational publishers decide to compete. To build a strong financial base is one of the most important requirements for the future. It is adamant that the owners should not extricate any monies from the company. In principle, all profits should be reinvested.

Another very interesting possibility, which Walter Bgoya has brought up, is joint ventures. Professional knowledge of the local scene can be joined with financing from the outside. This could become a short cut to the consolidation of a company.

Marketing and distribution

I will not go into detail on the issue of marketing and distribution. However, I feel that Henry Chakava is absolutely right in saying in his article: ‘Most African publishers assume that their work has been completed when they take delivery of their books from the printer.’ It is quite possible to delete the word ‘African’ to make this statement even more accurate. Far too many publishers all over the world forget that they must also sell their books.

For the word ‘marketing’ we could substitute ‘information’, which is immediately less expensive. Publishers are convinced that everyone knows what they are publishing. This is not the case. It is not usually a matter of money to inform—cheap leaflets, free copies etc. do a lot—it is a matter of awareness. Publishers must also be aware that covers and typography are part of

the marketing process. Once books are in the market place they should be looked upon as any commercial commodity. It is obvious, as with other products, that an attractively packaged item is easier to sell. And good design is not more expensive than bad design.

Sales to retailers or directly to customers is another crucial area. Most publishers are too small to have a sales force of their own. I have in vain tried to convince publishers in Nairobi that they should cooperate through a joint sales force. The fear of competition is—unwisely—greater than seeing the rationale in cooperation. This is a system that works extremely well in Europe and the US. Sales people do not care which publisher has produced a book, they only care if it is easy to sell. There are two possibilities—either that one of the bigger publishers invites some of his colleagues to share his sales force, and is thus able to reduce its costs or to increase its size, or that an independent sales force is set up, working on behalf of a number of small publishers.

Distribution, another important link in the marketing chain, poses severe problems for small publishers, especially new ones. Efficient contact with customers—retail, export, single buyers etc.—is crucial for success. An independent distributor is usually very powerful. He can decide discounts, thus favouring some publishers over others, and even refuse to represent publishers. Here, too, there is an interesting possibility for several publishers to start a joint distribution centre—and still better to link it with an independent sales force promoting the books published by the same publishers involved in this as well as selling for other publishers.

Fiction and general books

The publishing of fiction and general books has not developed in the way we hoped. Our idea was that indigenous publishers would attract fiction writers and also create a market for these books. Obviously text books and, to a lesser degree, children's books, are the core of the market and, of course, the market for indigenous fiction is—comparatively—small and risky; on the other hand it is, as we know, possible to sell tens of thousand, even hundreds of thousand copies of a few books in a country like Kenya.

I am aware that you cannot command good fiction to appear; but it is possible to encourage people to write. I would suggest that someone arranges a novel-writing competition in order to test the possibilities. It would surprise me if unknown talent did not emerge. A competition is also in itself a very good marketing proposition.

Publishing and the new technology

During the twelve years since the first Arusha seminar, then, many interesting developments have taken place in African publishing. At the same time, a real revolution has emerged at the global level—the electronic revolution.

The evolution of electronics is right now changing the future of publishing in a most intriguing way. After several hundred years during which methods and processes changed little, conventional publishing and, even more so, book production are changing radically and will soon be entirely different. I am not talking about the CD-Rom record. This will affect only a small part of the publishing industry, involving encyclopaedias, some popular children's books, etc. It will not affect traditional books any more than videos or ordinary CDs have done.

What is interesting in our context is the new digital technique being used for book production. Already today a number of publishers have all their new books on diskettes, and that is the *whole* book including colour illustrations and cover. This diskette will in the near future be used for electronic printing, also called Computer-To-Plate (CTP), or for a technique that does not even use plates or film—digital printing.

If the CTP technique is used, the book is sent on-line by computer to a digital printing press. There an 'image-setter' produces printing plates directly from the computer and the book is printed on a conventional press. This is a technique already used in England and America for bestsellers. Instead of thousands of books having to be transported all over the country, *the books are produced where they are sold*.

Digital printing is a process where you can print directly on paper without using plates or film. Again you can use a diskette, which will have gone first from author to editor—the manuscript's journey from author to publisher to 'printing computer' may all take place on-line. This brings the printing cost as well as the production time down considerably. You do not need any typesetting, film, plates etc. Nor do you need a long print run to bring the cost per copy down. It will virtually be the same unit cost if you order one copy or a thousand. This method is nothing else than the way you use your laser writer with your personal computer. It should, though, be noted that a good design must always be used. Many editors are already trained also in basic knowledge of typography.

This technique, also called 'Printing-on-Demand', can produce finished books at any place where a digital print plant is installed. These can be small presses, similar to copying machines with a binding facility attached. You

send the book electronically through a computer and print at the place where the books are needed. Small printing presses for 'Print-on-Demand' (a mixture between an offset press and a copying machine) will in the future be set up all over each country. There is a possibility that they will even be in the bigger book shops, so that the book you ask for is produced while you have a cup of coffee. The immediate future in the US—only a couple of years away—is that there will be presses in some two hundred cities, that can produce books in as small a quantity as you desire within 24 hours or even less.

This will change the face of publishing in every country. It will take care of your inventory; after the initial publication you don't have to stock the actual books, you only stock diskettes. You don't have to print high editions to reduce your cost per copy; you print as many copies as you have orders for and you reprint the number that are re-ordered—and you print them in the region where the books are needed. Finally, you may not even need a wholesaler if the book shop orders books directly from the publisher's data base.

This has an enormous impact not only on the publishing industry but on the educational and cultural scene. In theory, and quite soon in practice, every book that ever has been in print can be scanned in on a diskette and can for a reasonable cost be ordered anywhere in the world in as small a number of copies as you wish. For the publishing industry itself there are enormous sums to be saved, which are now squandered on overprinting (resulting in unsold stock) and transportation.

Of course, this revolution also affects African publishing. I would almost say that digital printing is a technique that seems to have been invented specifically for book production in developing countries. Its advent means that African countries can make a great leap forward, catching up on several decades. In countries with an underdeveloped infrastructure both in transportation and publishing there may be no need to build distribution centres, or to arrange road transportation. Instead, books can be sent on-line from east to west and vice versa. As someone put it: 'Today you print and then distribute. Tomorrow you will distribute and then print.'

Books can be ordered not from a distribution centre but on Internet and will be produced close to the customer. The financial burden of building up stock will be eased or even disappear. Marketing can also be undertaken by means of the Internet, which allows the information to reach people everywhere. (I am, of course, aware that 'everyone' does not have access to Internet today. But it will soon be as common as the telephone.)

This technique applies for all sorts of books where you want a rather small print run and a quick, small, new edition: children's books, academic texts, fiction and most elementary school books. In Europe practically all books and covers and blurbs are now delivered to the publisher on diskettes. If you have access to a computer you can do the same in African countries.

Like all revolutions—development can be faster than anyone believes. The machines are already here. Rank Xerox has one called Xerox Docutech 135 and there is a competitor called Océ 9245. These printers can be combined with a binding machine, a Horizon Glue Binder. It is possible to instal equipment of this kind immediately. It is not usually bought, but leased on a three-year basis. The technical development is so fast that these machines will get better and less expensive in a short time. If there is anything I would recommend donors to do to support African publishing, it is to fund the lease of these machines.

Costs are going down fast. Already now you can print and bind an edition of 500 copies of a book of 120 pages for USD 2.50 if it is on a diskette. It takes about five minutes for every copy to be printed and another couple of minutes to be bound.

Very soon every country—industrialised or not—can be a partner in this true globalisation of the world. Let me quote one of the gurus of digital development, Nicholas Negroponte, as he writes on the digital future of the world in the last chapter, entitled 'An Age of Optimism', in his book *Being Digital* (you can change 'India' to 'Africa' and 'Madras' to 'Nairobi'):

The radical transformation ... will happen just about the same time the 2-billion-strong labour force of India and China starts to come on-line (literally). A self-employed software designer in Peoria will be competing with his or her counterpart in Pohang. A digital typographer in Madrid will do the same with one in Madras ... As the business world globalizes and the Internet grows, we will start to see a seamless digital workplace.

The digital world is developing so fast that these 'prophetic' words from 1995 have already come true in 1997. To give a simple example—in Nairobi alone 3,000 people have access to the net, and make more than 10,000 daily visits. If books were on the net, these 3,000 visitors could already read them there. The same books could be printed 'on demand' wherever a suitable printing machine is placed. Publishers should make computers available to their authors, so that they can get the manuscripts on diskettes. Why not a computer room in publishing offices?

There is no doubt that the world of books—or rather the world of the written word—will be in the forefront in this development. Here Africa has an equal opportunity to take part, and very much so in publishing and bookselling.

Paradise is, as we know, though, not without the snake. This truly international system gives everyone in the world a possibility to compete. Transnational publishers can be very fast in using the new technique to conquer new markets. On the other hand, the specific knowledge of the indigenous publisher becomes even more valuable. The best books are still those produced locally, by local writers and local publishers who know their markets. Here, too, the idea of joint ventures may fit in. The main thing is that African publishers should be aware of the new possibilities ahead. I would urge that APNET immediately make a study of this new technique which, in fact, only was invented a couple of years ago, in 1993.

This is a unique possibility for African publishing to be in the forefront of developments, to continue to build a strong indigenous industry using a technique that in a wonderful way can be adapted to the specific situation of each country.

And don't let us forget the ultimate ends: to make the culture of books and reading available to everyone.

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In the technical revolution the latest news are old already when being put on paper. When I gave this speech originally at Arusha II in March 1996, the comments from most participants were that this is not for Africa; if this technique ever comes to us it will be in an unforeseeable future, etc.

When the same issues were discussed at Arusha III in February 1998, Print-on-Demand was not only well known—Walter Bgoya could proudly show the first book produced in this technique. The disk with the manuscript arrived in Oxford on a Monday—on Friday the same week there were finished books of high quality.

Now, the first Docutech printers are arriving in Africa and in a few years they will be common in most cities. There will be no need any more to send disks to Europe.