Rapporteur Notes: "Database as Book" Event

Date: November 28, 2024
Time: 9:00 AM - 2:30 PM
Location: British Institute of Eastern Africa (BIEA), Kileleshwa, Kenya
Rapporteur: Angela Okune

Opening Remarks

Wambui Wamunyu

- Framed the project as an exploration of what a "book" could mean in the context of evolving knowledge production and distribution systems.
- Highlighted the project's experimental nature, positioning it as both a question and a reflection of the participants' identities.
- Urged participants to reimagine the relationship between knowledge, form, and accessibility.

Presentations and Discussions

Francois (Book Publisher)

- Advocated for all books to be open access, ensuring availability in as many formats and repositories as possible.
- Acknowledged that current systems make books more accessible in the U.S. than in Kenya and other parts of Africa, a disparity that needs addressing.
- Emphasized the importance of books as spaces for comprehensive idea development, compared to the restrictive formats of journal articles.
- Critiqued the "black box" nature of academic publishing, where scholars are both the content producers and consumers yet remain excluded from decision-making processes.
- Advocated for a mixed financial model where some authors pay for publication while others do not, ensuring broader inclusivity.
- Proposed rethinking peer review to focus on the process and engagement rather than solely on the output.
- Discussed experimenting with open peer review formats while ensuring rigorous academic standards.

Leo (AI and Representation)

- Explored how AI technologies like ChatGPT and Google Gemini shape societal narratives, citing local examples: During the 2023 maandamano protests, developers used AI to make information about the finance bill accessible, demonstrating AI's potential for civic engagement.
- However, noted challenges in ensuring AI-generated representations align with diverse African realities and aspirations.

- Called for the inclusion of diverse stakeholders in shaping AI systems to reflect and support decolonial knowledge practices.
- Suggested examining licensing frameworks and ethical guidelines to protect African contexts from exploitation.

Syokau (Nairobi as a Site of Resistance)

- Discussed Eastlands as a hub of resistance, where marginalized communities built spaces of belonging against exclusionary narratives.
- Traced the evolution of Sheng during the Moi era as a subversive language reflecting alternative identity narratives.
- Highlighted the 2022 MaVulture campaign, where graffiti artists critiqued corruption through public murals.
- Reflected on the shift from collective activism to individual recognition, questioning why contemporary movements often elevate singular faces over collective voices.

Aurelia (Postgraduate Education)

- Critiqued the metaphor of a "pipeline" in postgraduate education, which frames knowledge production as linear and mechanistic.
- Called for rethinking educational models to emphasize inclusivity, creativity, and broader societal impact.

Angela (Knowledge Infrastructure)

- Noting the under-representation of Africans in global Science systems, asked what follows from an imperative focused only on greater inclusion of individuals into an existing system?
- Solutions framed around representation alone misses questions around what knowledge is and isn't captured and included as knowledge that "counts" as valid science. We need an infrastructural analysis of who owns the scholarly infrastructure we use to circulate and share our work.
- Study of DOI as a case of extroverted science infrastructure.

Wambui (Knowledge Ecosystems in Kenya)

- Explored gaps between ideal knowledge ecosystems and the realities exposed during the 2023 maandamano protests.
- Analyzed legal and policy documents in contrast with citizen-driven narratives shared on social media platforms.
- Highlighted the marginalization of indigenous languages and informal knowledge, critiquing the privileging of academic and Western-centric paradigms.
- Advocated for greater openness, interdisciplinary collaboration, and equitable knowledge-sharing practices.

Synthesis of Discussions

Key Insights:

- **Knowledge as Agency and Power:**
    - Participants agreed that knowledge instills confidence and can be a revolutionary act, enabling societal change.
- **Decolonial Knowledge Practices:**
    - Emphasis on reclaiming excluded forms of knowledge while preventing exploitation.
    - Suggested merging contemporary art and traditional artifacts to create dynamic knowledge repositories.
- **Infrastructure Challenges:**
    - Kenya's fragmented digital records and siloed knowledge systems were identified as major barriers to accessibility and connectedness.

Critical Questions Raised:

1. How can academic peer review processes be restructured to accommodate diverse forms of knowledge?
2. What is the role of intentionality in knowledge creation and dissemination?
3. How can/should local knowledge be preserved and integrated into global discourses?

Feedback from Participants:

- An elder scholar noted: "it's rare to have a room with various PhDs where everyone is not insisting you call them "Dr" so and so or "Professor" such and such.
    - Highlights the peer and lateral culture hosts were trying to cultivate was felt and noticed.
- Angela received a whatsapp from a participant who said: "Very interesting. Though I am struggling a bit with how all your projects connect together."

Observational Notes by Francois van Schalkwyk, African Minds

- Members = individuals who constitute the RDS Collective
- The collective = the collection of members, the RDS collective
- The contributors = individuals invited to contribute to the RDS experimental book

Arrival and registration

As contributors arrived and had completed registration, they were invited to take part in an exercise that involved matching quotations by African scholars with publication titles; some participants had quotations, others had the titles printed on pieces of paper. The exercise worked relatively well in connecting the contributors with one another, and also with the collective. Some contributors were a bit lost because they matched early but the exercise still encouraged contributors to connect. There was no closure to the exercise and while this didn't impact the rest of the days' proceedings, it did feel like a missing piece.

Welcoming and introductions

Contributors and the collective were seated in a semi-circle. 18 souls in total.

Wambui addressed the gathering from a lectern: Very clear communication about the personal rights of the contributors; reference was made to their participation being voluntary, their right to make anonymous contributions, to withdraw, and to change their minds.

Wambui initiated an ice-breaker by asking everyone to introduce themselves, state their affiliation and to answer the question: What does knowledge smell or taste like? The question got contributors to think – they were piqued by the question. Responses of knowledge as tasting or smelling like water were prominent (ocean, sweat, rain, waterfall, mud), as was food (chili, biryani) flowers (roses, gardens), and very visceral associations (blood, shit, sweat). Another theme that emerged was the ambivalence associated with knowledge – specifically, the pleasure and pain associated with knowledge.

The ice-breaker was followed by an introduction to the RDS project by Wambui who provided background to the project to inform contributors in the room and to acknowledge their contributions. Contributors were invited to add any thoughts or comments to post-it notes and to place them in a designated space – a glass screen referred to as the "parking lot".

African Minds was introduced by Wambui, and Francois spoke from his chair about the publisher to the gathering, including its hybrid open access model, approach to peer review and willingness to learn from participating in the project.

Each member of the collective then presented their "chapters" that would be included in the experimental book. No time was allowed for Q&A; follow-up discussions between members and contributors were deferred to lunch-time when contributors would have time to approach the members about their presentations.

Tea break

Three cohesive tables formed informally during the tea-break. The discussions around the tables were lively and appeared to be connected to the morning session. Members and contributors mixed at the tables and there were no signs of exclusion or "lost souls".

World Café

Setting: 2 circles of chairs occupied by 6 contributors plus 1 member. Observation of both groups were done simultaneously with the intent to observe levels of engagement, participation, liveliness; and whether anyone seemed disengaged. Contributors were asked to discuss three questions with the two groups reforming after each session (with the exception of a reporting 'anchor').

Harvesting and weaving

Leo presented the concept of databases and how the artefacts relate to databases and the relations between 'things' (whether data or artefacts).

Some contributors moved to the board to write on and/or connect (weave) existing post-it notes from the parking lot. Notes with similar themes or concepts were connected by the contributors using coloured wool/yarn. Others sat in small groups rather than approaching the wall. Others checked their phones. As time progressed, more contributors moved to the wall. Contributors spent about 5-10 minutes at the wall. Most contributors worked individually. Some added new post-it notes. There was no participation in the activity by 4 contributors.

Once the harvesting and connecting was completed, contributors were invited to make comments. Four contributors and one member made use of the opportunity to make comments and reflect.

Angela presented PECE as a publishing platform. She described how contributors could participate after the workshop – including four possible contribution types which were then distributed to the contributors on pieces of paper for them to indicate how and whether they would like to participate in future activities. There was mixed engagement on the part of contributors during the closing session.

Lunch

Almost all contributors stayed for the lunch and discussions continued over the lunch "session".

The space

The space was a good size to provide enough space for the participants to gather in the larger plenary semicircle of chairs and in the format of the two circles for the World Café. But the space was not too large for the space to feel unoccupied or empty. The addition of fabric hung in the meeting space and music played during breaks helped to create a welcoming space which contributed to a more welcoming and informal atmosphere.

–End of observation–