

Information integrity in Africa: Exploring information corruption issues

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This chapter examines information integrity, with the premise that sound, dependable information enhances the values of the entire society. Several issues about information integrity of great concern to Africa are access to information; the right of individuals to correct records that are erroneous; accurate and culturally appropriate translations; and the standard of freedom of the press. The basis for this chapter is human rights doctrine largely embodied in the ethical principles of the international informatics community.

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Introduction

As our world becomes more interconnected, especially through computers and cellphones, we theoretically should have more accurate information spread to a larger population. A person selling goats in remote farming country needs to know the market price of her animals, or she will be swindled by a local go-between. The remote vendor needs the facts, and modern technology can help her get them (Friedman, 2007). However, a miscommunication could cost her money. In the same spirit, a person suffering from HIV/AIDS could be saved or killed, depending on the integrity of the information received.

The price of a goat or the best treatment for HIV/AIDS is part of the information lifecycle, the functions through which information is handled. The stages are acquiring, processing, storing, disseminating, and using information (Mason et al., 1995:7). What is crystal clear is that we cannot talk about any of the later parts of the lifecycle without the “acquiring” step, and we focus here on that aspect, examining the potholes in the road of progress – the nefarious developments that could corrupt peaceful progress as the Internet spreads across Africa, a continent of over a thousand languages that will be further transformed by an information revolution.

What is information integrity without first having access? The problem is neatly summarised in the story of a motion picture, the 2004 film *Moolaadé*, by the Senegalese director Ousmane Sembène. Its theme is female circumcision. In the film, the husbands confiscate their wives’ radios, real radios still turned on and emitting songs and commentary, and burn them in front of the mosque. What the director says about his film is at the heart of information integrity issues in Africa (College Street Journal, 2005):

As far as I am concerned, politically speaking, cinema allows me to show my people their predicaments so they take responsibility [...] They hold their destiny in their hands. Nobody other than ourselves can solve our problems. We are in 2004; out of 54 states of the African Union, more than 38 still practise female circumcision. Why? I don’t know! Origins? I don’t know! [...] But Moolaadé is not just about female circumcision, it’s about the liberation of our societies, the freedom of our people.

Moolaadé has made an impact outside of Africa and can be found in festivals such as Cannes and Los Angeles, winning the National Film Critics Award for Best Foreign Film, in the syllabi of university courses, and in art theatres around the world. However, despite being directed and written by a prestigious African director and being filmed in Africa, the film’s exposure to an African audience is miniscule, and will only penetrate the African continent with the help of free DVDs and public grants, such as the one from the Sigrid Rausing Trust to use the film as an advocacy tool (FORWARD, 2006). Change will come from public awareness, and perhaps the availability of films like *Moolaadé* in libraries and schools.

The artistic merit of the film is widely acknowledged, and the question is clear: Why is it so difficult to view *Moolaadé* in Africa? In the film, the director uses the metaphor of burning radios, implying that the spread of information is not open but rather controlled by those who are threatened by it. Can the Internet help spread uncomfortable artworks and information to areas where such an introduction surely will bring change? Will it help Africans fulfil the minimum standard of information access for all members of society (Mason et al., 1995)?

Information integrity

One of the oddities in Africa’s history involved the Mountains of Kong in Western Africa. This non-existent mountain range graced 19th century maps of Africa until geographers finally convinced map makers that the Mountains of Kong never were there at all (Bassett & Porter, 1991). However, for nearly 100 years the well-documented myth lived, demonstrating the power of incorrect, unchallenged information issued on the culturally powerful medium of a map.

We all are affected by information integrity, whether it is the history of repairs on an aeroplane we are about to board or the financial records of our government. Information integrity is a general term that Prabhaker (2003) summed up as:

... the dependability or trustworthiness of information. More specifically, it is the accuracy, consistency, and reliability of information content, processes, and systems.

These values are embodied in the objectives of the Nigerian National Policy for Information Technology (UNECA, n.d.):

(iii) To guarantee the privacy, integrity, accuracy, confidentiality, security, availability and quality of personal information.

The availability of information is an essential part of the process. We cannot have any checks on the accuracy of information if we cannot access it. Suppression or loss of material can have enormous consequences, and huge factors in the integrity of information are inspection, audit, review and correction.

Access to public information

In the preamble to its Constitution, the Library and Information Association of South Africa (LIASA, n.d.) wrote that it:

... affirm[s] that equitable and unrestricted access to basic information, including government information, is a fundamental right in a democratic society; recognize[s] the power of information and information technology in establishing a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights.

A Google search for the words “information access” turns up thousands of references because this issue is so pivotal for ensuring accountability, education and oversight, to name only three benefits.

In South Africa, during the apartheid era, people had difficulty checking the validity of information that the government held about them. After apartheid ended, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission found that there was a systematic destruction of classified documents starting in 1990–1994, sanctioned by the Cabinet. South Africa has enacted a Freedom of Information Act, but its use and effectiveness have been uneven (Banisar, n.d.). The key ingredient of ensuring the accuracy of information is the right to review documents and an ease in exercising that right.

As far as government records are concerned, the US has attempted to have government officials preserve electronic information via the Freedom of Information Act, the 1978 Presidential Records Act, and the Electronic Freedom of Information Act. Yet, as recently as April 2007, perhaps

thousands of government email messages have “disappeared” (Hamburger, 2007). Laws can only help to a certain degree, and a basic common valuing of the integrity of information has to be actively pursued by people in power.

Accuracy of translation

Africa is a continent of over 1 000 languages. South Africa has 11 official languages and seven unofficial ones. Morocco uses Arabic officially, with people also speaking French and eight other tongues, and Ethiopia has at least seven official languages. Thus, the issue of correct translation applies much more critically to African countries than to countries less endowed with lingual variety. In order to ensure that a document has the same meaning across many translations is a huge task, with issues too vast to cover here. Suffice it to say that translation mechanics open up areas where the facts and sentiments of the original artifact can be vastly altered. For example, translating the Bible into many African languages demonstrates the inherent problems of translation (Omanson, 1988).

In the last 20 years, the translation of HIV/AIDS materials has shown how difficult it can be to communicate accurately across the continent. Researchers know that the most appropriate language for disbursing sensitive material about this virus is a person’s mother tongue, but the appropriate words used may be taboo in many languages. To be effective, information has to be socially acceptable, yet it must be accurate and get the critical information across (OSISA, n.d.). The Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa (OSISA) is tackling these translation issues and encouraging translation into the various indigenous languages, so that people will not only have access to accurate information, but also be able to read and understand it in their own language.

In addition, educational materials should be culturally relevant, taking into account the differences between Europe, the US and Africa, where the *ubuntu* spirit of community comes first (Allen & Heald, 2004). For example, in many parts of Africa polygamy is the norm, and urging people to be monogamous goes against the culture (Heald, 2002). Thus translation is not simply an issue of one language to another, but of one culture to another. The social taboos that

prevent the spread of helpful practices and medicines will lead to the deaths of many more thousands of people unless education can be done in a culturally practical way.

Preservation

We cannot adequately address the issues of the permanency, accuracy and integrity of stored traditional and digital knowledge resources here because the topic is simply too vast. The library associations, governments and businesses of Africa are tackling these problems as information moves increasingly into digital form.

One issue worth noting is that Africa's scholars are working to preserve its oral culture, traditional dances and other important parts of its heritage. Capturing the spirit of a living culture is more complicated than keeping written records. The integrity of these records is critical as issues abound, such as who is doing the recording, what media is being used, have people given their consent to be recorded, and how will the archive be stored? Many issues arise in maintaining these records, and UNESCO has put forth the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, adopted by its General Conference in 2005. At the time of writing, 52 nations have signed onto the Convention, and African countries with their amazing diversity of language and culture should be at the forefront of this effort.

Corruption and pollution of information

The goal with information integrity is to ensure that information is available and accurate, and therefore the opposite would be information that has been altered in some way during its journey. Of course, shoddy or deceitful recordkeeping leads to information corruption. To give an idea of the issue, take these three US headlines on the Internet and the chilling problems they reveal:

Massive state contracts database riddled with errors, omissions – Problem-plagued system grew out of effort at transparency in state spending (The Associated Press, 2007)

Census errors shortchange counties from federal grants – York County could lose up to \$1M a year until 2010 (MacInnes, 2007)

Schools budget full of errors – In city document, funds for salaries don't match number of people being paid (Neufeld, 2007)

As we can see, excellence in bookkeeping and statistics would help in the above situations, but only when the records see the light of day and we can audit them. The Internet offers the promise of oversight, but what can we do about the millions of websites containing all sorts of inaccurate and biased information?

The analogy to drinking water best describes the problem. Of course, first we need access to water. Once that is established, the entire community has to combine efforts to preserve the purity and healthiness of the water, because disease and filth so easily contaminate this precious resource. Although water composes most of our planet, only 3% of it is fit for humans to drink (Lawson & Lazarus, 1998). In a similar way, we need controls to prevent the dumping of waste and impurities into our information stream. The "impure" information can be an accidental error in copying or translating, or it could be intentional, for example through the release of misleading or completely false artifacts.

The spreading of connectivity means that some people will suffer from misinformation and "information pollution". What we need are well-defined and acceptable standards for the accuracy, consistency and reliability of information (Madhavan et al., n.d.). For example, people will see pictures that have been "doctored", but they may not have the education to understand that pictures can lie. They may read that they can send their money to a remote person and reap vast rewards, but it will be a scam. Worse, leaders might base decisions on false premises, and the people will be starved of accurate information on which to base public opinion.

No policy on information corruption can treat it as something separate from the main society. Economics, law, culture, psychology, sociology, ethics and philosophy are interrelated in these information integrity issues (Madhavan et al., n.d.). For example, take this quote by Packer (2006):

Nigerians have become notorious for their Internet scams, such as e-mails with a bogus request to move funds to an offshore bank, which ask for the recipient's account number in exchange for

lucrative profit. The con, which originated in Lagos, represents the perversion of talent and initiative in a society where normal paths of opportunity are closed to all but the well connected. Corruption is intrinsic to getting anything done in Lagos.

The promise of the Internet could be challenged by the ingenuity that some people have poured into computer crime, information corruption, and mischief. Also, Internet access and use are so unevenly distributed that some problems will emerge earlier in the more populated areas without having a significant impact in the more rural and remote areas.

Freedom of the press and information integrity

A recent scandalous event in the US underlines the need for a free press. The incident involved the death of Corporal Pat Tillman, a former football player who was killed by an American soldier in a friendly-fire incident in Afghanistan. The US military fabricated a tale in which Tillman was shot dead in battle by enemy fire. Only the determined efforts of Tillman's family and the probing of journalists revealed the falsehood to the nation. As a *New York Times* columnist wrote, a government that will lie about the tragic fate of an honourable young American like Pat Tillman will lie to the public about anything (Herbert, 2007).

Lying is not unique to the US. In Africa it is also essential that the press keeps an eye on the government, challenges false information, checks sources, and is the eyes and ears of the people. Even with examples of courageous reporting, the US is ranked only 53rd on a list of countries and freedom of the press. On the African continent, the highest-ranked countries are Benin (23rd), Namibia (26th) and Mauritius (32nd), while the lowest ranked is Eritrea (166), where a number of journalists have been imprisoned in secret for more than five years (Reporters Without Borders, 2006). Dadg (2006) summed it up like this:

The year 2006 saw an increase in the number of assaults and attacks on journalists throughout the African sub-Saharan region. Many of these assaults were carried out by the authorities or their proxies, and the violence was often a precursor to arrests and detentions [...] The attitude of these

governments displays a distinct dislike of criticism, and is also the sign of a lack of political maturity.

Another author wrote (Crawford, 2006):

There can be no democratic progress without a free media, and repression of the media is a first sign of democracy going off the rails.

Countries like Senegal have state-owned media that can be used to advance the aims of the government and not necessarily the people. In Zimbabwe, a journalist died as recently as April 2007, after smuggling television pictures of the badly injured opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai after he was beaten up by police on 11 March (Howden, 2007). Four independent newspapers have been shut down, bombed and suppressed, and reporters from other countries are routinely barred entry to Zimbabwe (Sapa-AP, 2007). Reporters Without Borders publishes updates on press freedom for many African countries, and these reports are often depressing.

The future

The goal is to have information that is reliable, accurate, helpful, public and correctable. As Africa had to erase the Mountains of Kong, it also has to correct errors in public health information and court and government records, and adapt its digital infrastructure to storing and maintaining records. At the same time, all countries should support their public libraries for the dissemination of uncensored information, art and literature.

Newspapers, blogs and other media in African countries can contribute to information integrity through reporting government and public activities as accurately as possible. In the US, the media has long been called the "fourth branch of government". But as US journalism slips down to 53rd place in the world, the Internet helps keep journalists honest. When more people are connected in Africa, perhaps their voices, too, will counter state-owned and state-intimated media outlets.

We need to be proactive in providing access to, and provision of, public information in order to empower people to redress inequities. In other words, governments and businesses must provide accessible and understandable information, with formal processes of audit and

accountability, made available free of charge. Of course, good recordkeeping and accounting are essential. People should have access to records about themselves in order to correct and update their personal information, and to ensure that this information is used only for the purposes that they have authorised.

Conserving and maintaining integrity is the responsibility of those who store information. We urge stringent data protection laws and standards for information security. All those who have power, including businesses and governments, must be held accountable when deliberately releasing incorrect information.

Maintaining a plurality of independent media is absolutely necessary in countering misinformation. Thus, state ownership of media ought to be discouraged and the independent media nurtured and encouraged.

By taking those steps, the metaphor for Africa will not be a pile of burning radios. Rather, communications will abound, and we will hear more voices and experience more art and literature through the myriad digital media that will increasingly be at our fingertips. In that rosy future, the quality and integrity of the information we produce and receive will be vital to nurturing Africa's future.

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