

An African E-Journal

by Nyerhowwo J. Tonukari

One of the motivating factors that led to the establishment of the *African Journal of Biotechnology – AJB*, www.academicjournals.org/AJB – was to have an international journal that published the current research that published on in African countries.

The vast majority of journals published in Africa today are languishing in obscurity because they are not known outside their institutions or region. Many journals published in Ghana, for example, cannot be found in universities or research institutions in Kenya. Furthermore, African researchers often lack access to foreign journals as most of the universities' libraries cannot afford to buy these journals anymore. On the other hand, the scarcity of African journals in the libraries of the developed countries or on the Internet makes it difficult for anyone outside Africa to find information on some issues peculiar to the continent.

None of us who started *AJB* had previous editorial experience in a normal print journal; neither did we have any idea initially of how to start an e-journal. For economic reasons an e-journal appeared to be the best option since we all had computers and Internet access.

Although we agonised whether African researchers and lecturers would be able to access and download articles from the Internet, our calculation was that there will be increasing access to the Internet with time. My trip to Kenya changed my views about Internet access in Africa. I was pleasantly surprised to see so many cyber cafes where anyone can go online for a fee.

So with less than a \$100 to register and host the website initially, *AJB* was born. *AJB* receives manuscripts as Email attachments and uses only Email to contact authors and reviewers. Even proofs are sent as Email attachments. Currently, there are 6 computers (3 desktops and 3 laptops) in the *AJB* office with Microsoft and



Adobe software to handle all these mails and other formatting. We also have a printer and scanner. We earlier used students and part time staff, but there are now five regular support staff and one web consultant in the Editorial Office. This has curbed staff turnover (due to low wages) which plagued the journal for more than a year.

Our initial goal is was to publish 2 to 4 papers per month. However, we have become victims of our own success. Because of the initial speed of publication, we now receive too many manuscripts. In 2002, we published an average of 6 papers per month which has now increased to 15 in 2005. *AJB* is a free access journal and everyone with access to the Internet can read and download the full articles for free as soon as they are published.

So as not to be too dependent on foreign donors, government or research/academic associations like other African journals, we charge authors a modest handling fee, and 80% of it can be waived for most authors from sub-Saharan Africa. Even after 2 years, it is still difficult to convince many authors that it costs money to publish a peer-reviewed and well formatted online journal. Total handling fees received

for 2003 and 2004 were about \$3,800 and \$8,700, respectively, and the numbers of paying authors have improved from 20% in 2002 to 45% in the first quarter of 2005.

To date, *AJB* has not requested nor received any funding. We still have not reached any agreement whether or not to apply for funding. But we are very proud to be a self-sustaining journal. The biggest challenge for us at *AJB* is still Internet access. Unlike in western countries, it costs quite a lot to have constant Internet access in most African countries. Since we cannot afford our own direct Internet access, we have convinced a cyber cafe to extend their connections (for which we pay monthly) to adjacent offices which we rent. That is the best we can do for now.

On the brighter side, *AJB* has now become so popular thanks to the Internet. Authors publishing in *AJB* are happy that their articles will receive the widest audience. *AJB* also publishes articles from countries outside of Africa so as to enrich its contents and expose African readers to research going on in other parts of the world. The 'hits' on the website have increased from less than 1000 per day in July 2003 to about 4000 in May 2005.

The most important requirement in starting an online journal is access to the Internet and some knowledge of computers. Most software is easy to use and affordable. Money is not a limitation, but commitment from the editors cannot be overemphasised. It is nearly impossible for print-only journals to compete with online journals because of the speed of publication. Although more than 95% of authors now understand and appreciate the online (only) model of *AJB*, we still get inquiries from time to time for print copies. Several authors and some libraries have indicated their interest to pay for the print copies. Maybe in the future, we may print the issues.

Because of its online model, *AJB* editors and reviewers can be located anywhere in the world as long as they have Internet access. We are quite optimistic about *AJB*'s future

and we are working hard and also reinvesting its meager revenue to make it Africa's premier journal. Having access to *AJB*'s full text articles and especially the reviews has been a boon to lecturers and researchers in Africa. We are quite pleased when they inform us that they are using *AJB* materials in their class notes and research. *AJB* cited papers can easily be found even from popular search engines like Yahoo, Google and MSN. Currently, there are several hundreds of university libraries, research institutes and other websites linking to the *AJB*'s website. We are humbled by the patronage and trust.

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TEEAL Update

This summer TEEAL (The Essential Electronic Agricultural Library) is introducing a new local area network version. TEEAL is a complete collection of agricultural journals with abstracts and full text articles. Formerly available only on compact disc, now researchers and students will be able to access articles from the convenience of a networked computer. Just click on a link and the article appears — no compact discs to insert, no Internet, and no waiting.

LanTEEAL contains 114 journals from the original TEEAL collection selected by a panel of 600 international scientists as the most relevant to research being carried out in the developing world (visit the TEEAL website for a list of titles: www.teeal.org).

LanTEEAL is available for \$3,500USD* and includes the 1993-2003 literature. Annual updates cost \$1,000 USD each. The 2004 update will be available this December.

Additionally, prices are plummeting on the compact disc TEEAL collection of 140 journals. The 1993-2003 CD set can be purchased for just \$5000 USD — over 2.2 million pages of journal literature valued at about \$1 million in developed nations. Annual updates on CD are available for \$700 to \$1000 each. The 2004 update will be ready this December.

TEEAL is a project of Cornell University's A R Mann Library and over 60 publishers, with the ongoing support of the Rockefeller Foundation. Contact TEEAL for more information, at: teeal@cornell.edu

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TEEAL Project Manager

*Discounts on LanTEEAL available to subscribers with the compact disc version of TEEAL (valid until Dec 2005).

AGORA update

www.aginternetwork.org

The AGORA initiative to provide free or low-cost online access to science journals on food and agriculture was launched on 14th October 2003, and in its first 18 months of existence has seen significant increase in user participation. To date, 450 institutions in 56 countries — from the 69 countries eligible — have registered to use AGORA's valuable online resources.

Eleven publishers have now joined the initiative in addition to the nine founding publisher partners. The content available through AGORA now comprises more than 700 key journals in food, nutrition, agriculture and related biological, environmental and social sciences.

This is making a significant impact on researchers, students and others in the scientific community in developing and transitional countries but FAO and its partners such as Cornell University are still seeking to increase participation from users and publishers even further. It was also agreed that particular attention needs to be paid to improving accessibility of AGORA content for organisations with poor connectivity.

In its first 18 months, the AGORA initiative has resonated among policy-makers, and has received endorsement from policy-makers — such as the Honourable Charles Keenya, the Minister of Agriculture and Food Security of Tanzania, who said: *'My call is to all participants to take advantage of this opportunity and make sure that they carry the new skills on accessing electronic resources to their colleagues back at their workplaces... . Our development partners have not only shown the way but also assisted in very practical ways We are therefore bound to make maximum use of this opportunity. Our research and training effort in agriculture stand to benefit a lot.'*