Towards a Future of African Magazines

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In the process of organising one of the biggest virtual literary readings in Africa in the first quarter of 2022, my priority was to bring together the big names in the industry; publishers, critics, renowned poets, artists and academics, all in one single virtual space. But the central priority — the priority of all priorities — was the funding. The question arose: how were we going to fund the event? There were countless work hours to be committed, endless flyers to be made, Internet payment to be made, intense social campaigns and publicity for at least a month to the event, and of course, honoraria for the invited readers and speakers. We resorted to writing letters to organisations and private bodies for help. Our budget was simple. We needed only 600 US dollars, a modest amount, I believed. We never got a positive response from any of them, and we were left to undertake the project on our own.

Many funders forget that the success and downfall of small African presses (magazines, journals, etc.) is inextricably tied to the growth and downfall of writers. With the severe lack of funding the literary magazines in Africa currently experience, more disadvantaged African writers living in Africa could begin to feel the brunt of this in the form of their inability to read for free. I must also add, for the sake of being misquoted as Jeremiadic, that this will not be a deliberate action on the part of magazine editors and owners. We might soon — quite sadly — be faced, rather inevitably, too, in the mouth of an abyss. African literary magazines have grown so big, and their importance in African literature has become so amplified that they have become essential to the growth of African writers. The AKO Caine Prize for African Writing is a direct testament to this. Since the prize was inaugurated in 2000, African literary magazines have been shot further into the spotlight. In their role as middlemen in the prize, they have become kingmakers within the community.

Since Leila Aboulela won the prize in 2000, the place of African literary magazines have become quintessential to the growth of African writers. African magazines now have a pride of place within the larger literary world. In a World Arts Agency-powered interview published last year in Praxis Magazine Online, hosted by Michael Chiedoziem Chukwudera, I mentioned, and I quote again here, "There's an incredible amount of punch power small presses have, even against bigger presses. One of the advantages of small presses where magazines and journals fall under, especially electronic magazines, is its reach towards the younger and mainstream audience that usually do not have the wherewithal to buy books. It's also helpful since magazines publish shorter pieces that are easier to read, and at the same time push forward the writers to the public eye."

The extent, hence, to which the African literary magazine industry is funded for the work they do is too limited. Is it not a thing to mourn over when kingmakers have become beggars, and worse still, ones to be shunned?

Anthony Ademiluyi, a freelance journalist in Lagos, advises publishers, "Look at the curriculum of African literature in foreign universities. Do an analysis of their works and put it behind a pay or firewall. Students will pay a token to access it. Creativity is the name of the game."

While this could be a viable income source, how many readers in Africa are financially capable of breaking through those firewalls?

Lack of funding is an unfortunate scenario that has bedeviled a great number of African literary magazines and companies like ours, too. Save for a number of magazines such as *Omenana*, *Agbowo*, *Olongo Africa*, *Isele magazine*, and others who pay, the many others do not. Quite interestingly, the problem is not exclusive to the African continent. In October 2021, popular American magazine, The Believer, announced a shut down due to what they described as stemming from, "…the financial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic." They had been around and active for 19 years. One of the magazine's funders, Jennifer Keene, noted that, "Print publications in general have been facing increasing headwinds in recent years, which makes them a financially challenging endeavor."

Likewise, in Nigeria, Dami Ajayi, co-founder of Saraba Magazine, decried the situation African literary magazines find themselves in, commenting that, "The cost of running Saraba comes from our own pockets so we are unable to pay our writers, and it is a labour of love for both writers and editors."

Troy Onyango and Ukamaka Olisakwe, founding editors of *Lolwe* (Kenya) and *Isele* (Nigeria) respectively, have been seen to put out tweets (links above) asking for supporters to their magazines and projects. However, only little to no responses are gathered, and the struggle continues. The ultimate choice of each literary magazine founder has then become to fund their projects internally, or close shop. The longevity of this stifling practice might soon have clapbacks on the writers who contribute to the magazines, and the readers who read them. This has already begun to take effect.

The central purpose of virtual publishing should be to publish and promote art without charging money from readers and contributors. However, with the crippling rate of insufficiency in funds and the consequent rise in maintenance costs for these magazines, many have resorted to putting firewalls in place. Readers are now expected to pay a fee to read the works published in these journals and magazines. One such journal is *The Republic*, an African-centric magazine publishing quality works of "serious journalism," art criticism and literature. Readers are asked to pay a stipend of $1.99 for a monthly subscription. A small fee, yet, amazingly, many African readers are unable to afford it. With this source of funding, *The Republic* is able to pay writers for some of their works published in the magazine. A Nigerian writer and editor, Carl Terver, once expressed his shock that *Literary Hub* , despite its clout and reputation, was not behind a firewall. He should not have been

surprised. A cursory look at the magazine's "About" page shows an almost innumerable list of partners and funders. The same goes for other vintage magazines such as *New York Times, Granta, The New Yorker*, and others who are, not so surprisingly Western-based. This suggests that it is an African problem, even though some Western-based magazines solicit entry fees to their publications. Although the *NYT* has most of its content hidden behind a firewall, it pays a modest royalty to its writers. But this is only because it is not only funded but earns from print and online subscriptions, with its far reach and staggering reputation. But this is not the case for Africa where its people live below the poverty line and most cannot pay for these subscriptions to read.

African literary magazinery is in a state of financial shock, and only an intervention can rescue it. The lack of financial support African literary magazines get from literary donors and organisations is very low, or non-existent. When asked once — while organising the earlier described literary event — whether I would be willing to "task" contributing writers to pay to get published and so earn money, my response was simple, fuelled not so much from a very stoic place (we badly needed money), but from a resolution I made in the beginning when I set up the magazine: "No, the mission is to pay writers and give them a space to be known, not to charge them to be published." The argument went on for longer, but my decision could not be unmade. There was no need asking writers to pay. Writers in Africa only deserve to be paid. Moreover, the chances that writers would pay money to a literary magazine, however established, to be published, was somewhat unthinkable. For a developing nation like Nigeria, especially with its majority of young, up-and-coming writers (the vast majority who submit to magazines and literary journals), the chances that anyone would pay to be published in a magazine was close to zero. I would argue that many African writers would avoid contributing to big names like *The New Yorker* or the *New York Times,* had these journals been asking for submission fees.

The fact that the majority of magazines in and out of Africa do not charge their contributors points to one argument: the knowledge that writers are the system around which magazines thrive, and they should ultimately be paid. Literary magazines were created and built to be a home to writers, to give them a space, and give them some money, too, never the other way round.

The fact that Nigerian writers are visible and active in the global literary magazine space is as a result of two major reasons: the quite obvious massive population in the country, and consequent large number of writers, and the fact that these magazines publishing them, unlike others in Africa, pay them royalties.

To tackle this unique problem, indeed, for the African literary magazine industry to thrive, we need the presence of a working structure. The magazine and literary journaling industry should be seen as much more than a resource for writers, readers and intellectuals, but now also as a business. There is an abundance of opportunities in the literary magazine industry that literary- and non-literary organisations can tap into. For one, with the wide reach many literary magazines in Africa are getting, advert spaces on their websites now have a greater chance of being converted to sales and revenue by companies and individuals wishing to advertise their products.

Now, literary events, more than they have ever done, are providing a viable opportunity for foreign investors to grow their businesses. Ready examples are the Ake Literary Festival, Quramo Writers Literary Festival, Time of the Writer, Doek Literary Festival, Swahili Literary Festival, Gaborone Book Festival, Lagos Art and Books Festival, and The Afrolit Sans Frontieres Festival which has over the years built a solid reputation by bringing together virtual and print publishers, writers and academics together in one space. Literary anthologies and issues from magazines have also begun to get good reach, a bait for investors to hook into.

Businesses, private funders and organisation should not forget that with the powers of the small

presses now, they can turn the numbers of readers and paid or unpaid subscribers to these magazines into sales. It is time for funders and investors to latch on to the potentials in the African literary magazine industry. Adequate and consistent funding would help publishers pay the burgeoning talents in the African creative industry who contribute to these magazines, and also benefit the readers since less magazines would find strong causes to hide their content behind firewalls.

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