

What We Download When the Libraries Are Empty

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In 1962, the Heinemann African Writers Series began publishing inexpensive paperback editions of African literature that would define a generation of readers across the continent. Readers in Lagos, Ibadan, Nairobi, and Accra could read writers like Chinua Achebe in editions designed specifically for Africans. These books circulated widely in schools, teacher training colleges, and public libraries, making literature written by Africans materially present within the everyday life of education. Lorretta Stec suggests that the Heinemann African Writers series created a canon. When I was weaned as a school child off the milk of Enid Blyton and the adventures of the Famous Five, as was common with other middle-class African children, I moved on to the bones of the matter contained in the orange paperbacks of the Heinemann series. The quiet decline tells a much larger story about the fate of knowledge infrastructures across Africa.

In a recent viral post on X, a Google drive link containing over two hundred publications in the Heinemann African Writers series generated an online conversation about the ethics of digital piracy, writers' rights, publishing infrastructure, and citizens' access to literature. Debates about the ethics of digital piracy for educational materials often dominate conversations about reading in Nigeria and elsewhere on the continent. Students download scanned PDFs from shadow libraries, circulate textbooks through messaging platforms, and photocopy entire books in university copy centres. These practices are framed in some quarters of the Nigerian literati as moral failures, evidence of a disregard for intellectual property and the labour of writers. Yet this framing obscures a more fundamental transformation. The erosion of African publishing ecosystems, symbolized by

the disappearance of the African Writers Series, has converged with the rise of scholarships-for-development programmes and the contemporary migration phenomenon Nigerians call *japa*. Together, these forces are transforming not only where Africans study, but where African knowledge exists and can be retrieved. To focus solely on the ethics of piracy is therefore to begin the debate from the wrong premises.

The African Writers Series, which once represented an infrastructure that made African literature locally accessible, was itself built on external ownership. James Currey, the longstanding managing editor of the Heinemann African Writers' Series should know. He suggested that the new owners of Heinemann Educational Books closed shop following the closure of Nigerian foreign exchange in April 1982, a decision that precipitated what was later described as a regional "book famine" across West and East Africa as the importation of books abruptly stalled. This other famine was different from the more popular depiction of starving children in Ethiopia or Mali that warranted Bob Geldof's Live Aid concert. This other famine was compounded by the widespread devaluation of African currencies throughout the 1980s, which made the continued production and distribution of inexpensive paperback editions financially unviable, *for the foreign publishers*. At the same time, the publishing house itself was undergoing rapid institutional instability: Heinemann Educational Books passed through four different owners within five years, each successive ownership restructuring shifting the company's strategy away from the risk of commissioning new or academically oriented African titles toward merely maintaining what Currey described as a minimal "toe in Africa."

By extension, the company had also published the Caribbean Writers Series, and Alan Hill, the founding publisher of the series, was awarded a Commander of the Order of the British Empire for his role in what was described as one of the most significant developments in twentieth-century British publishing. Yet as soon as the economic conditions that sustained foreign investment deteriorated and profits could no longer be guaranteed, the new owners withdrew. The departure of Currey himself in 1984 symbolized this turning point: the editorial leadership that had sustained the series' intellectual vision was replaced by a corporate publishing strategy less concerned with building African literary infrastructure than with financial retrenchment. Efforts to reenact the legacy of the African Writers Series since then have appeared only intermittently, marked by fits and starts rather than the sustained institutional commitment that once made the series possible.

What mattered was not simply the existence of the series, but the infrastructure that allowed the series to circulate. This infrastructure extended beyond the series itself. During the decades following independence, African universities, national libraries, local publishing houses, and book distribution networks formed a loosely connected ecosystem that supported reading cultures. Nigerian universities maintained functioning libraries. Local presses printed textbooks and literary works. Bookstores stocked locally produced titles alongside imported ones. The result was a fragile but real environment in which knowledge production could occur within the continent.

The dismantling of that ecosystem did not occur suddenly. It emerged gradually through the economic transformations of the 1980s, particularly the implementation of Structural Adjustment Programs across many African economies. Structural adjustment demanded fiscal austerity, currency devaluation, and reductions in state spending. Public institutions such as universities, libraries, and cultural agencies were among the sectors most affected by these policies. What we see today is because of the hollowing out of the public commons. We have had enough time to rebuild it and have refused to do so.

In Nigeria, the effects were profound. Libraries struggled to maintain acquisitions budgets. Universities could no longer afford journal subscriptions or book purchases. The cost of imported paper and printing materials rose sharply due to currency devaluation, making local publishing financially precarious. Many international publishers that had once operated regional offices

withdrew from the continent. What had once been a fragile infrastructure of knowledge production began to erode.

The consequences of this erosion can be seen in the experiences of writers themselves. The Nigerian novelist Buchi Emecheta once described the difficulty of sustaining her independent publishing efforts due to the rising cost of paper and declining local book sales. Her experience reflected a broader pattern: as the economic foundations of publishing weakened, authors increasingly depended on foreign publishers, literary prizes, or academic adoption lists to ensure their books reached readers.

In this environment, only a narrow category of books could reliably sell. Texts prescribed for examinations or included on university reading lists at least guaranteed a minimal market return. Prize-winning novels attracted international attention. Beyond these categories, publishing became economically risky. The result was a contraction of the literary ecosystem, where fewer books were printed and fewer readers could afford them.

The disappearance of Heineman and other publishers was replaced by new imprints who sold textbooks and local publishers who recouped their investments from book launches. For regular readers, alternative systems were found. A common spectacle in African cities like Lagos, Accra and Nairobi are the city center literati who congregate around vendors of foreign magazines, popular fan fiction and self-help books, which I suspect are pirated copies. An earlier iteration is the Onitsha Market Literature. Cheaply printed novelettes were sold in bustling marketplaces. They contained stories, advice manuals, and popular narratives written in accessible language. Although they were often dismissed by literary critics, they represented an important experiment in the democratization of storytelling. They allowed ordinary Nigerians to participate in literary culture outside conventional publishing channels.

Ironically, many of these works, *another literary canon*, survive only through foreign institutions such as the University of Kansas Libraries, which hosts a digital collection of Onitsha Market texts. The archive makes these materials freely available online, justifying the digitization partly on the grounds that many authors or their estates cannot be traced. This situation raises a complicated question: when local infrastructures fail to preserve intellectual property, who assumes responsibility for their preservation? Students downloading scanned copies of novels or textbooks are not simply avoiding payment. They are navigating a knowledge environment in which the institutional channels for accessing books have largely collapsed. Public libraries remain underfunded. University libraries struggle with acquisitions. Bookstores carry limited selections, often at prices that exceed what many students can afford. In such circumstances, the distinction between piracy and access becomes blurred.

Critics frequently frame piracy as a threat to writers and publishers. While this concern is legitimate, it overlooks the structural conditions that have made piracy ubiquitous. When students cannot obtain required texts through libraries or affordable bookstores, photocopying centres and digital file-sharing networks become the de facto distribution system for educational materials. Indeed, in many Nigerian cities, photocopying centers sell more “books” in the form of bound photocopies than formal bookshops sell in printed editions. The ethical question therefore cannot be separated from the institutional conditions that produced it.

The Nigerian-American writer and commentator Ikhide Ikheloa has argued that debates about piracy often miss the larger issue. According to him, the central problem is not the book itself but the culture of reading. Nigerians want to read, he suggests, but the cost of books and the fragility of the publishing industry prevent them from doing so. In his view, digital platforms may offer a viable alternative to traditional publishing, allowing writers to reach readers directly through online

subscriptions or social media.

There may be some truth in this argument. Although globally, publishing industries are adapting to digital distribution. Newspapers increasingly operate online. Books are sold through electronic platforms. Streaming services have transformed the film and music industries by providing legal alternatives to piracy. Yet, public libraries are still funded and supported from the public purse.

Platforms such as digital libraries or archives depend on significant financial and technical resources. Servers must be maintained. Copyright negotiations must be conducted. Digitization requires labour and equipment. When these infrastructures are not publicly funded, access often becomes restricted behind paywalls. In such cases, the rhetoric of protecting intellectual property may end up benefiting corporate platforms more than the authors whose works they distribute.

The analogy with the film industry is instructive. For decades, anti-piracy laws attempted to suppress illegal copying of movies without addressing the underlying demand for affordable access. Pirates frequently earned more money than filmmakers themselves. Only when streaming services emerged which provided convenient and reasonably priced access did the balance begin to shift back toward producers. The lesson is clear: enforcement alone cannot solve piracy. Access must be provisioned.

In Nigeria, however, the provision of access has historically been treated as a secondary concern. Public libraries remain underfunded. University budgets prioritize infrastructure projects over acquisitions. National literary institutions struggle with limited resources. Meanwhile, millions of dollars may be spent on prestigious literary prizes without addressing the everyday ecosystem that allows readers to have access to books.

As local infrastructures weaken, African knowledge increasingly circulates through institutions located outside the continent foreign universities, foreign presses, international publishers, and digital platforms. This relocation has subtle consequences. It shapes which books are published, which research topics receive funding, and which narratives gain global visibility. The centre of gravity for African knowledge production gradually moves outward.

Within this context, the debate about digital piracy appears in a different light. Downloading a PDF is not simply an act of individual moral choice. It is a symptom of structural conditions in which the infrastructures that once sustained reading have been hollowed out.

This does not mean piracy should be celebrated. Authors deserve compensation for their labour, and sustainable publishing models are necessary for literary cultures to thrive. Yet focusing exclusively on enforcement risks obscuring the deeper crisis: the disappearance of publicly funded systems that once guaranteed access to knowledge.

Public education historically treated libraries and reading materials as a public good. A library book could be borrowed by many readers without diminishing its value. Knowledge circulated as a shared resource rather than a commodity restricted to those who could afford it.

When these institutions decay, the boundaries between legal and illegal access become increasingly porous. Digital technologies simply reveal the extent to which access has already been privatized.

If education and literacy are understood as a public good, then the responsibility for sustaining it cannot fall solely on individual readers or writers. Governments, universities, and cultural institutions must treat the infrastructure of literacies such as libraries, archives, publishing grants, and digital repositories as essential components of national development. Without such investment, debates about piracy will continue to circle around symptoms rather than causes. The question we

should be asking is therefore not merely why readers download books illegally. The more important question is why downloading pirated copies has become the primary method through which many readers can access literature at all.

When readers circulate pirated copies digitally, we must acknowledge our collective abdication of education as a public good and literacy as a human right that has gradually eroded under the pressures of austerity, privatization, and global economic restructuring. It is only then that we can commit to rebuilding the institutions that make reading guilt-free possible once again.

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