

the world outside

OBSERVATIONS ON NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL LIBRARY EVENTS AND PROGRAMS



The African Digital Library

By [Ariel Lebowitz](#) and [Laura Banfield](#)

We were fortunate to receive responses from Paul G. West, the individual responsible for setting up the African Digital Library, and Marié Botha, Team Leader, Content Management, UNISA Library. We have incorporated what they shared with us in the following article.

In the late 1990s, Paul G. West, then the Director of the Centre for Lifelong Learning at Technikon, South Africa, was on an overnight flight from Washington to Los Angeles with a four-hour layover in Denver. Instead of putting on his headphones and ignoring the people around him, he started chatting with the passenger in the seat next to him. The passenger turned out to be the first CEO of netLibrary, a division of OCLC Online Computer Library Center, Inc., based in Boulder, Colorado, and an e-content provider for libraries and publishers. As the two chatted, they began to realize how they might be able to work together to create something meaningful. Instead of spending his four hours at his next gate, West got into a

taxi at 6 a.m. By 7 a.m. he was at the netLibrary's Boulder office contemplating the possibilities.

West took his idea to his colleagues with little success. They felt it was too big, that it couldn't be done. But he did do it, and by working with netLibrary to adapt the model, the African Digital Library became a reality. The idea was to enable the residents of Africa to access a public digital library at no cost. It was a developmental project aimed at assisting the less-developed regions of the world where basic access to books is limited. In November of 1999, the African Digital Library was launched.

The ADL is intended to supplement the capacity of any African library and support lifelong learning on the African continent. Like anywhere else in the world, African libraries and librarians want to provide their users with access to up-to-date information, whether it be through print or electronic materials. In many cases, the costs of resources,

especially e-resources, can be prohibitive. By making use of the African Digital Library, African libraries can virtually expand their own collections without additional cost.

So how is the African Digital Library able to provide access to e-books for free? ADL is able to remain free through a combination of financial grants and donations from various organizations within and outside Africa, operational support from the ADL Committee, and technical assistance from netLibrary. Initial funding for the ADL came from a \$90,000 grant from the World Bank, in addition to donations from Technikon SA and ISCOR, a South African steel company. Current financial support is being provided by the Southern Business School and the University of South Africa (UNISA). Through the UNISA Library, UNISA also provides staff for the ADL Committee which manages the collection, memberships, and outreach activities of ADL. netLibrary continues to be involved with the African Digital Library through the provision of a searchable platform to access the collection and assistance with collection maintenance. All of this allows the received funding to be put directly into purchasing e-books.

Using the netLibrary platform, e-books are purchased "in perpetuity" rather than leased, guaranteeing their continued availability. While the in-perpetuity model provides ideal enduring access, there are some additional concerns from both the publisher and the purchaser which must be taken into consideration. To satisfy publisher concerns over access and copyright, at additional cost, digital "locks" have been put into place permitting only one simultaneous user and tracking systems which monitor the amount of text copied.

From the purchaser's perspective, e-books obtained "in perpetuity" cost 1.5 times the price they would through other purchasing models, thereby reducing the number of books which can be acquired. UNISA has also indicated a need to purchase the "offline reader" to increase access to the collection for those without reliable and consistent internet access. These concerns represent increased costs to ADL. Yet, the potential to reach increasing numbers of people within Africa outweighs such barriers and encourages the ADL Committee to continuously seek funding for its work.

Both West and Botha say that perhaps the greatest advantages of e-books are that they cannot be lost, stolen, or damaged, they can be "inter-library loaned" between countries in seconds, and they are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. With the mission of reaching such a broad user group, these e-book characteristics become particularly important.

The world is full of good ideas: ideas that come to you in a flash of brilliance, ideas that take months of careful consideration, research and planning, ideas that stem from conversation with friends, colleagues, family and sometimes even strangers. The trick is to take one of those ideas and turn it into something tangible. The African Digital Library was one of those ideas that found its way into the tangible yet virtual world of the internet. As of November 2009, the ADL has been live for 10 years. The collection has grown from providing access to approximately 3,000 e-books to over 10,000. Though 10 years is a long time in the digital world, it is not yet long enough to see the full impact that the ADL is having on the residents of Africa. What we do know is that this one idea helped bring information to a user group that is now taking the knowledge they have gained and coming up with their own ideas.

To learn more about the African Digital Library please visit www.africandl.org.za. If you are interested in making a donation to or raising funds for the African Digital Library, contact Bridgette Masango at masanbd@unisa.ac.za.

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