

# There's Always a Way Out: Covid-19 and Humanities Research in Africa

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The COVID-19 pandemic interrupted learning and scholarly activities in Africa in many unanticipated ways. The pandemic's impacts on researchers in the humanities, social sciences and arts, aka the non-STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) disciplines were so disruptive that many scholars thought they were insurmountable. For many African researchers, it was almost impossible to do fieldwork that required direct human contact and being in open spaces. Even foreign researchers on Africa could not travel to their research locations in Africa for fieldwork.

In Nigeria, for example, COVID-19 halted knowledge production for almost a year. By closing borders, it overturned opportunities for cross-country research trips and restricted physical contact. The effect of the total or partial lockdowns it gendered between 2020 and 2021 was huge, leading to loss of much ground in research output and delays in completion of advanced academic programmes, among others.

Nevertheless, a few escaped this constraint by resorting to digital technology for their research and other scholarly activities. In other words, the global pandemic required a shift from traditional (analogue) methods of researching and knowledge production to digital (ICT) modes.

The traditional methods of research and knowledge production in non-STEM fields include participant observation, ethnography and interviews (structured and unstructured). Any of the above methods of data gathering brings the researcher into close contact with informants. In the instance of a disease outbreak, like the COVID-19, the entire research structure becomes threatened—the researcher as well as the informant. Thus, the long months of lockdown across the continent because of the pandemic forced many researchers to suspend their studies for nearly the entire duration. Indeed, reports were rife of cancelled research trips, scheduled interview appointments and inability to visit museums, archives, libraries and other repositories, for artefacts, archival and literature searches. But digital technology offers a way out.

## Using Digital Technology in Humanities Research

When caught in the web of lockdowns, the need for safety (for the researcher and her informants), and the desire for unbounded research, scholars in Africa should go the digital route. This simply means using technology for data gathering. Literature searches can be carried out on the Internet and with the aid of contacts in the diaspora. The latter can more easily access their institutional libraries from their homes and download and email the researcher in Africa the relevant articles for his or her work. For primary data, the Internet, email, and social media are very helpful. A personal computer and smartphone (equipped with chat, video, and camera features) are the basic technological equipment the researcher needs. With the computer or smartphone, interviews and focus group discussions can be held with people across the globe. One-to-one discussions are possible by telephone via recorded calls, chat and WhatsApp features, and also through Facebook, LinkedIn, and other digital formats. If incorporating a quantitative analysis, questionnaires can be distributed to research participants through emails, WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, among others. Information generated from these media can also be saved in a computer or the cloud to mitigate loss from digital collapse, pending their analysis.

While using digital tools for research incorporates speed, its major limitation borders on the fact that the researcher may not reach the grassroots, some of whom may not have adopted technology into their daily lives. But, instead of locking down research because of un-ideal situations, working with the available population becomes a better alternative.

## Why seek a way out?

The disruption of regular scholarly activities undermined the output from many African universities. This disadvantage of the COVID-19 pandemic is critical because non-educational sectors, industries and the private sector especially, use the knowledge produced in our universities. They also fund humanistic studies that push the boundaries of discoveries, which help to improve living

conditions in our societies. While academics are aware of how to navigate research disruptions during an emergency, the non-educational sectors must also be acquainted with the challenges of knowledge production during uncertain times. Doing so will help guide philanthropists and other funders on how to respond to scholars needing their funds to work. Even the non-funding population can intelligently support knowledge production by doubling as participants in ethnographic studies conducted through digital platforms.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, although the integration of digital technology in knowledge production generally had a slow start in Africa, and has continued to be at a very low level in the non-STEM disciplines where there is no need for experimental laboratory tools, the pandemic brought to the fore the need for African nations to improve their respective educational infrastructures to meet future emergencies similar to what the COVID-19 pandemic created. Knowing how to integrate digital tools in humanities research will foster robust learning and knowledge production during difficult seasons. Finally, there is also the need for university administrators and individual researchers in Africa to modernise their research profiles by making technology a central research ingredient.

## References

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