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**Gatekeeping African studies:  
What does “editormetrics” indicate about journal  
governance?**

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# Gatekeeping African studies:

What does “editormetrics” indicate about journal governance?

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## Abstract

This paper probes the internal governance of research journals by focusing on the editorial boards of leading African studies academic journals. We submit editorships to systematic scrutiny through a number of perspectives: geography, gender, institutional affiliation, research performance, entry/exit, etc. Overall, leading journals in the area of African studies are found to be less inclusive than expected: under a quarter of the editors are Africa-based scholars while women are even scarcer. Observations on editorial inflation, interlocking editorships and differentiated journal positioning are also made possible by taking a quantitative approach to editorial evidence. What we refer as “Editormetrics” thus suggests the need for further debate regarding the managerial rules and roles of journals. This perspective may, and perhaps should, inform other evidence-based appraisals of the journal “industry” and the research scene at large.

## Keywords

Editorships – Editormetrics – Research governance – Editorial inflation – Interlocking editorships – African studies

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# **Gatekeeping African studies: What does “editormetrics” indicate about journal governance?**

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**July, 2018**

## **Introduction**

This research deals with a particular step in the “academic value chain” and takes, for the sake of application, a particular field of research in the area studies domain. We focus on journal editorships and draw our evidence from the top academic journals of African studies, namely those dealing with issues of socio-economic development. The paper has three objectives: to argue that journal boards continue to be a neglected but valuable source of scientometric data; to conduct an appraisal of editorial patterns, which could serve as a template for similar exercises; and point out preliminary implications, both for African studies and to scholarly governance at large.

Journals are fundamental institutions of the modern scientific enterprise. Little is known, however, about the internal organisation of international peer-reviewed research journals and our paper hopes to contribute to understand (at least the contours) of this “black box”. Unlike much contemporary work on scientometrics, this paper does not take for granted publications or citations. Instead, we investigate journal editorships as a governance set-up that shapes the selection, construction, amplification and curation of research input, output and impact.

Our evidence is the composition and characteristics of editorial boards. These elite groups of scholars have executive powers and consulting responsibilities that ultimately give credence and visibility to that part of research that is academically validated, formally published and readily accessible in general. So far, the profiles of these bodies of actors have not been subject to much systematic scrutiny (for recent inroads into this topic see Petersen, 2017, and Petersen et al., 2017). We aim to advance this agenda in the case of African studies journals through the prism of a number of dimensions: geography, gender, affiliation, research relevance, etc. Information on what may be termed “editormetrics” provides in turn leverage for describing and distinguishing the journals themselves (as well as institutions, countries, etc.).

We find that Africa-based editors occupy a minority share in the editorial structure of the leading journals on African studies. Female editors are also a minority in these top journals, with Africa-based women editors being even scarcer. Non-academic editors (i.e. those working in practitioner contexts such as NGOs, think-tanks, international organisations, etc.) are also few, while Africa-based non-academics have a quite residual share of the total population of editors. These patterns can, perhaps, invite some reflection regarding the benefits of and opportunities for greater diversity in journal editorial boards.

The paper is organised as follows. The following section makes explicit the conceptual and analytical conditions for examining journal boards. Then, the basis for considering editorships as an indicator of research organisation and dynamics is discussed. The following section refers to the particular field of African studies as a key case for applying an “editormetrics” perspective. The data is then put forward and empirical patterns discussed. Some conclusions are highlighted in the end, along with opportunities for further research and suggestions for a reflexive debate regarding the rules and roles of editorships in the current day journal industry.

## **Research intermediaries: Going upstream in the academic value chain**

Gatekeeping broadly refers to the processes and mechanisms of orchestrating influence through information control (see Barzilai-Nahon, 2009). The recognition of this phenomenon emerged in the 1950s when the existence of social filters in information flows was documented (see Shoemaker, 1991). “Gatekeepers” are those actors in positions of power at focal points of information channels, also acting as “shepherds” steering the agenda of communities and nudging organisational life. The perspective proved instrumental in unpacking related phenomena in a variety of settings, including journalism, parliamentary committees, ethnic groups, healthcare systems, managerial bureaucracies, new technology development, etc. (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008; Howells, 2006; Criscuolo et al., 2017; Wal et al., 2017).

We follow these insights and consider academic journal board members as gatekeepers in the sense of “research intermediaries”. In quantitative science studies much work goes into analysing authors and their products, to the extent that many times *scientometrics* and *bibliometrics* appear to mean the same thing (see van Raan, 2004, p. 20). However, an institutional appraisal of the actual conditions of scientific production and distribution needs to engage with the structure of the whole “research value chain”. Key “middlemen” at critical junctures of the formal scholarly pipelines matter and deserve a closer inspection. If editors are journals’ human face, information on them has analytical value.

Scarce and fragmented work exists on these agents. Editorial materials remain underexploited as empirical sources (van Leeuwen et al., 2013). Contributions tend to be rather qualitative, based on internal accounts, and often normative in intent (McAfee, 2010; Schwartz-Ziv and Weisbach, 2013; Szenberg and Ramrattan, 2014). There are, however, important exceptions (see Laband and Piette, 1994, and more recently Card and DellaVigna, 2017, Petersen, 2017, and Petersen et al., 2017). A quantitative approach to editorial governance certainly brings something to the existing toolbox of the scientometrician, of the research evaluator and of the historian of science (see Gumpenberger et al., 2016).

## **“Editormetrics” as an alternative empirical approach to the scientific enterprise**

A basic premise of the quantitative approach to scholarly gatekeeping, or “editormetrics”, is that the editorship phenomenon is a structured process. Journal editors are scholars or experts in their own right who are, nonetheless, instrumentally involved in establishing the final output of their field. Editors play a number of roles:

1. they are in the position of attracting acceptable papers (thus competing with other editors),
2. are tasked both with filtering out bad ones (“in-or-out” decisions),

3. are supposed to improve the good ones (by choosing appropriate reviewers, suggesting changes, granting publication),
4. and are interested in promoting the quality of the final publication so as to contribute to the journal's standing (raising the profile of the outlet by promoting well rounded, relevant, impactful, and citable papers).

Research intermediation can be studied with many research methods and at different levels of analysis. In what editorial gatekeeping is concerned, however, evidence is hard to come by. The actual process through which proposed drafts ultimately become published items depends on a series of steps (desk evaluations, appointment of reviewers, reviewer-editor interactions, author-reviewer feedbacks, etc.) that are rarely documented. In particular, the precise activities of the editors are not observed and mostly go unreported.

One available empirical strategy is not to focus on *editorial behaviour* but rather on *editorship structure*. Editorships, i.e. editorial roles, reflect a journal's capacity to govern itself. Journals publically exhibit a degree of information concerning the positions, numbers and names of editors, and sometimes their institutional affiliations. From a journal's board data, a considerable amount of additional elements may be traced back, such as gender, geographical location, scientific reputation, and fields of expertise. Other details, such as disciplinary background or nationality, can be difficult, ambiguous or too costly to retrieve. Thus, shifting the focus of what editors *do* to who editors *are* may be a feasible empirical strategy to describe the journals themselves and leads to questions regarding the *profiles* of editors.

In this paper, the domain of analysis is that of boards, which are composed of editors, advisors and other individuals. We will treat them here indistinctly, although sometimes it may make sense to distinguish them. One reason to do this is plain ignorance since journals hardly ever explain the division of labour between board (deciding, assisting, passive) members. This is true of the examined African studies journals, while casual observation of other journals also suggests that usually no details are given regarding editorial team appointments and actual rights and obligations.

We will assume that board members are mostly "elite" scholars who came to that position as remarkable authors, outstanding reviewers or even scientific entrepreneurs (Laband and Piette, 1994; McAfee, 2010; Fagerberg et al., 2011). As Watts (2014, p. 1) puts it: "Being named the editor of a respected academic journal is a clear signal of ability and professional esteem on many dimensions, in almost all cases including a long and well-known record of scholarship in a field or sub-field." Editors feel a degree ownership regarding the research field and the journals that support it. That is: they are invested in learned journals in their dual role "as records of ideas and research results and also as guarantors of intellectual quality, purveyors of a sort of Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval." (Solow, 2014, p. xi)

Quantifiers of editors' characteristics are of interest. This relates to the broader agenda of science and technology indicators, a vibrant field in the intersection of analysis and policy. Proxies of knowledge, research and innovation have been suggested for many years and their relative merits have been assessed in theory and practice from a variety of disciplinary angles and professional realms of application (see Patel and Pavitt, 1995, Mendonça, 2014, Lee, 2015). This literature highlights that indicators are always indirect measurements of relevant phenomena and stresses the need to balance their strengths and weaknesses (Martin and Irvine, 1983). Editorial records, as tentative proxies of a journal's knowledge base, should be submitted to the same caution.

Key advantages of editorship data are *i*) partially availability in outlets' publisher blurb, *ii*) records from the beginning on the journal, and *iii*) relatively little contamination by indicator gaming and jockeying of journal rankings (for a recent critical note on unfair competition in the academic journal industry see Martin, 2016). Regarding the limitations of journal editorial lists there are many. Usually there is little detail, or no guidance at all, concerning the specific level of activity of individual editors, the differentiation of duties inside the board, or the length of the editorial mandates.

Editor data refer only to editors as individuals. As such, this data can be a window into the tacit knowledge, academic preferences and research networks that underpin a journal. A conceptual problem, of course, is that a journal's agenda and publishing criteria is more than the sum of the profiles of its leading executives and top consultants. Also, editorship patterns are only partial indicators of research intermediation: the structure of gatekeeping is revealed but not gatekeeping behaviour. Indeed, there could be further appraisals and criticisms of this tentative new editorship indicator. Much of these insights lie in the future, however, as there is still very little experience with this type of material (see Petersen et al., 2017). Meanwhile, an available path for learning about this indicator is actually to carry on with the analysis.

## **Researching (and editing) African development**

Research on Africa is major thematic plank in many fields, including African studies proper, economic development, international relations, and others. It is also ripe with controversies among the various research communities, including on issues of substance, method and policy. The ongoing debate about inequality and the prospects for Africa's economic catch-up provides a chief example.

There has been a long-time discomfort regarding ideas on the benefits of trade liberalisation. Many African scholars and practitioners resent structural adjustment programmes conceived in the "North", while the African input is seen as lacking in the design, implementation and evaluation of development recipes (see the widely cited report by Mkandawire and Chukwuma, 1999; for a different perspective see Collier, 2015, p. 242).

Recently, the two-volume *Oxford Handbook of Africa and Economics* (edited by Monga and Lin, 2015a, 2015b) stresses that African development has failed to offer an intellectually profitable avenue for researchers and that this may be connected to the neglect of know-how from the African continent. There "has always been the intellectual hegemony of some people in Western academic institutions" and when African scholars tried to break out "their works were rarely accept and recognized" (Monga and Lin, 2015c, p. 9; for a converging view see Solow, 2014, p. xii). Articulating this perspective, Grieve Chelwa, a Zambian postdoctoral fellow at Harvard, commented in the blog of the university's Center for African Studies: "The problem is that the dominance of Western development economists leads to one prism dominating the development discourse on Africa, leading to a damaging lack of cognitive diversity." (March 20, 2016) The pointed observation caught the eye of the official magazine of the IMF:

"Oxford University's *Journal of African Economies*, a prestigious and influential publication on African economic development issues, has only one Africa-based scholar on its 27-member editorial board. (Since the blog was written, the number has grown to two.) And none of the 64 academics on the editorial board of the *Journal of Development Economics* is based in Africa to the role of African experts themselves." (*Finance & Development*, December 2016, p. 3)

Thus, the editorial composition of leading venues of scholarly work on African studies is an increasingly salient, or even pressing, object of concern. This aspect of journals is not just an internal affair. It highlights some features of the “industrial organisation” of modern research (access to sources of manuscripts, differentiation between outlets, etc.) but may also have a bearing on the very nature of the scholarly output in this field (geographical diversity, intellectual pluralism). Given that social science research is more embedded in local context (Hicks et al., 2015), and that editorial ethics is such a hot topic in the broader academic sectoral system (Hall and Martin, 2018), it makes sense to advance reflexive research agenda in terms of science policy studies and scientometric indicators.

There are more reasons why African studies is an apt field to see “editormetrics” in action. The area of development studies, at least in what economics is concerned, has risen in the past decades in terms of overall citations (Card and DellaVigna, 2013). However, the standing of researchers in developing countries seems not to be at par with that trend. Bibliometric work points out that African science is small in terms of world share and carried out usually in collaboration with American and European researchers (Adams et al., 2010). Global south and, specifically, African scientific productivity is nonetheless on the rise, and with it the expectations of new generations of scholars on the continent (Confraria and Godinho, 2015; see also Confraria et al., 2017).

## Sources and data

Our paper handles data on 284 “editorships”, i.e. positions in editorial boards and advisory panels. The focus is on five leading journals on Sub-Saharan Africa, but we included a sixth for contrasting purposes and sensitivity analysis. There is no single way to establish rank orders of journals (Adkisson, 2014, p. 174). In our case, the journals were identified with recourse to Scimago, which ranks journals using the “Scimago Journal Rank” (SJR) indicator of “scientific prestige” by computing Scopus data on articles and citations (see Guerrero-Bote and Moya-Anegón, 2012; for the purposes of the paper Scopus is considered a neutral source, since citations are highly correlated in this and other databases, Scopus is selected for convenience, Yang and Meho, 2006).

All the specialist journals bearing the word “Africa” in the title were considered in field area of “Geography, Planning and Development” (ranked for 2015), which contains 623 journals in total. There were 18 publications on Africa emphasising various angles and themes (general, comparative, geographical in scope, etc.), and our sample is the first third of this universe.

The five main journals selected for analysis are generalistic in scope: *African Affairs* (AA), *Africa* (Africa), *Journal of Modern African Studies* (JMAS), *Review of African Political Economy* (ROPE), and *Journal of Southern African Studies* (JSAS). We call these our “core” set of journals; in our case, the “top 5” cut-off point is entirely arbitrary but has been a rule of thumb in other academic exercises (see, e.g. Card and DellaVigna, 2013).

The first four journals belong to the 1<sup>st</sup> Quartile of Scimago’s ranking of scientific influence. There were two candidates for a fifth journal, both belonging to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Quartile and at a great distance from the following journal. Eventually we settled for JSAS, and kept *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* (JCAS) as a “control”. JSAS, like the other four in the “core” group is managed and published in the UK. JCAS is the only one administered from outside the UK: the JCAS is based at the Institute of Social and Economic Research at Rhodes University (in Grahamstown, South Africa, although printed in London, UK). Hence, for the sake of consistency

in the “core” group, and as a way to provide perspective, we decided to examine a total of six journals (“top 5+1”). All are in English language.

It should also be kept in mind that two of the “core” journals belong to institutional entities, they are not stand-alone journals: AA is published on behalf of the Royal African Society (London, UK), *Africa* is the journal of the International African Institute (London, UK). The “control”, i.e., JCAS, is also supported by an institution: the Institute of South Africa. Ties with esteemed societies, professional associations, and research centres do have content implications; however, the profile of the journals may evolve over time as they become more internationally-oriented (Watts, 2014, p. 6).

Our “core” group (the top 5) of journals contains 255 editorships (while our “control”, JCAS, adds a further 29 editors to the collection). Table 1 shows basic descriptors of the sample and Appendix 1 summarises the journals’ aims and history. The journal H-index, which conveys a sense of the bibliometric impact of the journal by representing the number of its papers that achieve at least *h* citations each, is drawn from Scimago (Braun et al., 2006). It must be emphasised that academic reality is dynamic, and that the table is just a snapshot in specific moment (refers to July 2016, when this data was extracted and compiled).

Table 1. Characterisation of the African studies journal sample (core+JCAS)

| Journal acronym | Scimago rank | Quartile | Journal H-index | Editorial team | Documents published (2015) |
|-----------------|--------------|----------|-----------------|----------------|----------------------------|
| AA              | 32           | Q1       | 46              | 31             | 32                         |
| Africa          | 64           | Q1       | 28              | 45             | 34                         |
| JMAS            | 81           | Q1       | 36              | 25             | 23                         |
| ROAPE           | 97           | Q1       | 32              | 73             | 56                         |
| JSAS            | 186          | Q2       | 33              | 81             | 90                         |
| JCAS            | 182          | Q2       | 20              | 29             | 28                         |

Source: Scimago and own computations from journals’ raw data, as of July 2016

A preliminary observation has to do with the variability of the number of total editors per journal (note that for convenience we tend to use editors and editorship as interchangeable terms, unless otherwise stated). For the “core” journals this figure ranges from 25 (JMAS) to 81 (JSAS). Likewise, the paper output (articles, reviews, notes, etc.) varies considerably across journals (journals publish four issues a year, with the exception of JSAS, which issues six), but is conspicuously correlated with the size of the board ( $\rho = 0.93$ ). Another observation has to do with the disparity of research impact of the journals (the leading journal of the “core five” has more than the double H-index comparing with the control journal (JCAS, the only that is based in the African continent).

For the whole pack of journals the boards were thoroughly inspected. A preliminary survey of the boards was conducted in December 2015 and a second carried out in July 2016. The final listing and identification of all editors was performed during the month January 2017 to ensure consistency. Names were hand-collected from the journal editorial lists, and all information crosschecked and disambiguated. Painstaking searches were conducted in personal webpages, Wikipedia pages, prior publications, in Scopus and Google Scholar, so as to confirm institutional belonging, avoid gender misattribution, and collect individual metrics on research performance (like the individual H-index).



It is important to distinguish between *editorships* and *editors*. All-in-all, the complete (six) journal sample has 284 editorships, but only 257 unique persons. This is because some editors (repeat-editors, for short) have management duties in more than one journal, a few even in three at the same time. Something that should be also kept in mind is that no attempt was made to ascertain editor nationality or the country of undergraduate education (although in future research it could be considered); only the location of their current professional background is considered (that is to say, we are not addressing the phenomenon of international scientific migration in any way; on this matter see Moed and Halevi, 2014).

Boards are structured bodies, i.e. they include several types of levels and specialities. Indeed, over 20 different varieties of editorial descriptors exist in our sample (see Appendix 2). Although there is some overlap of terminology, the labelling of the several editorial responsibilities is not homogenous. A difficulty therefore exists in comparing the different journals given the sheer proliferation and non-standardisation of editorial labels. Additionally, it is also worth remarking that (to our knowledge) in no journal in our sample a description of the *roles* of the several kinds of editors was available; the same for the *rules* that govern their appointment or transition from job. We therefore considered all editorships or associated experts in the analysis.

## African studies editorships, by the numbers

### Geographies of editorship

In the broad landscape of geographies, Africa-based editors are a *minority* in the top Africa-oriented journals (see Table 2). Sub-Saharan editors constitute under one-quarter of the core five journals' editorial population: 61 out of 255, or 23.9%. This share increases to 29.2% if JCAS (the only Africa-based African studies journal considered here), for sensitivity purposes, is included in the analysis.

The other side of the coin has to do with the location of the “majority” of editors. It is worth noting that the “North” (taken here as Europe and North America) absorbs about three-fourths of all editorship roles: in the top 5 journals they are 190 out of 255 (or 74.5%); if we include, JCAS the proportion of the Northern-controlled editorships drops to 69.0%. European-based editors, in particular, are the largest overall continental contingent of all (with 54.9% of all editorships this is an absolute majority in the core journals).

English-speaking/Anglo-Saxon countries constitute the individual countries holding most editorships by far and, indeed, hold an absolute majority in the African studies journal gatekeeping scene. Scholars from the UK, the US, South Africa and Canada occupy the greatest number of editorial seats: 107, 41 and 33, and 9, respectively. Together these countries take 74.5% of the editorial positions of the core-5 journals (71.5% in the six journals).

Table 2. Geographical distribution of editorial positions of the “core” (top 5) African studies journals (plus the control journal, JCAS)

| Major geographies | AA | Africa | JMAS | ROAPE | JSAS | Total | JCAS (control) |
|-------------------|----|--------|------|-------|------|-------|----------------|
| Asia              | 0  | 0      | 0    | 2     | 0    | 2     | 0              |
| Europe            | 16 | 26     | 9    | 39    | 50   | 140   | 2              |
| North Africa      | 0  | 0      | 0    | 1     | 0    | 1     | 1              |

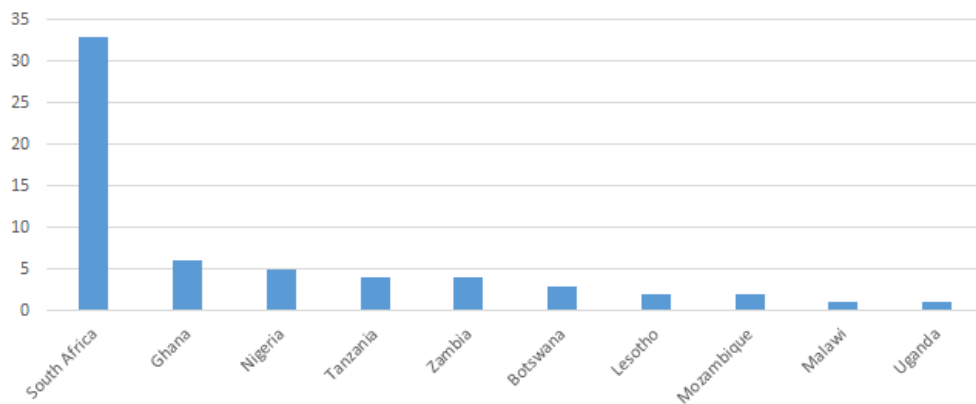
|                           |              |              |              |               |               |               |               |
|---------------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| <b>North America</b>      | 8            | 12           | 12           | 9             | 9             | 50            | 4             |
| <b>South America</b>      | 0            | 1            | 0            | 0             | 0             | 1             | 0             |
| <b>Sub-Saharan Africa</b> | 7<br>(22.6%) | 6<br>(13.3%) | 4<br>(16.0%) | 22<br>(30.1%) | 22<br>(27.1%) | 61<br>(23.9%) | 22<br>(75.9%) |

Source: own calculations

### The geographical patterns of editorships

The performance of Sub-Saharan Africa without South Africa comes out to be even more lacklustre (South Africa alone has 33 editors, i.e. more than half out of 61 Sub-Saharan occupied management seats in the core journals). There are 9 other African countries entering the boards, all English-speaking (with the sole exception of Mozambique), adding all-together to 28 editors, or to emphasise, less than South-Africa alone (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Geographical distribution of African-based editors in the African studies top 5 journals



Another observation in terms geographical distribution has to do with the journal distribution of the Africa-based editors. These are not concentrated in the highest ranked journals: AA and Africa have 11% and 10% of the 61 editors whereas an aggregate of 72% appear in the bottom two of the “top 5” journals in terms of impact (ROAPE and JSAS). In other words, the stronger the journal the smaller its inclusion of those editors living in and working on the African continent.

It is worth noting what is left for the other major former European colonial powers besides Britain: France is able to get only 5 editorships in the core journals (1 each at AA, Africa, and JMAS, and 2 in ROAPE), Belgium 3, and Portugal 2. The bias against these former colonising countries with historical ties to Africa is further underscored if the language perspective is taken: only one African country not bearing English as official language appears in the list of core (top 5) journal editors, Mozambique (Portuguese official language; nevertheless, it should also be pointed out that this country was admitted to Commonwealth in 1995, first taken in without having any constitutional tie to the British Empire).

Overall, there are 32 countries involved in the core journal editorship (for the six journals 34 countries are counted as Cameroon and Kenya appear in JCAS). For the six-journal sample 14 African (of which 12 Sub-Saharan) countries appear, a higher number than for any other continent. As the journals deal with Africa, this perhaps indicates an effort to reach out to representatives of a number of African-based countries. Table 3 shows country representation.

Table 3. Countries in which editors are based (all journals)

| Europe      | Africa       | Americas | Asia/East |
|-------------|--------------|----------|-----------|
| Belgium     | Botswana     | Brazil   | Lebanon   |
| Denmark     | Cameroon     | Canada   | Malaysia  |
| France      | Egypt        | USA      |           |
| Germany     | Ghana        |          |           |
| Greece      | Kenya        |          |           |
| Netherlands | Lebanon      |          |           |
| Norway      | Lesotho      |          |           |
| Portugal    | Malawi       |          |           |
| Sweden      | Mozambique   |          |           |
| UK          | Nigeria      |          |           |
|             | South Africa |          |           |
|             | Tanzania     |          |           |
|             | Uganda       |          |           |
|             | Zambia       |          |           |

It is, perhaps, useful to put figures in perspective. The detected African countries are 14, i.e. 24.5% of the total 54 countries in Africa. If we focus on Sub-Saharan African countries and if also apply a narrower definition to Europe (i.e. just Western Europe) it then becomes more clear that, in fact, the discrepancy between the African representation and the European representation is striking (Table 4).

Table 4. Geographical distribution of African-based editors (all journals considered)

|        | Broader definition of the territory                           | Narrower definition of the territory  |
|--------|---|---|
| Africa | 15 African countries out of 54 (all Africa):<br><b>27.7%</b>  | 14 Sub-Saharan countries of 48 (Sub-Saharan Africa):<br><b>29.2%</b>                |
| Europe | 10 European countries out of 51 (all Europe):<br><b>19.6%</b> | 10 European countries out of 15 ("Western", pre-2005 EU countries):<br><b>66.6%</b> |

### The gender dimension

Another dimension that can be explored in this elite scholarly population is gender. There are 72 women in the core group, i.e. little over a quarter of the total number editors in the African development journals (28.2%). In only one of the core journals women comprise more than one-third of the editorial group: JSAS has both the highest absolute number (29) and highest proportion of the group (35.8%). JMAS and JCAS have 5 female editors or less.

Carrying out a finer analysis of gender shows that female Africa-based presence at the top is highly underrepresented. Table 5 tabulates data from all the six journals to show that only 17 of the 83 Sub-Saharan Africa-stationed editors of our larger sample are female, i.e. 20.5%. This also makes Sub-Saharan African women editors 22.1% of total women editors (whereas African-based men are 31.9% of all male editors). This is to say, Africa-based women are proportionally scarcer than Africa-based men in these power positions.

Table 5. Geography and gender, editorial population of all six journals

| <b>Major geographies</b> | <b>Male</b> | <b>Female</b> | <b>% Female</b> |
|--------------------------|-------------|---------------|-----------------|
| Asia                     | 2           | 0             | 0%              |
| Europe                   | 99          | 43            | 30.3%           |
| North Africa             | 0           | 2             | 100%            |
| North America            | 39          | 15            | 27.8%           |
| South America            | 1           | 0             | 0%              |
| Sub-Saharan Africa       | 66          | 17            | 20.5%           |
| <b>Grand total</b>       | <b>207</b>  | <b>77</b>     | <b>27.1%</b>    |

### **The institutional configuration**

Through the prism of editorship performance we may infer something regarding the knowledge brokerage capabilities of institutional actors. In terms of the represented institutions, we map 149 in total (the six journals). The top decile is depicted in Table 6. Among the universities with most editors we find overwhelmingly British ones. This pattern points to a considerable degree of “clubability”, i.e. the same few institutions dominating top journals (Macdonald and Kam, 2009). However, it also emerges that no less than a full third of Sub-Saharan ones (including one from Botswana) are represented.

Table 6. Top universities in terms of editorial service in the 6 journals (all journals)

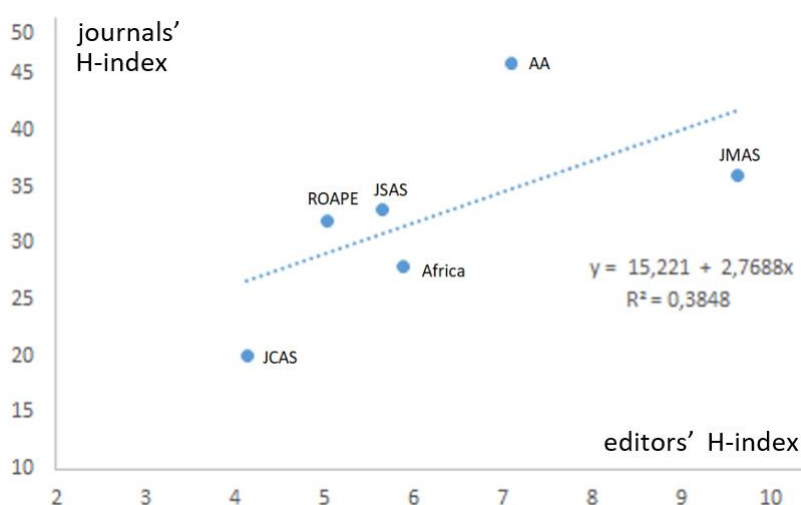
| <b>Institutions</b>                  | <b>Editorship count</b> |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| University of London (UK)            | 30                      |
| University of Oxford (UK)            | 13                      |
| University of the Witwatersrand (SA) | 10                      |
| Rhodes University (SA)               | 7                       |
| University of Cambridge (UK)         | 6                       |
| University of Manchester (UK)        | 6                       |
| University of Birmingham (UK)        | 5                       |
| African Studies Centre (UK)          | 4                       |
| University of Botswana (BO)          | 4                       |
| University of Cape Town (SA)         | 4                       |
| University of Edinburgh (UK)         | 4                       |
| University of the Western Cape (SA)  | 4                       |
| Columbia University (US)             | 3                       |
| University of Leeds (UK)             | 3                       |
| University of Michigan (UK)          | 3                       |

The bulk of the institutional affiliations editors are indeed universities, only 27 (10.6%) of the core group come from outside academia. The journals AA and ROAPE are the most institutionally diversified in both relative and absolute terms, respectively: AA has the highest proportion of non-academic (8 out of the 31 editors of AA, or 25.8%) while ROAPE has the highest absolute number (10 out of 72 editors). Non-academic editorships are distributed along institutions such as governmental agencies, NGOs, museums, etc. Most of non-academics are located in European think-tanks.

## Editorship and research performance

A relation surfaces between editors' expertise and journals' performance. We find a broadly positive connection between the average H index of the editorial teams of a given journal and the journals' own impact in this field of area studies (Figure 2). In line with the literature that emphasises editors' "proven credentials" (Adkisson, 2014, pp. 175-6), the line of best-fit points to a positive association: the highest-standing journals tending to have more impactful editors.

Figure 2. Association between editors' H-index (x-axis) and the journals' H-index (y-axis) in African studies



Journal performance is correlated with the academic prowess of editors, but with dispersion around a line of best fit. A journal like JMAS has arguably a stellar editorial board, but somewhat underperforms in terms of impact, whereas AA punches much higher than its board would allow us to predict. JCAS, a journal that is heavy on Africa-based editors, is located in the lower-left-hand side corner of the chart.

## The incidence of research excellence

Research excellence usually refers to higher quality or impact research, as measured by work receiving the largest amount of recognition. Operationally speaking, citations is an oft-used metric and the 10% most cited papers being an often-mentioned cut-off threshold (Bonaccorsi et al., 2017). The upper decile of the editor distribution, i.e., the top 25, allows an empirical window into this. The median H-index of this segment of editors is 15 (the average is 16). Europe comes in a strong position (11 editors), while North-America gets 9 and Sub-Saharan African another 5. Notably, all Sub-Saharan editors are stationed in South Africa.

Regarding gender balance: there are 16 men and 9 women, i.e., the female proportion (36%) is above what it is for the entire editorial set. All the core journals are represented in this group of very influential 25 editors (there are editors of these journals that belong to the board of JCAS as well). Only a minority of these topmost editors are "repeat editors" (i.e. editors that have seats in more than one journal board).

### **“Repeat editors” and “interlocking editorships”**

A gauge of editorial influence may be given by “repeat editors”. There are 27 repeat individual editors (that is, 10.5% of all the 257 unique editors in the full set of six journals). This is a phenomenon akin to “interlocking directorates” in the field of corporate governance, i.e. membership across multiple boards. Hence, and structurally speaking, African studies journals are thus tied together through some overlapping editors and thus enjoy channels of communication. An implication is that editors are not only “competitors”, trying to develop their different journals; the existence of board interlocks suggests that these journals share some research agenda commonalities through the networks created by such editorial linkages.

Most of these “repeat editors” hold seats in two journals, but a couple of editors (one from the UK, the other from the US, both male) are present on the boards of three journals at the same time. Of the 27 repeat editors 14 are Europe-based, 8 Africa and 5 North-America. Regarding the Africa-based editors: South Africa 5, Ghana 1, Mozambique 1 and Tanzania 1. Gender balance: 21 male, 6 female. Metrics of academic prominence show their average H-index to be 8.1 (median 8), which is above single-journals editors (average H-index 5.4) but below “excellent” editors (average H-index 15.9).

### **Editorial dynamics**

For illustrative purposes, we compute the patterns of entry and exit of editors from December 2015 to January 2017 (a very short time window). The total population grew about 1%, i.e. it is observed that there was “editorial inflation” due to net entry for the sample of six journals: there are 15 newcomers, whereas 12 editors exited.

In terms of turbulence, as the term that refers to the simultaneous flow of movement in different directions, something can also be said. The turbulence rate is computed as the module of the sum of gross arrivals and departures relative to the initial stock of actors (Pitassi, 2010). In our case, turbulence in the African studies editorial market reached something like 10.6%. Although we do not know if this phenomenon is persistent or significantly different from other “journal industries”. Notwithstanding, that turbulence exists is suggestive that editorial boards are not necessarily a *caste* (although, they can probably be described as clubs). Surely, churn may have different degrees of intensity depending on the standing of editorship positions but this aspect we are not assessing. With all the caveats, our partial finding nonetheless points to some dynamics in this elite academic population; this observation runs against the enduring appeal of straightforward groupthink charges and naïf conspiracy accusations surrounding how editorial boards work (see Laband and Piette, 1994; McAfee, 2010; Szenberg and Ramrattan, 2014).

Furthermore, finer evidence of the composition of change can be documented. Looking at the journal level we find that it was mostly ROAPE that expanded its demography of editors, while the other journals mostly did replacements. Moreover, gender-wise there was a slight rebalancing: more turbulence among male (with negative net entry) and less so among female editors (with positive net growth). In terms of geography, there was a contraction of the Europe-based editors (9 go while 3 arrive) and an expansion of Africa-based ones (3 exit and 8 enter). In other words,

these results could hopefully reflect a trajectory of greater pluralism in our sample in the sense of supporting Africa-based editors.

### A more integrated picture

In this section, we integrate some of the insights the editorial perspective on African studies yielded so far. Table 7 presents basic descriptive correlations, which are interpretable in this way: Africa-based editors tend to not be in the most impactful journals, tend to be mostly academic and not women. Journal impact correlated positively with non-academic affiliation and the female gender.

Table 7. Correlations between journal performance and editor attributes (all journals)

|                        | H-index of the journal | Africa-based % | Non-Academic % | Women % |
|------------------------|------------------------|----------------|----------------|---------|
| H-index of the journal | 1                      | -0,66          | 0,76           | 0,43    |
| Africa-based %         |                        | 1              | -0,18          | -0,41   |
| Non-Academic %         |                        |                | 1              | 0,24    |
| Women %                |                        |                |                | 1       |

This analysis is further complemented by contrasting board diversity with academic impact. Our strategy was to position the six journals using a summary index framework, which compares journals and may be used to help identifying issues they need to address. The goal is to find one synthetic variable for capturing the multivariate balance of a journal board (which for the purposes of this particular analysis we term “evenness”, in the sense of balance or equity) and another synthetic variable for encapsulating the performance of the journal in terms of its scholarly business (or “effectiveness”).

A first step is establishing the composite indicator, namely, selecting its underpinning variables. For *Evenness* we use the three already mentioned variables (the proportion of Africa-based editors, non-academic editors, and female editors in the journal). For *Effectiveness* the idea is to convene variables that could show the output quality and quantity, the following were chosen: the H index of the journal, the number of repeat editors, and the volume of papers published in one year.

A second step is deriving a compute a normalised score for each journal in any given variable ( $I_{ic}$ ). The maximum score is 1 and refer to highest data point for a journal in a given variable; similarly, the minimum score is 0 and set for the lowest journal in that variable; the remaining journal’s score is computed with reference to this scale. The same procedure is carried out for *Effectiveness*. Hence, the score for each journal  $i$  on each variable  $c$  is:

$$I_{ic} = \frac{x_{ic} - \min_c(x_i)}{\max_c(x_i) - \min_c(x_i)}$$

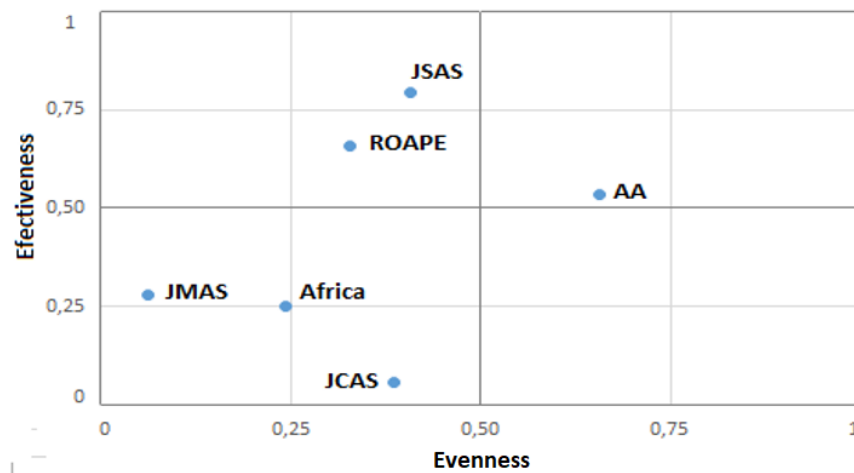
The third step is then to compute the (unweighted) composite indicator for Evenness; this is given as the arithmetic average of the three re-scaled variables. The same is done for Effectiveness. The unweighted summary index may be understood as the baseline, but it is just a special case in which all the variables are assumed to be equally important. Notwithstanding, weights ( $w$ ) can be

assigned to all variables ( $q$ ) within each composite indicator so as to assess the sensitivity or robustness of the patterns obtained. The general case of the summary index is:

$$CI = \sum_{q=1}^Q W_q I_{qc}$$

This measurement approach allows, then for a further comparative analysis of journals. Figure 4 shows the pattern emerging from calculating the position of journals in the two different dimensions for which the composite approach was implemented (in an unweighted version). Only one journal shows relative strengths in both Evenness and Effectiveness: AA. Two others are leading in terms of Effectiveness but lagging in what Evenness is concerned: JSAS and ROAPE. The other three journals perform relatively modestly in both dimensions.

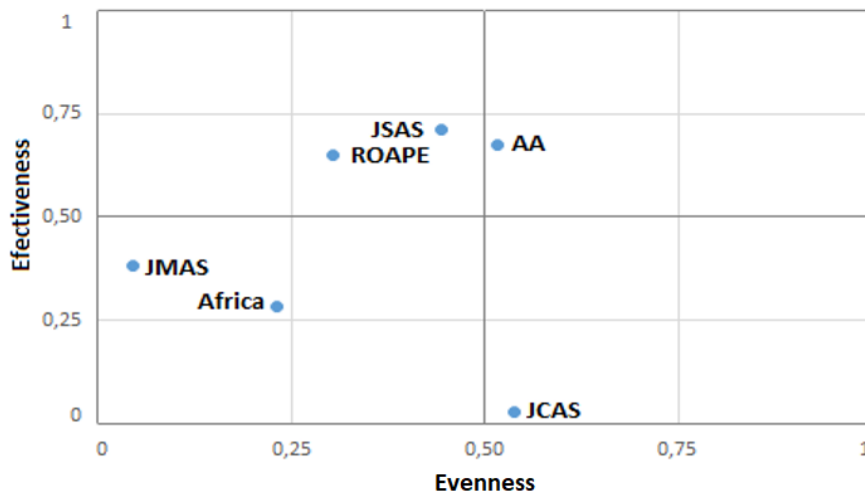
Figure 4. The summary index of evenness vs effectiveness, unweighted (all journals)



The exercise is done again, now assigning weights to each variable in both dimensions. Weighting is a delicate procedure, as it is difficult to warrant against arbitrariness. Here we gave weights 3, 2 and 1 (with 6 in denominator) respectively to each variable, as listed above. The result is shown in Figure 5: the core 5 journals are still in the same quadrants as before, but the control (JCAS) proves unstable as it shoots ahead in the direction of more Evenness (this is sole Africa-based journal, and the presence of Africa-based editors is at a premium in the weighted version of the index). Overall, the representation of the journals in this framework seems considerably robust.



Figure 5. The summary index of equity vs effectiveness, weighted (all journals)



### Standing at the gates of African studies, a discussion

Scholars from the global periphery of the academic system are hard to find in the exclusive circle of editors that manage the leading African studies academic journals in the field area of “Geography, Planning and Development” Among the core journal editorships less than 25% are Africa-based, little over 25% are women, 10% are non-academic. The analysis reveals two other stylised facts: first, the northern-hemisphere dominance is visible in terms of not only individuals but also in terms of institutions; second, there is a minor penetration of African-based editors in the highest-ranking journals.

The picture can look brighter from other angles, however. African countries are the most numerous in list, suggesting a substantial (even if thin) degree of Sub-Saharan diversity. Also, women editors display a robust standing. What is more, recent trends suggest an increasing pluralism in boards as the proportion of Africa-based and women editors is found to strengthen over the (short) time window we analysed. It may well be that barriers to entry in editorial clubs are eroding but the pattern remains, notwithstanding, that non-African heads dominate Africa-focused academic journals.

The effects of editorial activity of editorial activity seem far from trivial. Being an editor at a key journal is an important way to leverage “entrée”, i.e. building reputation with fellow scholars and establishing connections to many other authors and reviewers (Perlman, 2004, p. 362). Besides access, the day-to-day editorial activity is also a way to keep near the frontier of the subject and to broaden one’s expertise (McAfee, 2010, p. 7). But there are externalities. Due to lower transaction costs in attracting and evaluating papers, editors are likely to have preferences regarding specific research groups or themes that are closer to their preference or background (Laband and Piette, 1994). Editors may follow the evaluation of reviewers but that is not the whole story; they do draw upon on “private information” to select what papers to desk reject or to invite for revision (Card and DellaVigna, 2017). The activity of editors also has direct impacts on the careers of others given the mentoring aspects of dealing with authors and the self-confidence that reviewing tasks brings to young academics chosen for such responsibilities (Ramrattan and Szenberg, 2014, p. 366; Lerbak and Hanson, 2017, p. 455).

Scholars with responsibilities in editorial planning and the academic control of journals have a bearing on the future directions of a research community and in the definition of what constitutes the mainstream in a field, with cascading impacts on knowledge production, expert recruitment, and policy experimentation. Indeed, diversity of panel backgrounds and expertise matter at least in other knowledge settings: less diversity may reduce the preference for novelty in expert panels on technology evaluation (Criscuolo et al., 2016), but so far no clear link has been found of a link between editorial diversity and journal impact (Petersen et al., 2017). Re-appraisals of editorial policy are rarely seen in journals (see Blank, 1991), but with every renewal of editors there is chance to break with past editorial routines (Card and DellaVigna, 2013, p. 161).

The possibility exists that, under a conservative or opaque editorial superstructure, some researchers and topics may find hurdles in getting through the filters of conventional academic publishing. These difficulties are compounded by the English-dominated context that permeates the business of academic publishing. One wonders, for instance, how the work of an early-career researcher working on the migration between Cape Verde and São Tomé can fair in such an ecology of journals. Are too local or out-of-the-box agendas too promptly dismissed as low relevance research simply because they slip between the prevailing editorial profiles? As Chavarro et al. (2016) point out, one strategy to countervail filters can be seen in the Latin American experiments with own-language, non-mainstream open access electronic journals; research published there have been contributing to fill research gaps of local value.

Editorial sorting matters and the cumulative effect of limited pluralism in boards is likely to have implications both for research and researchers. Hiring more African-based editors can hypothetically help mitigating the asymmetries among researchers, collaborations and agendas because everyday contact yields a different sensitivity in weighting arguments and evidence. An investment in diversity would arguably contribute to enlarge the pool of competing views and incentivise more submission from less privileged corners of global academia (Adams et al., 2014; Ondari–Okemwa, 2007). Pluralism expectedly allows boards to guard against blind spots of editors' tacit knowledge, the structural holes of their networks, and ensure that personal views regarding future directions of the field are kept in check. However, prescriptions do not follow easily from observation. Any gains in terms of inclusion or equity, as might be the case with more African-based editors, cannot be expected to mechanically convert into research quality or higher journal impact.

## Conclusions

The role of African scholars in journals covering Africa is little understood and rarely measured. Extant research has highlighted a severe and persistent gaps in terms of scientific output from this continent, but there are reasons to believe that such an inquiry has only scratched the surface of the “research value chain”. By adopting an *Editormetric* approach we uncover revealing patterns in the population of elite scholars that *run* journals, the prime vehicles of academic dissemination. Indeed, we find that scholars from Africa are underrepresented in a sample of five top-level journals happens of African studies. A key finding is that only less than 25% of the senior brokers that edit these journals are Africa-based.

Accounting for editorships is important as a research agenda, as source of critical insight for science policy, and a guide for journal managers. First, the governance of the “journal industry”

is ill-documented and is worth studying as subject in its own right. Second, editorships are a valuable empirical resource to assess global outreach and the influence of given communities of researchers and institutions. Third, several notions of editor diversity may be useful for benchmarking disciplines and their outlets. Notwithstanding, as we tried to cast some light into the structure of scholarly editing in academic journals, a number of limitations called our attention. The actual editorial decisions and the journals' inner workings remain unobserved, and none of the structural patterns identified were allowed to support undue inferences regarding discriminating behaviour or biased editorial choices.

Overall, the application of this approach to African studies reveals a number of substantive empirical results. However variegated in their profiles, the leading African studies journals generally show themselves poor in terms of Africa-based editors. Only a minority of such key research intermediaries are based on the African continent and even fewer are women. Researchers and institutions operating in Anglo-saxon contexts were found to top research "excellence" rankings; conversely, African-based editors are concentrated away from the top journals and usually are not "repeat editors". A link between editor expertise and journal impact was observed. A phenomenon of "interlocking directorships" was documented and editorial "inflation" and "turbulence" described.

This paper is an attempt at taking editorial data seriously. Journal board members play a central role in scholarly governance. Given the methodological difficulties, a key recommendation is that more studies of this kind should be conducted. Surely, there is ample empirical material hidden at plain sight that complements other approaches (such as bibliometrics). Normative analysis is different, and should at least keep simplistic implications at bay. For instance, the imposition of quotas of any kind would strike a bizarre note in the realm of science. However, it is also true that journals could improve their accountability, their internal balance and their self-governance mechanisms. None of the journals in the sample provides readily accessible information regarding how editorial powers are allocated and how editors are nominated. This lack of explicit guidelines is surprising given editors' leverage in steering the direction of published research and the overall standing of surveyed journals. In what concerns the broader academic sectoral system, science policy could strive for openness and prefer clearer benchmarks regarding the transparency over the rules and roles of editorships.

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## Appendix 1

### African studies journals, in the area of “geography, planning and development” - brief outline of the sample

*African Affairs* (AA) – The oldest journal of venue for African studies papers. Founded in 1901 after the death of Mary Kingsley, a scientist and explorer. It changed its name in 1944 from *Journal of the Royal African Society* and today is published by the Oxford University Press. In its website it depicts itself as “the top ranked journal in African Studies”. This is an inter-disciplinary journal, and focuses on the politics and international relations of sub-Saharan matters.

*Africa* (Africa) – The journal describes itself as the “the premier journal devoted to the study of African societies and culture.” It is open to interdisciplinary research, including the humanities, social sciences, and environmental sciences. It purports to give attention to the “African production of knowledge, highlighting the work of local African thinkers and writers”. Its first volume was in 1928 and is printed by Cambridge University Press.

*Review of African Political Economy* (ROAPE) – This journal was established in 1974 by a group of scholars and activists in the UK and Africa. It offers a “radical analysis of trends, issues and social processes in Africa, adopting a broadly materialist interpretation of change.” The journal is committed to understanding political challenges and projects of radical transformation. It offers a harbour for critical research on inequality, exploitation, oppression, social movements, etc. Taylor and Francis publishes it.

*Journal of Modern African Studies* (JMAS) – Since 1963 the journal provides a coverage of African politics, economies, societies and international relations. It positions itself for students and academics, but also for general readers and practitioners “living and working both inside and outside the continent.” It commits to stand neutral on political and ideological grounds, but engages with “controversial issues in order to promote a deeper understanding of what is happening in Africa today.” It is published by Cambridge University Press.

*Journal of Southern African Studies* (JSAS) – The publication pursues issues of interest for the region of Southern Africa. It is open to inter-disciplinary research from the fields of history, economics, sociology, demography, anthropology, geography, development studies, administration, law, political science, political economy, international relations, etc. It periodically organises and supports conferences to this end, sometimes in the region. It started in 1974 and is published by Taylor and Francis.

*Journal of Contemporary African Studies* (JCAS) – JCAS was launched in 1981 by the Africa Institute of South Africa (AISA). Later, in 1991, it moved to the Institute of Social and Economic Research at Rhodes University (Grahamstown, South Africa). This interdisciplinary journal seeks to promote “an African-centred scholarly understanding of societies on the continent and their location within the global political economy.” It welcomes perspectives from the social sciences and the humanities to cover topics such as culture, development, education, the environment, gender, government, labour, land, leadership, social movements, etc. It started in 1981 and is published by Taylor and Francis.



## Appendix 2

### Titles or labels referring to different types of editors in journals

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <p>AA</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Co-Editor;</li> <li>• Editorial Assistant;</li> <li>• Book Reviews;</li> <li>• Editorial Advisory Board</li> </ul>   | <p>Africa</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Co-Editor;</li> <li>• Reviews Editor;</li> <li>• Local Intellectuals Editor;</li> <li>• Editorial Advisory Board</li> </ul>             |
| <p>ROAPE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Editorial Working Group;               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Editor;</li> <li>- Book Reviews Editor;</li> <li>- Deputy Chair of Editorial Working Group;</li> <li>- Chair of Editorial Working Group;</li> <li>- Affiliate;</li> <li>- Production Editor;</li> <li>- Hon. Treasurer;</li> <li>- Briefings and Debates Editor;</li> </ul> </li> <li>• International Advisory Board;</li> <li>• Africa Editor;</li> <li>• Contributing Editor</li> </ul> | <p>JMAS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Editor;</li> <li>• Assistant Editor;</li> <li>• Editorial Advisory Board;</li> <li>• Contributing Editor</li> </ul>                       |
| <p>JSAS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chair/Editorial Board;</li> <li>• Senior Editor;</li> <li>• Editor;</li> <li>• Editorial Co-Ordinator;</li> <li>• Book Review Editor;</li> <li>• Editorial Board;</li> <li>• Editorial Advisory Board</li> </ul>   | <p>JCAS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chief Editor;</li> <li>• Co-Editor;</li> <li>• Editorial Committee;</li> <li>• Book Reviews Editor;</li> <li>• Editorial Board</li> </ul> |