

Using Open Educational Resources in Online Welfare Communities: Facebook as an Arena for Open Scholarship across the Commonwealth

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Abstract

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1 INTRODUCTION

Over a decade after the term 'open educational resources' (OER) was first used the potential of OER to break down barriers to learning has yet to be fully realised around the Commonwealth. Lane (2013, p.141) observes that 'today the OER movement is still dominated by higher education institutions (HEIs) publishing their own resources' and that 'much of the discussion and debate about the potential value of OER has centred on the benefits of OER to those HEIs, to higher education teachers and to higher education students'. Lane argues, however, that 'the very openness of OER means that they can be used by more than this already highly educated group...they can also be used for more interest-driven informal learning'.

The fairly recent move towards Open Educational Practices (OEP), 'which support the (re)use and production of OER through institutional policies, promote innovative pedagogical models, and respect and empower learners as co-producers' (Ehlers, 2011, p. 4), goes some way to realising the original aims of the open education movement in moving from a supply-push, educator-driven mode of learning to a demand-pull mode which is responsive to learners' needs and interests (to use Seely-Brown and Adler's (2008) distinction). However, the shift in emphasis from OER to OEP is still largely focused on the use of OER in formal education rather than exploring ways of using OER to meet the needs of informal learners. This paper reports on one form of open educational practice focused on meeting the needs of informal learning communities and widening access to OER - the 'public-facing open scholar' role - and its enactment in six Facebook groups in Africa and Asia.

1.1 The public-facing open scholar

The authors have been developing the public-facing open scholar role since 2011. The role revives the centuries-old practice of 'public academic' which, in Europe, found prominence in the theatrical public lectures of 18th century English scientist Humphry Davy. 21st century public academics such as the UK's Professor Brian Cox - a particle physicist and ex-pop musician - use radio, TV and the Web to disseminate their work and cultivate celebrity status. However, these scholars all tend to exert a top-down influence, giving the public knowledge academics deem they need rather than what they ask for. The public-facing open scholar role inverts this dynamic by working with online communities who might benefit from OER, identifying members' expressed needs and then sourcing OER to meet those needs. As such, the role is an extension of Weller's 'digital scholar' - 'someone who employs digital, networked and open approaches to demonstrate specialism in a field' (Weller, 2011, Chapter 1) - broadening Weller's conception of digital scholarship to include enacting OEP beyond formal education and bringing OER to the people who can most benefit from them.

There are five steps to performing the public-facing open scholar role:

1.1.1 Find a community and identify its OEP-readiness

An academic may already have links with a community due to personal interest or charitable work, or may choose to work with a community linked with their subject specialism. When selecting a community with which to work the academic should first assess that community's capacity to be 'self-educating' (Burbules, 2006) and thus potentially receptive to open educational practices. Galley's Community Indicators Framework is useful here. Galley *et al* (2010) suggest that fully developed communities share four indicators

- 'identity', 'participation', 'cohesion' and 'creative capability' (see Figure 1) - which develop in sequence and can therefore be used to evaluate a community's strength. The presence of all four indicators suggests that a community is likely to have the capacity to be 'self-educating'.

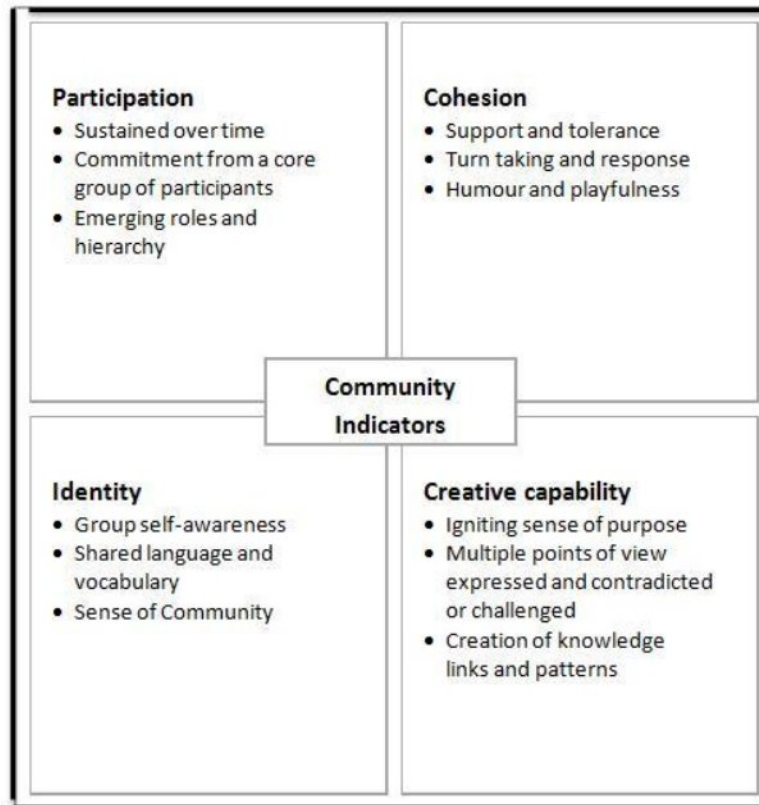


Figure 1: Galley's Community Indicators Framework (Galley et al, 2010)

1.1.2 Listen to the needs of the community

Operating on a demand-pull basis, academics should be attentive and responsive to the ever-changing needs of their chosen community in terms of content, complexity and educational level.

1.1.3 Simultaneously, establish your own credibility.

Trust is an important part of relationship-building and information-exchange in social networks (O'Brien and Torres, 2012) and academics should therefore attempt to establish their credibility as soon as possible in order to gain community members' trust. Palmieri, et al. (2012, p. 48) observe that self-disclosure on an individual's Facebook Page can reduce perceived uncertainty about them and that both breadth and depth of self disclosure are important in developing trust. Self-disclosure methods for an academic could include:

- Using a profile photo;
- Stating professional affiliations and personal links with the community focus;
- Giving a weblink for professional bodies to which they belong;
- Linking to social networking profiles (e.g. LinkedIn and Twitter) where evidence of participation in a network can be seen.

Academics should be attentive to community rules about self-disclosure and should also follow any social media-use guidelines given by their employing institution.

1.6 Search OER repositories and collections for resources that might meet those needs and then share them with the community

When sourcing OER the public-facing open scholar should consider resources' content, complexity and level. Sharing OER with community members might involve an academic encouraging discussion around them, perhaps comparing and contrasting several resources on the same topic to draw out their strengths,

weaknesses, quality and provenance. This, in turn, could show community members how to evaluate self-sourced OER. Academics should also offer guidance about where other OER might be found.

1.7 Disseminate information about the community's needs

An academic with a network of contacts in formal education and a social media presence can play a valuable role in disseminating information about a community's unmet needs, either in academic institutions or using Twitter or blogs. In particular, academics might lobby for further OER to be released, for the license to be changed on an existing resource, or for a resource to be re-released in a more accessible format.

Figure 2 shows how the collaboration between a public-facing open scholar and online communities might work.

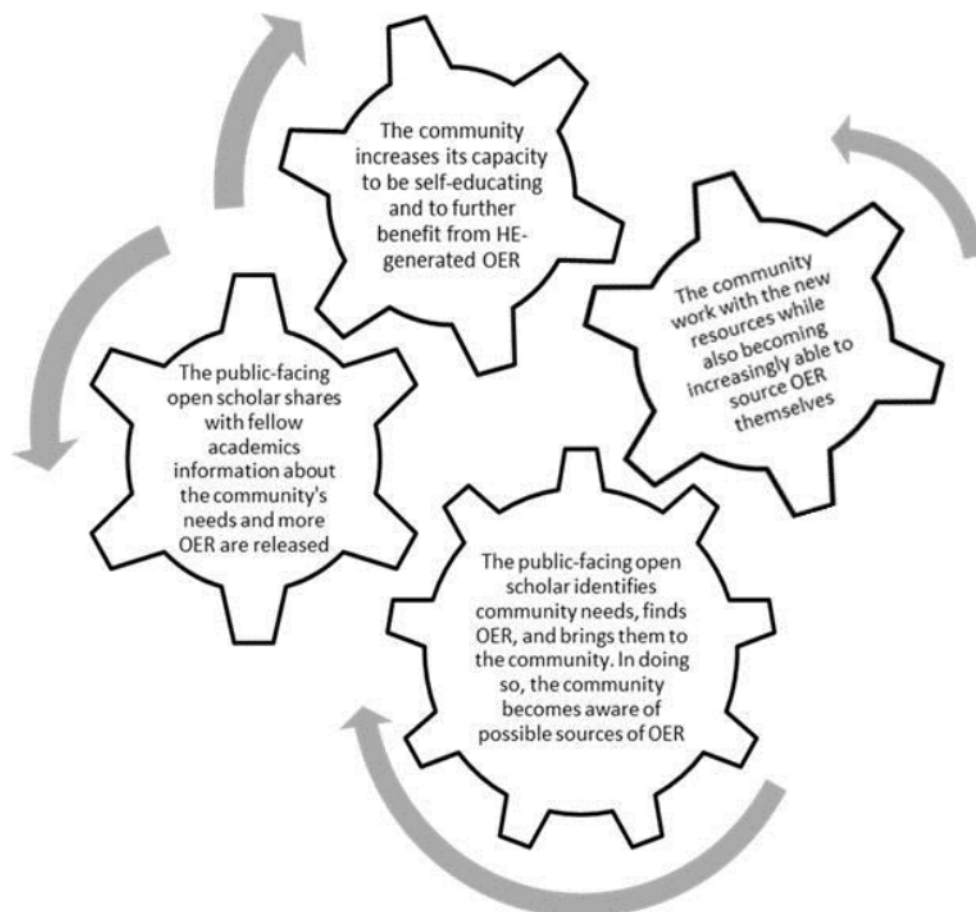


Figure 2: The collaboration between a public-facing open scholar and an online community

2 Methods

We piloted the public-facing open scholar role within UK voluntary sector online welfare communities who were using bulletin board-style forums for information sharing and peer support (see Coughlan & Perryman, 2012; 2013). This paper reports on a further phase of development - performing the role in autism-focused Facebook groups. Facebook was chosen for its popularity as a social networking platform throughout the Commonwealth and the autism focus was a continuation of the pilot emphasis on welfare communities.

The Facebook study commenced in April 2013 with the researcher joining and evaluating 20 English language-using¹ autism-related Facebook groups in Asia and Africa - continents chosen in order to extend the geographical spread of our research. The groups were assessed against Galley's (2010) Community Indicators Framework for their capacity to be self-educating and six case study groups were selected (see Figure 3).

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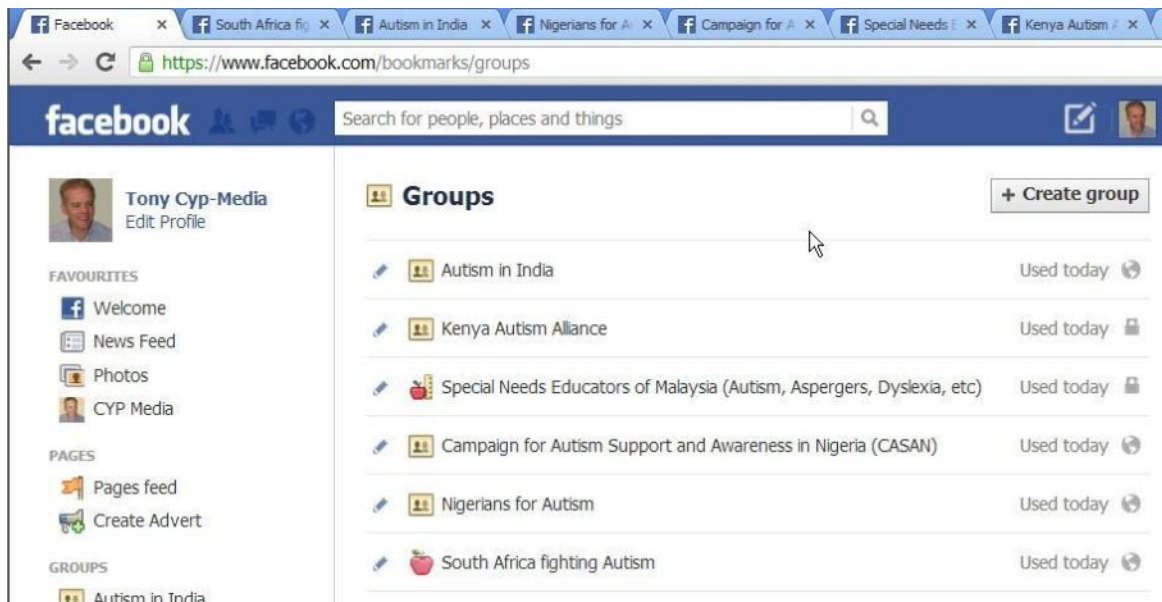


Figure 3: The case study groups shown on the researcher's Facebook groups page

Having gained permission to perform the research from each group's moderator the researcher performed Step 2 of the public-facing open scholar role - 'listen to the needs of the community' - by spending several weeks reading all messages in group and posting a few 'Likes' to these messages. Step 3 - 'establish your own credibility' - involved the researcher linking his Facebook personal profile to his Facebook page (www.fb.me/freeCYPmedia), which gives details of his employer and professional expertise. Performing Step 4, the researcher assembled a master list of 40 autism-related OER, seven of which he has since shared in response to the identified needs of members from the case study communities. When sharing resources the researcher added accompanying explanation, including highlighting their relevance and, in four groups, posting two similar resources to allow comparison between them (see Figure 4). He has also commented on existing posts in each community, thanking people and asking questions.



Figure 4: The researcher comparing two similar resources

Performing Step 5 - 'disseminate information about the community's unmet needs' - saw the researcher making five tweets asking for relevant resources to be released with Creative Commons licenses and asking for mobile-friendly versions of existing resources (see Figure 5).

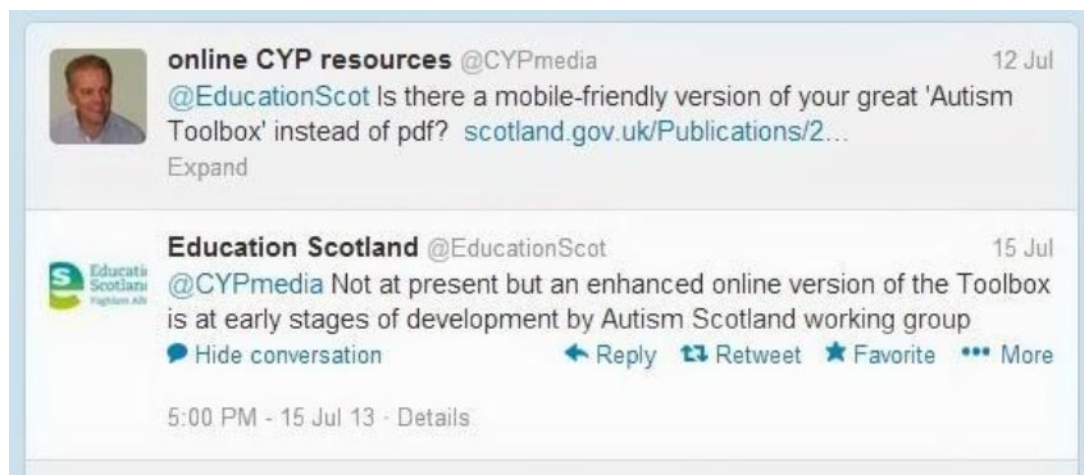


Figure 5: Twitter exchange between the researcher (@CYPmedia) and Education Scotland (@EducationScot)

3. Findings and implications:

Our findings suggest that the value of the public-facing open scholar role in widening access to learning via OER extends beyond the UK to Commonwealth countries in Africa and Asia. In addition, it highlights some differences in performing the role in Facebook groups and in online forum-based communities. The researcher began performing the role with the case study groups in May 2013 and is still working with them. The findings reported here cover May to July 2013. The researcher is finding it invaluable to be able to learn from the up-to-the-minute experiences described by members of the six groups and to gain knowledge of resources from outside academic circles.

3.1 About the case study groups

The case study groups differ in various ways but show commonalities in behaviour patterns. All six have moderators and are self-educating, evidenced in particular through high levels of resource-sharing. Two groups are closed but it is not difficult to join any of the groups. The Nigerian groups clearly comprise both local and non-resident members (the latter typically located in the UK or US). This is less noticeable in the other groups. Interestingly, the busiest groups (see Table 1) each have a core element of between 6 and 10 active participants, irrespective of the number of members (which varies from 115 to 600).

	Campaign for Autism Support and Awareness in Nigeria (CASAN)	Nigerians for Autism	Autism in India	South Africa fighting Autism	Kenya Autism Alliance	Special Needs Educators of Malaysia (Autism, Asperger's, Dyslexia, etc.)
Open/closed	Open	Open	Open	Open	Closed	Closed
Number of members (July 2013)	1138	693	614	115	589	125
Number of core group participants	2	5	10	6	8	9
Number of timeline posts	71	150	174	117	133	104
Number of individuals making posts	8	29	56	27	36	19
Number of comments	30	117	70 (rarely more than 1-2 per post)	209 (maximum 36 per post)	569 (22 posts attracted over 10 comments)	95 (typically 1-2 per post)
Number of Likes	52	232	196	237 (plus emoticon use)	633	195
Posts & comments made via mobile devices	13 (13%)	103 (38%)	6 (2%)	82 (25%)	220 (31%)	16 (8%)

Table 1: Characteristics of the six case study groups and participation levels from January to May 2013

There is little variation in the number of timeline posts per month in each group (ranging from 100 to 170), irrespective of the group size (see Table 1 and Figure 6). However, there is a huge variation in the number of comments made (see Figure 6) and this is indicative of a broader distinction between two overall patterns of behaviour that emerged across the six case study groups. The Indian and Malaysian groups have the highest levels of link and document sharing and can be seen as particularly **object-focused**, while the South African and Kenyan groups, featuring a relatively high number of comments on timeline posts (see Figure 6) can be seen as **discursive and relationship-focused**. Interestingly, the Kenyan group also featured a high level of Likes (see Figure 6), which corresponds with a relationship-focused behaviour pattern.

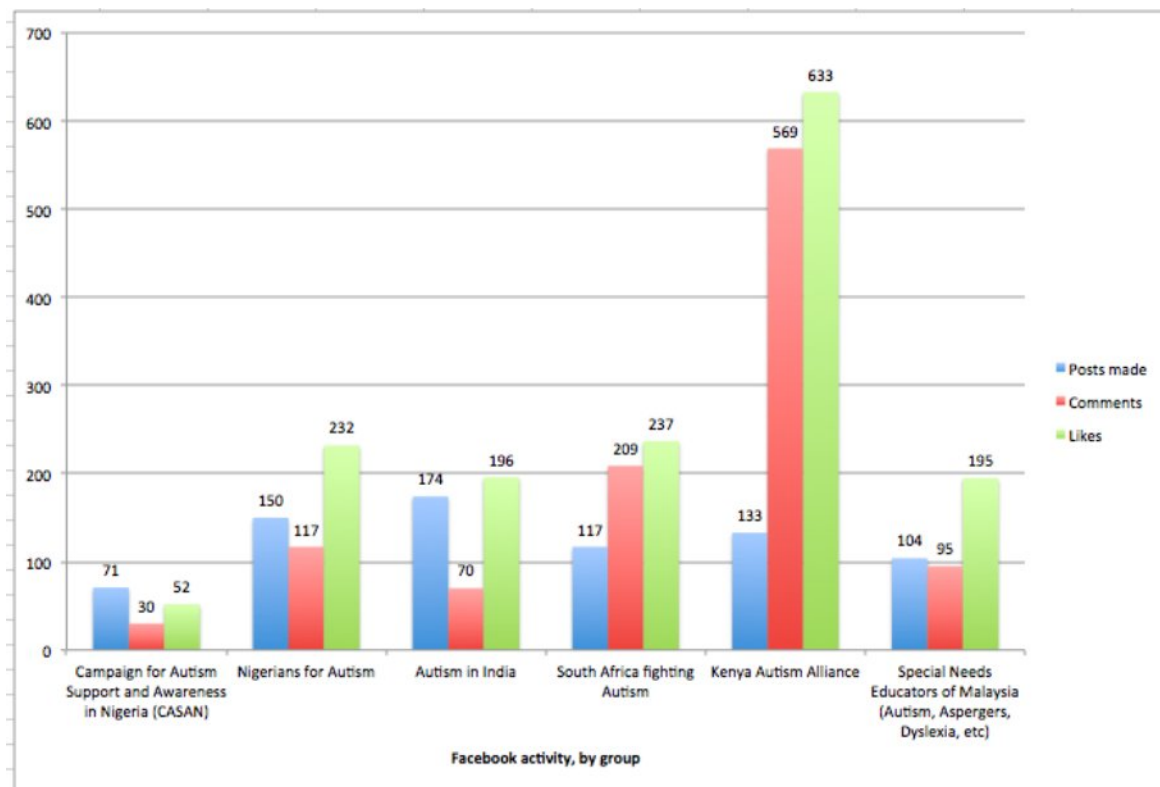


Figure 6: Posts, comments and Likes between January to May 2013, by group

These behaviour patterns appear unconnected with groups' openness. For example, the South Africa and Kenya groups, open and closed respectively, fall into the 'discursive' relationship-oriented category, due to the high number of comments (see Figure 6), and are considerably more discursive than the Indian and Malaysian groups who do much more link-sharing, with very little discussion, and fall into the object-focused behaviour pattern. The Indian group shows a particularly high level of document sharing. A final finding concerns the widespread use of mobile devices to make posts and comments in three of the groups: 38% of the posts and comments were made by mobile devices in the Nigerians for Autism group, 31% in the Kenyan group and 25% in the South African group. The high level of mobile devices in these groups (see Table 1 and Figure 8) reflects the level of smartphone use in these countries.

3.2 About performing the public-facing open scholar role within Facebook groups

Sharing is intrinsic to Facebook and it was an easy transition to broaden this to include needs-led sharing of relevant OER. The case study groups were all receptive to the researcher's interventions, voicing positive comments, Likes and messages of thanks. With the exception of the South African group there were very few direct requests for help. However, closely following each community revealed the pertinent issues for each group and allowed the researcher to judge which resources would match which communities in terms of topic and level.



Figure 7: The researcher sharing a relevant resource

The study revealed several ways in which performing the public-facing open scholar role in Facebook differs from doing so in forum-based communities. For example, Facebook timeline posts are typically shorter than forum messages and are often typed on a mobile device (see Table 1), offering less opportunity for nuanced communication. The dominance of image-sharing has also been a challenge. Infographics and diagrams are very suitable for sharing via Facebook but the researcher has found very few with an open license. In contrast, many OER are text-heavy and locked in inaccessible PDF formats.

3.3 Implications for performing the public-facing open scholar role in Facebook

The study findings indicate that performing the role in Facebook can be just as effective in widening access to OER as doing so within online forum-based communities. Also, object-focused and relationship-focused/discursive groups appear to be equally suitable for an academic's interventions. However, an open academic needs to adapt to the constraints that the Facebook platform imposes - for example, the typically brief messages offer little space for lengthy explanations of an OER's relevance. An academic working in Facebook should also be mindful that content will be viewed on a mobile device by many community members, especially in countries where mobile device use is particularly widespread. They should therefore attempt to source mobile-friendly OER where possible in addition to lobbying for the release of mobile-compatible versions of resources.



Figure 8: Information request within the South African group. Of the 17 responses, 15 were via mobiles.

3.4 Implications for widening access to education across the Commonwealth using OER

Our findings also show that the public-facing open scholar role, when enacted in Facebook groups, can help to maximise the potential of OER to widen access to education across the Commonwealth, both by increasing awareness of OER's existence and working with communities in evaluating resources, and by using a popular platform. However, the digital divide remains a persistent barrier to OER use in many countries as does the dominance of English (plus Spanish and French) language resources. A growing campaign for the localisation of OER (e.g. Ivins, 2012) is highlighting the need not only for resources to be produced in/translated into many languages, but also the fact that localisation involves adapting imagery, pedagogy and terminology that may differ between cultures and countries.

A related consideration is the need for public-facing open scholars around the Commonwealth, again allowing for the role to be performed by someone with an understanding of the culture(s) represented in a given Facebook group. Such academics might also work with communities in localising resources for their own countries on a crowdsourcing basis. Future development of the role could usefully include additional promotion and dissemination activities designed to inspire potential public-facing open scholars to begin performing the role in their own countries and interest areas.

3.5 Advancing the social and economic development of communities

Our work with national Facebook groups also suggests that OER and the public-facing open scholar role can contribute to the social and economic development of both virtual and real-world communities by providing a low-cost way of nurturing groups in which meta-skills such as information-sourcing and evaluation are developed. As mentioned earlier, at least two of our case study groups included non-resident members, showing evidence of Facebook groups as a digital diaspora (Brinkerhoff, 2009). Digital diasporas are held to improve members' quality of life in the host society and contribute to socio-economic development in the homeland (see Brinkerhoff, 2009) and therefore in contributing to the development of such groups the public-facing open scholar also contributes to health of the diaspora.

We had intentionally chosen national groups, but in during our research we also identified pan-national groups focused on health and wellbeing topics, e.g. 'Africa for Africa's Children'

(<https://www.facebook.com/groups/440249522657375/>) (585 members). Performing the public-facing open scholar role with such groups could provide a valuable means of supporting regional learning and collaboration and the model could even be extended to cover pan-Commonwealth groups, for example the 'Commonwealth Youth Programme, Africa Centre' (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/cypafrica/members>) (19,575 members).

4 Conclusion

In all, the substantial audience of receptive Facebook welfare communities encountered during this study indicates the potential for broadening access to open educational resources by performing the public-facing open scholar role within Facebook groups across the Commonwealth. However, the problem remains that there is a dearth of openly licensed mobile-friendly and engaging OER at different levels of complexity. This, in turn, has implications for Weller's (2011) argument about the possibilities for using university-produced long-tail content in that if such content is released in an inappropriate format (for example PDF, long videos or Flash) then it is of little use to mobile device users such as those that are common in Facebook. On the basis of this study it is arguable that the development and release of mobile-friendly OER should be a priority focus for the OER movement as a whole.

Having piloted the public-facing open scholar role and adapted it to work with Facebook groups we are now issuing a call-to-action for academics in the OER and open education movements Commonwealth-wide to perform the role in communities aligned with their own interests and subject specialisms. To date, at least 5 million Facebook groups exist (REF) and with every academic who begins sharing open educational resources with Commonwealth Facebook groups the potential of OER to widen participation in education will be increasingly realised, as will OER's potential to advance the social and economic development of Commonwealth communities and nations through informal learning around health and other aspects of life.

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