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Deacon, Harriet

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The Archival Platform, a new networking, advocacy and research initiative

Harriet Deacon
Archival Platform, South Africa
harriet@conjunction.co.za

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Introduction

The Archival Platform is a new research, advocacy and networking project in South Africa, initiated in May 2009 and formally launched in November 2009. The "archive" is understood in this project as material traces of the past in public/private archives and collections, heritage sites and cultural practices. The Archival Platform aims to promote public engagement with and investment in the archive through networking and information sharing. It is fostered and supported by the Nelson Mandela Foundation and the University of Cape Town (UCT) Archives and Public Culture Programme, and funded by The Atlantic Philanthropies.

The need for such a project emerged out of a broader series of discussions, including a project at the University of the Witwatersrand from 1998 called "Refiguring the Archive", which produced a book of the same name in 2002;[1] and a 2007 conference entitled "National System, Public Interest".[2] The book highlighted the idea that archives are more than just physical records: they are political and intellectual constructs, hiding as well as revealing historical truths through their very construction, alteration and interpretation. The 2007 Conference highlighted the poor public status of, and lack of investment in, archives, and the dearth of networking and information sharing across the professional memory sector.

Verne Harris of the Nelson Mandela Foundation and Caroline Hamilton, UCT National Research Foundation Research Professor in Archive and Public Culture, were mandated by the conference to set up the Archival Platform as a way of addressing these concerns. Harriet Deacon, an historian and researcher with a number of years experience in the professional heritage sector, was appointed as the first Director of the Platform, responsible for the set-up phase. She will continue to be associated with the Platform online. A new Director will be in place from 2010. The team has been augmented by four part-time correspondents: Thokozani Mhlambi, Xolelwa Kashe-Katiya, Uthando Baduza and Kirsten Thomson. Mbongiseni Buthelezi is an associate researcher for the Platform, working on the clan names project for 2010. The new Director of the Platform is Jo-Anne Duggan, who has worked extensively in the museum and heritage sector in South Africa for many years. The Archival Platform will create opportunities for networking and debate between professionals, academics, government and the public about the role and value of critical engagement with the archive.

The Archival Platform started professional networking through a website, newsletter, Facebook and Twitter feed in August 2009. The newsletter currently goes to over 1000 people in the sector and the Facebook fan page has over 400 members; the Twitter feed (the_archive) has over 100 followers. In Heritage Month the Archival Platform launched a "Letters for Lulu" campaign (in the spirit of "Tips for Trevor"), to help identify challenges and opportunities in the heritage and archive sector. In the letters received, professional organizations and institutions like SAHS and the South African History Archive raised concerns about the state of our archives. Young professionals in the sector commented in their letters about the dearth of funding for individuals in the sector, the need to promote oral history, the importance of digitizing collections and the need for a review of existing policies on copying materials in archives. This latter point was underlined by our online poll on camera use in archives which received over 1,000 votes.

Issues raised on the site have included the Archives Advisory Council, digital copyright, the national digitisation policy, heritage learnerships and oral history. Key areas of focus for the Platform in the first two years include an investigation of heritage sector funding; digitisation and use of online resources; and professional sector education. We are also planning a project on family trees and clan names.

The challenge of networking and debate

Networking and debate within the broader memory sector in South Africa face a number of significant challenges. Although the South African Museums Association has in the past run a successful annual conference, there are relatively few opportunities for memory sector professionals to speak to each other across disciplinary boundaries (archives, museums, heritage site and intangible heritage), and to engage with academic or government debates in the field. Academic discourse about heritage has thus been somewhat distant from professional concerns. Professional organisations in the sector tend to be small and organisationally weak, relying on voluntary work in an underfunded and overstretched professional environment. Young professionals and students have limited travel and networking opportunities and often feel isolated in small institutions. Consultants in the field are often similarly isolated: most consultancies consist of one or two people, working alone and in a competitive environment, and have little access to conference funding.

Most networking opportunities across the sector have been provided by external funders for digitization projects, and are thus irregular and have been subject to an externally-set agenda for discourse in the field. This disjunction has affected heritage sector training, leading to a situation in which students emerging from university courses cannot easily marry critical theory and effective practice. The lack of synergy between theory and practice in heritage education has been recognised as a key problem in the sector and various players are trying to address it (for example, the African Programme in Heritage Management Studies at Robben Island Museum/University of the Western Cape).

The Archival Platform will thus make interventions at conferences and in professional organisations, presenting position papers on the key problems facing the sector in relation

to digitization, financing and education. It will also create opportunities for online networking. Online networking strategies would not reach all people in the archive sector, nor would these replace face-to-face networking, but such approaches could supplement and extend existing structures and opportunities for networking and information sharing. Internet sites and email have become increasingly important platforms for information transfer between institutions and individuals in Africa since the 1990s. Public sharing of personal data has become much more widespread worldwide in the last few years, with people sharing their personal collections of videos, documents and photos on various social networking and media-sharing sites. Online or virtual communities allow people to interact with each other and create something new through that interaction. The importance of social networking sites in the recent US election is one example. Use of certain platforms, such as Facebook, Mxit and cellphone technology, has risen very quickly in South Africa.

Although South African internet access is still limited compared to wealthier countries, a recent survey by World Wide Workx suggests a significant recent expansion in spite of the economic downturn. In 2008, the Internet user base saw its highest rate of growth since 2001, expanding to 4.5 million or about 10% of the society as a whole. Perhaps even more significantly, it "has seen a continued dramatic shift from dial-up connections to broadband, with growth in both ADSL and 3G at more than 50%". According to World Wide Worx, this heralds a possible dramatic turnaround in Internet use, to be further boosted by changes in the regulatory environment for Internet service providers and the laying of new undersea cables.

A particular opportunity is presented by the high penetration of mobile phone technology and the narrowing of the gap between Internet and mobile phone technologies.[3] There has therefore been some recent discussion about a comprehensive broadband strategy for South Africa to enable wider and cheaper broadband access.[4] As LWATI points out, however, strategic planning for use of social networking to aid the non-profit sector has been rather slower to emerge. The 2009 SANGONeT Conference in October 2009 will thus focus on the use of social media in the NGO sector, supported by a research report on "The State of ICTs in the South African NGO Sector 2009", a joint initiative of SANGONeT and World Wide Worx.[5]

There are some projects which have tried to tap into increased online social networking to create a public discourse about heritage. "Open SA!", for example, is a pilot project of a Ford Foundation-funded organization called iHeritage, in collaboration with SA Rocks and the African Commons Project. "Open SA!" draws on the notion of people managing their own copyright while encouraging use, enabling "people to share historical and cultural materials about South Africa [for which they own copyright] for the benefit of all". The project owners "believe that getting ordinary people involved in sharing their history on the internet with artists, historians, students and researchers is a great way to keep local history alive and accessible".[6] However, response to this call has not been very high.

Internet access is of course disproportionately available to students, academics, government officials and professionals in the memory sector (perhaps even reaching 80%), compared

with access for the general public. This raises the possibility of creating online communities for debate and networking across these different sectors and more broadly with the community of professionals, government officials and academics within Africa and beyond. Internet-based information sharing in the professional memory and government sectors and indeed use of digital resources by academic historians has until recently been very poor, perhaps because of various combined factors such as low levels of awareness of the availability of useful information, low bandwidth, poor knowledge about internet use and restrictive institutional regulations. Positive responses to email newsletters from AFRICOM, ICOMOS-SA and ICOM-SA, and increasing use of networking sites like Plaxo and Facebook within the professional community, have suggested that more Internet-based networking is both necessary and possible.

Conclusion

The Archival Platform initiative strives to promote the status and visibility of the archive (broadly understood) at a number of different levels. First, the role and value of the archive has to become clearer in public discourse. Second, government and social institutions have to support the archive with appropriate investments of resources and personnel. Third, efforts to manage, conserve and interpret the archive have to be more effectively coordinated and resourced. By promoting better professional networking, information sharing and communication with government and the public, some of the aims of the Archival Platform can be achieved. Please join our newsletter list and contribute to the online and offline debates.

References

[1] C Hamilton et al (eds.). Refiguring the archive. (Cape Town, 2002).

[2] Nelson Mandela Foundation. Archives at the Crossroads, 2007. Report to the Minister of Arts and Culture from the Archival Conference "National System, Public Interest" held in April 2007 and co-convened by the National Archives, the Nelson Mandela Foundation and the Constitution of Public Intellectual Life Research Project. http://www.nelsonmandela.org/images/uploads/NMF_Dialogue_-_Archives_at_the_Crossroads1.pdf

[3] World Wide Workx press release, 8 December 2008, accessed at http://www.worldwideworx.com/archives/107.

[4] http://www.southafricaconnect.org.za/

[5] LWATI, SANGONeT newsletter, May 2009.

[6] http://iheritage.org.za/open-sa/