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Interrogating the Lesotho digital library ecology with a view to influencing policies, practices and development: focus on University and State library services.

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Abstract

This is a study of, first, the climate, conditions, practices and factors which all converge to constitute the ecology of a digital library in Lesotho in general, and in the University plus State library service specifically; secondly, the developmental consequence of that climate; and, finally, how that ecology may be influenced to give meaning of opportunities offered by technological advancement, to the Lesotho society, especially to the targeted library clients and the marginalized communities.

Subsequent to Africa's visible participation in the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) in 2005, it is an indisputable fact that Africa, including Lesotho, has entered the digital era. The issue is however the extent to which libraries and archives effectively digitize and provide to their intended clients relevant electronic information that is anchored on firm policies and supported by adequate resources.

Focus is put on major overarching national policy frameworks as well as regional and global commitments that could positively influence the course and accelerate the pace of digital library development in Lesotho. At the threshold of the government's commitments are the WSIS principles; reforms of the World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO) Treaty; ICTs; and HIV/AIDs policies, as well as budgetary conditions. At the institutional level are the University Strategic Plan 2007-2012; Senate-adopted policies on an Institutional Repository, Open Access and use of Greenstone; the newly launched undergraduate Diploma Programme in Library Studies; the Ministry of Culture's financially supported Lesotho Library Consortium (LELICO); and the reconfiguration of both the University and the State Library buildings.

The discussion further interrogates the practice of outsourcing the Internet services at the State Library, which superintends the archives sections; from the University side, prospects of a digital library are highlighted through projects such as the endangered Royal Archives sponsored by the British Library scheme; and the participation in the World Bank-supported Development Information Centre.

By highlighting the "best" and/or "poor" practices over six years in Lesotho, the discussion illustrates lessons to inform the librarian, the policy maker, clients and all stakeholders as to where and how to influence the ecology of the Lesotho digital library favourably for development.

Background

This debate is premised on the understanding that, as defined by the Digital Library Federation, "digital libraries" mean

> .... organizations that provide the resources, including the specialized staff, to select, structure, offer intellectual access to, interpret, distribute, preserve the integrity, and ensure the persistence over time of collections of digital works so they are readily and economically available for use by a defined community or set of communities. [1]

"Readily and economically available for use" implies fast and sustained provision and timely, convenient use as a benefit, by those intended. But the issue of digitizing, or a digital library, in Africa is not just a matter of a convenient and modern way of doing things as it may be the case in some regions of the world. Access to development information for all on the African continent, which is on the negative side of the digital divide, is imperative. It is urgent to inform communities that are dying of HIV/AIDs. It is a call for digital information, conveniently audible even to the illiterate, which is a matter of survival, as well as a factor in the improvement of education, health, agriculture, rural people, social welfare, good governance and democracy.

In making sense of the "digital divide", IFLA FAIFE refers to the term as

> the wide division between those who have real access to information and communication technologies and are able to use them effectively, and those who do not. Through provision of appropriate technology and training, libraries can contribute to the fight against poverty at a local level by offering access to information resources [2]

In the Mmankgoli Community Library in Botswana in October 2009 adults may view televised information on details of political parties campaigning for the general elections. In this way the right development choices are made through the help of a library. Young people are informed about means of HIV/AIDs prevention. Yes, libraries in Africa, including those in Lesotho, can contribute to the information needs of communities in these various ways.

[1] DLF Digital Library Federation 2004 http://www.diglib.org/about/dldefinition.htm downloaded 28/6/09
[2] IFLA FAIFE World Report Questionnaire 2009: 7

Making reference to digitization in the world of scientific development, the President of the United States of America, Barack Obama, said in his public speech in Cairo on 4 June 2009:

> We'll open centers of scientific excellence in Africa, the Middle East and Southeast Asia, and appoint new science envoys to collaborate on programs that develop new sources of energy, create new green jobs, digitize records, clean water, and grow new crops...

In mentioning "digitizing records" a link with key areas ranging from science and technology, to development and basic needs such as clean water, is made by a politician of the USA, a region which compared to Africa is already developed; the link is made but not by a development-seeking political leader of a least-developed region such as Africa (which is largely not yet witnessing the effect of the relationship between information and development, let alone digital information). If only this link could be seen by most African leaders, support for libraries would probably improve!

Africa should alleviate poverty, create jobs, supply clean water, and combat HIV/AIDS. In the process, the relationship should be found between information and readily accessible information, by which economically available digital libraries are part of key variables. The climate is thus interrogated in Lesotho through two major libraries namely, the National University of Lesotho (NUL) and the Lesotho National Library Services (LNLS), sometimes called the State Library. This study gauges how far the two institutions have gone in becoming digital; it spells out best practices in line with regional and international processes in and towards digitizing.

Introduction of LNLS and NUL

The Lesotho National (State) Library Services

The Draft Bill of this mother-of-libraries in the country refers to the Lesotho National Library Services. Use of the term "State Library" is keeping in line with the label that appears on the facade of the state-of-the-art building which is situated along the main street in Maseru, the capital city of Lesotho. But a continuous mention of the term "national" library also conforms to that common title which is consistent with the Draft of the Lesotho "national" library Bill. Both State and National will therefore be used interchangeably.

The Lesotho National Library is the Government-run library service that was established in 1976 through UK Overseas Development Aid. The recruitment and training of librarians also began at that time. Although an attempt was made to establish branches throughout the country, and to start a mobile library, the whole service weakened as soon as the donor funding came to an end. Things deteriorated by the late 1990s when

Government restructuring placed the National Library under the newly formed Directorate of Culture. Poor performance worsened as the Library building developed some technical faults and was finally demolished. Between April 2002 and March 2006 the National Library was not operating and the present Chinese-funded building was under construction.

In April 2006 when this building was officially inaugurated, the National Library acquired the status equivalent to a directorate. The Director was appointed and the National Archives were incorporated, so that both operate under the same roof.

How digital is the State Library and Archives Service?

According to the IFLA Internet Manifesto[3], it is the duty of professional information providers to guarantee, among other things, that

- Freedom of access to information, regardless of medium and frontiers, is a central responsibility of the library and information profession;
- The provision of unhindered access to the Internet by libraries and information services supports communities and individuals to attain freedom, prosperity an development;
- Barriers to the flow of information should be removed, especially those that promote inequality, poverty and despair.

Of fundamental relevance to the development of Africa are issues relating to "unhindered access, Internet, digital records, jobs, water..." These terms show the relationship between use of digital libraries, hope or development, and crystallize the sentiments of President Obama in the speech quoted above. As declared by WSIS in Tunisia, a factor that will stimulate an information society is the availability of a sound IT framework, supported by its own staff, and a high quality library collection that encompasses electronic resources relevant to the needs of a given community.

In 2003, the National Library became one of the founder members of the Lesotho Library Consortium (LELICO), which receives relatively satisfactory support from the Ministry to pay for subscriptions to electronic databases for member libraries. The Ministry annual budget allocating a subvention for LELICO is commendable, and serves as a facilitator for the use of shared digital information by libraries in Lesotho.

By November 2009, however, there was still no Internet facility in the National Library. An endeavour was made to outsource to the services of a private company, but this lasted for less than a year. Even though clients were required to pay a nominal fee to

[3] IFLA, The Internet Manifesto adopted unanimously on the Council meeting of the 68th IFLA Conference and Council, August 2002, Glasgow, Scotland, (IFLA/FAIFE: The Hague, Netherlands: 2002. p.1).

access the digital library, too many technical and teething problems for that maiden service brought about its closure, before it had started.

In these circumstances, by late 2009, there is still no digital library provision at the hub of the State Library in Lesotho. There is no public library service aimed, for instance, at a primary school learner during the holidays, or for rural farmers and extension workers who have the potential to accelerate agricultural productivity and arrest hunger and poverty. There is no readily available access to information for efficient use by the HIV/AIDS care givers, not even for busy female heads of households all of whom constitute a spectrum of a typical southern African community like Lesotho.

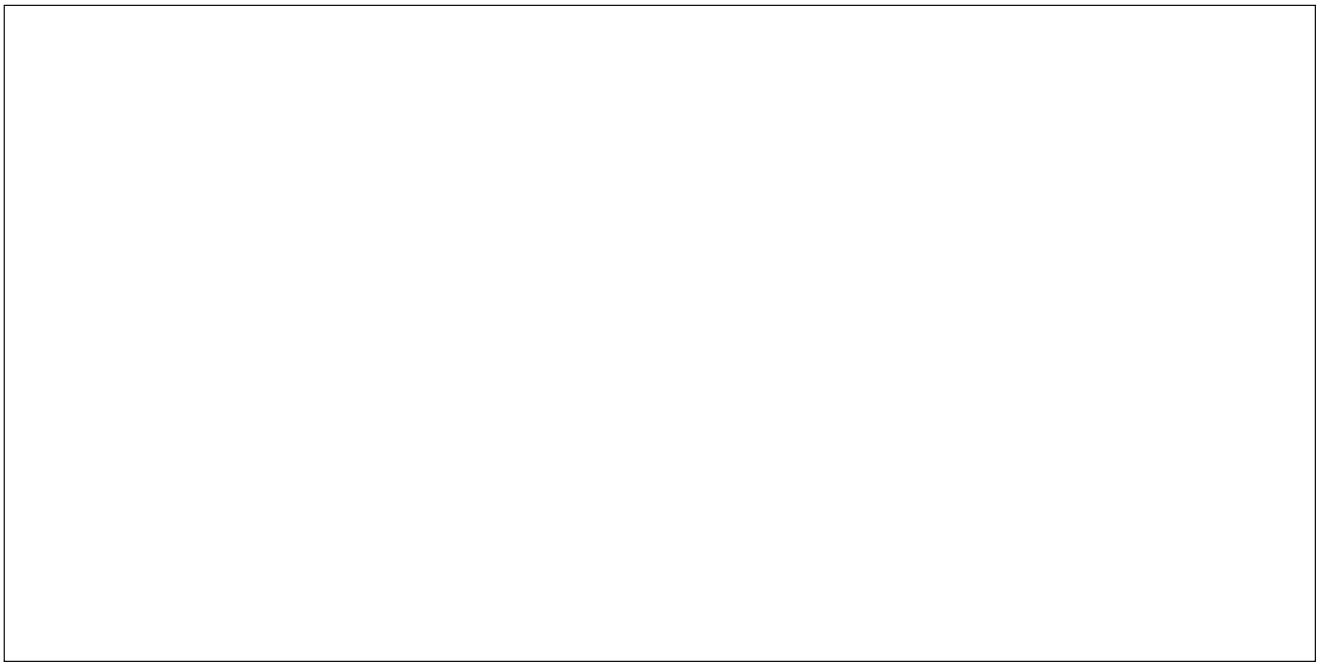
To have had to resort to a private commercial company implies that the State Library has no capacity of technical staff of its own, especially no librarians skilled in systems. Seemingly the Library lacks adequate equipment and the necessary capacity to go digital, let alone to accede to the *Internet Manifesto* whose guidelines still advance the principles of the old 1964 UNESCO Public Library Manifesto of supplying "for free". That the community which comprises the poor, youth, and farmers is charged for Internet services in the only available major public library in the country, is tantamount to hindering access to digital information.

Lesotho nevertheless participated significantly in the meetings in preparation for and at WSIS. Prior to taking part in WSIS in Tunisia in 2005, an ICT policy had been put in place, although it was subjected to revision and review later.

The National University of Lesotho

The National University of Lesotho (NUL) was born in 1975; and has metamorphosed from the 1945 Pius XII College to the 1964 University of Bechuanaland, Basutoland and Swaziland (UBBS) and then to the University of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland (UBLS). Being one of the oldest universities in the sub-region, its library dates from 1964 when electronic resources did not feature in libraries.

The 1964 structure was expanded in 1979. In 2006 there was another expansion and renovation which then, considered accommodating digital library amenities such as an OPAC at the entrance; the Internet section, Information Literacy laboratory section, the Archives as well as a work room for clients with visual impairment. A digital library service is still dependant on a suitable physical space.



Part of Phase 3 of the Library (Thomas Mofolo Library at NUL)

How digital is the University Library

To some, a digital library exists at NUL; to others, possibly, the NUL library is going digital but is not yet there. By comparison, full time learners and staff normally get relatively comprehensive library services from the main campus at Roma. In contrast, part time learners and instructors, who are spread throughout the country and at three regional centres, have very limited services at their disposal.

The year 2003 marked the dawn of a digital library at the University when, through the main support of Electronic Information for Libraries (eIFL.net), the Lesotho Library Consortium was founded as a group of nine libraries together aiming at sharing electronic resources and the application of uniform and compatible software. Ever since, there have been milestones that mark progress towards a digital library. Of significance are:

- training library personnel, not only to influence decisions but also to manage as appropriate in the digital dispensation;
- institutional adoption of appropriate policies and norms on the development of digital libraries;
- gradual development of digital collections that are integrated with print;
- training library customers through information literacy programmes and other means, for use of the digital library;

- providing physical space to accommodate both clients and emerging amenities that facilitate digital library services;
- encouraging collaborative projects that enhance the provision of digital library services within and beyond the academic;
- mounting a Diploma course on Library and Information Studies, for more workforces that may also meet emerging demands in the digital era.

Policies and norms

In April 2008, the NUL Senate, as the academic structure of the University, approved policies on an Institutional Repository (IR); Open Access (OA); and the use of Greenstone. These are yet to be endorsed by Council to be fully enforceable.

OA and IR enable libraries, especially in economically poor conditions, to

- build up their collections from their own local sources including lecturers' research output;
- gather experience of managing electronic resources at local levels;
- stimulate use of resources enriched with a combination of internal and external information;
- conveniently and readily meet information demands of both on- and off-campus library clients who may access online resources all at the same time, without the need for the library to duplicate printed copies for all of the users or site libraries; and finally
- use Greenstone which not only incorporates a digital collection-building, but is also suitable for stand-alone library users.

In April 2009, the Library launched a project to enhance library services for clients with disabilities. Subsequent to the procurement of relevant equipment, it will be easy to reproduce the required printed materials in Braille format. In addition, digitizing resources will be mandatory in response to special information needs of learners and staff with visual and/or hearing impairments. In this regard, the NUL Library will go further, to act as a catalyst in digitizing even for partners located beyond the campus. What is motivating in this respect is that WIPO is reviewing its treaty to consider the needs of persons with reading disabilities, and the Exceptions and Limitations of the Lesotho Copyright Law will allow libraries to reproduce items for educational purposes.



NUL past and 2009 students relating their experiences at the Launch of the Disability Project

Failure by a number of institutions, including academic libraries, to make people with disabilities independent and self-reliant, can be a factor for poverty, since unequal access to information and education translates to discrimination. If digital libraries in Africa can play their role in managing diverse resources for all, they too will contribute to improved livelihoods for all, and poverty alleviation on the continent.

Training

NUL recognizes its library as an academic arm, whose senior members of staff should duly conform and publish to keep abreast of developments in the profession. This requirement is also enshrined in the IFLA Internet Manifesto, and in line with the concept of a digital library which is to be managed by trained staff.

As a way of imparting appropriate skills to staff who should manage digital libraries within and around Lesotho, widely encompassing training has been carried out by the Library in cooperation with several partners as indicated in Table 2 below.

Table 2: List of training activities organized by the Library 2007-2009

DATE	THEME	PARTNERS AND PARTICIPANTS	Significance on Digital Library
Oct 2006	AGORA/ HINARI	FAO/ITOCA: activists in the agric & health sectors	Agric & health digital libraries are linked to relevant users
April 2007	OA / IR	INASP: participants from Botswana, Swaziland, RSA	Practice and lessons from the neighbouring countries
Mar 2008	GREENSTONE	eIFL.net, LCE, participants from BW, LS and Mauritius	Application of this source in repositories
Aug 2008	Publishing online	Publishers of academic journals in LS, BW, SD, MU	Sensitize and coach on e-journals and self arching
Dec 2008	On LELICO	Coordinator 's speech at Library Association AGM	The support of LELICO should come from all libraries
Apr 2009	IOP databases	IOP: lecturers, researchers, students in Lesotho	Subject approach in managing e-resources is important
Aug 2009	Info Literacy	INASP: Lesotho academics, students, librarians	Make aware of & impart skills on use of digital collections

A specialized staff is central to driving processes in the digital dispensation. It is no surprise that in the case of a State Library in Lesotho, where staff is limited, privately-run Internet management of non-library orientation could not be sustained, and had to close shop.

Training of local librarians in digital library techniques should be carried out at all levels of informal and formal educational programmes. In addition to full time programmes that are offered outside Lesotho, the NUL Library has launched an undergraduate Diploma programme within the Faculty of Humanities. This programme is aimed initially at producing support staff for the entire country. It is envisaged that by 2012 the first cohort will graduate, having acquired skills and experiential learning in what library studies of the 21st century should offer: the catalysts of change toward digital libraries.

Training and involvement of Clients

Knowledge, attitude and perceptions of deans and directors

Although the NUL Senate was quick to approve the implementation of both an Institutional Repository and Open Access as well as use of Greenstone, implementation of these policies has been sluggish, especially from the side of faculties that are generate scholarly work. As a result, in order to determine attitudes and perceptions as well as to gauge the level of understanding or knowledge about IR and OA, the Library of the National University of Lesotho issued a reminder to the academic deans and directors, reminding them of the responsibilities of their faculties to deposit their works

in the Library's repository. That reminder was followed up with telephone calls to deans and directors, enquiring if they were supporting these policies as they did in the Senate meeting. The following responses were recorded:

- As dean, I strongly support the principles of IR and OA, but the faculty would like to get assurance that our works are fully protected against plagiarism;
- As dean I have been depositing my print copies in the Library, it is your office that will need to outreach staff more vigilantly;
- Most journals now receive our works electronically; is it not a duplication of efforts that we deposit to them and our Library?
- The whole issue of a digital library in our university is still a dream, for as long as we have frequent power outage and low bandwidth; how can one tally these two conflicting conditions?
- My Institute publishes a journal that for over five years has appeared in the African Journals Online (AJOL); how do we avoid what I perceive an unnecessary duplication; moreover, are we getting proceeds from our works? We should also recover the costs of publishing printed copied that suit majority of users who have no access to the Internet;
- Let me respond on behalf of the director of the Institute which is the extension arm of the university, possibly the most disadvantaged in terms of ICTs. Our branch libraries are not connected. We have been waiting for a mobile library that we were informed would offer mobile electronic resources, but an unsatisfactory service continues. Who will then benefit from our depositing works in the main library? Should charity not begin at home?

Discernible from these comments is that, despite efforts shown in Table 1, intensive training still needs to be offered so that all understand and appreciate the academic benefits, as opposed mainly to monetary gains, in scholarly communication that enhances a digital library.

Collaborative Projects

The NUL digital library climate is continuously improved by the Library's interaction with several international partners. Three collaborative projects that are supported by such partners are worth mentioning in this regard.

The Development Information Centre (LDIC)

In 2005, the University signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the World Bank in terms of which the NUL Library is the host of the Lesotho Development Information Centre (LDIC). As the name depicts, development is key to this type of arrangement, by which the Library receives flagship publications and information from various agencies of the UN, mostly resident in the country; and in return the Library makes that information accessible, not only to University clientele, but also to the public. The Library is also

connected to the Bank's online resources. As the web page of the DIC that links to Library's resources reads:

> The Internet is an essential tool for accessing [not only Lesotho but also very rich] global information. The LDIC's ... computer workstations are available free of charge to the public to access development information, databases and other information resources needed for research purposes. Photocopying and laser printer services are available for a nominal fee.[4]

These are some of the activities through which the University can take its services to the people; in line with its *Strategic Plan 2007-2012*, it is what an institution with a conscience should do, as it gets its annual subvention from the same people through the Government. A digital library can contribute more meaningfully and cost effectively, in contrast with a traditional library that would only reach a few people at a given time and confined space. European universities too are convinced that through partnership and digitizing, more ground can be covered.[5]

Endangered Royal Archives of Matsieng being digitized at the University Library/Archives

Through the British Library 's grant on Endangered Archives Projects, the NUL Library which also serves as the University Archives, is engaged with the scheme not only to learn how to do it, but also to extend a hand to digitize the endangered Archives of the Chieftainship office in Matsieng, the Royal village. Partnerships of this nature allow the transfer of skills from the North to the South. Not only that; they also facilitate the multiplier effect, because once the project is completed the NUL Library/Archives can replicate all within Lesotho. The African Digital Library may then develop at a faster and desired rate.

The Agricultural information Question and Answer Service

A digital library can serve as a centre for the convergence of academic theory and practical experiences from the field. This conclusion is drawn from lessons learnt from the outcomes of the Lesotho Question and Answer Service (LEQAS) project that is supported by the Centre for Technical Cooperation in Agricultural and Rural Development (CTA) and the NUL Library. Even though emphasis was on queries that may be raised by farmers face-to-face with librarians, or by telephone through radio programmes, or by post, the interface of "experts" from the Faculty of Agriculture who give answers after researching from a maze of electronic resources such as AGORA and

[4] http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/AFRICAEXT/LESOTHOEXTN/0,,print:Y~isCURL:Y~contentMDK:21821768~pagePK:1497618~piPK:217854~theSitePK:356029,00.html.

[5] http://www.cenl.org/docs/PPP_interim_report.pdf.

TEEAL (to which the Library subscribes) indicates that the digital library acts as a broker. The Library receives from the world information that comes in various languages and at a highly scientific level; and acts as facilitator so that such information is simplified in local languages and provided on demand for specific situations.

Library Studies Programme: training human resources on e-library

As designed in 2008-2009 in southern Africa, specifically for the sub-region and Lesotho environment, the curriculum offers courses that are relevant for the digital library. Learners are trained through a host of theoretical and practical courses that cover, for example, computer appreciation, digital records management, electronic databases and information literacy. Products of the programme will therefore be catalysts of change for e-libraries in schools, government ministries and numerous types of organization in Lesotho.

The general national environment

Liberalization of the ICT market in Lesotho has allowed competition from various vendors, and "tele-density" has risen by 28% in the last five years. These general developments may be attributed to International Telecommunications Union (ITU) policies and WSIS resolutions, through which an independent Telecommunication Authority that regulates the IT sector has emerged as Government-controlled state monopolies end.

Increasing demand for services has forced authorities to find ways of increasing the bandwidth. At universities, pressure was audible not only from libraries only; students, lecturers and researchers were effective advocates where an exponential increase in usage statistics indicates that electronic resources are now a must.

The impact has thus boosted availability of devices such as cell phones, Asymmetric Digital Subscriber Lines (ADSL) and gadgets for mobile Internet connectivity that drive diversified options for accessing Internet and the readily available use of digital information. We are excited that we can learn from our own projects as well as some of the best practices from colleagues that we interact with.

As the digital era dawned, librarians seemed to be passive, and to relax under the illusion that "computer/automation/system" people would come to the libraries to "assist" librarians to manage digital libraries. Observations teach us that the combination of the two soon led to divorces. It is highly to be recommended therefore that core training in library and information work should be coupled with systems training so that there is a new crop of "Digital Librarians", so to speak!

Despite numerous challenges such as funding for training; competition among companies that demand incentives to curb the mobility of expert librarians; and funding

for computers and their replacement within a short period of time, there is preparedness by all concerned to find partners, and to collaborate, cooperate and partner in order to go digital effectively.

As we swiftly adopt enabling policies, there is the temptation to accept external assistance at any costs. Caution should be exercised to ensure the avoidance of dumping of recycled computers in our needy regions. That should also be supported by appropriate environmental protection laws, plus, of course, equitable allocation of resources for IT equipment at national levels.

Conclusion

Of note is that the concept of a digital library may be said to have been formally introduced in 2003 to 15 libraries at the launch of the Lesotho Library Consortium, yet the climate depicted in the country by 2009 ranges from “very poor” to “promising”, especially as respectively determined by the level of services of the State Library and the NUL Library. The former lacks capacity to offer basic Internet facilities. The latter is marking progress mainly because of aid agencies that have partnered with the Library, and that stimulate best practices in the course of a digital library in the country.

It is on the whole a long path that is being trodden by librarians and relevant activists towards a full operational digital library. It can however be a smooth walk if its pitfalls are realized and avoided; and light is also seen at the end.



SIDE VIEW OF PHASE 3 OF THE NUL LIBRARY