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Contestations, ownership, access and ideology: policy development challenges for the digitization of African heritage and liberation archives

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Abstract
The digitization of heritage material for publication on the worldwide web is a site of struggle and the real challenges are not technological or technical but social and political. What is at stake is the politics of memory in digital form and how whatever is selected for digitization projects frames research agendas and plays a role in repackaging history. The development dimension is also paramount, the issue of how these projects enhance the public interest, service researchers in the South and promote South-South dialogue.

This paper concentrates on policy rather than on narrow technical issues and engages the larger questions which frame digitization projects, such as national policies and processes around heritage, political identities, contested archives, the commodification of the archive and the archive as shaper of national histories.

This paper also gives a brief overview of the South African experience, examines notions of partnership that cut across international boundaries, interrogates the ideological and intellectual ramifications, including issues of content selection and access, and engages in policy framework discussions and recommendations.

The Sybil Syndrome: the nature of archives and archivists

In this globalised world, knowledge and information and, as a consequence heritage, are seen as strategic resources and tools. The manner in which information is used and who controls it is therefore pivotal. And, as a result the "soul of the archive", because it mirrors historical constructs of the past (albeit only fragments) is often a sought-after commodity. As such, archives are also about propaganda, rights, desires, lies, ownership, trust, nationalism, freedoms, concealments, acquisitiveness and surveillance. But the key is not *that* they are sought-after as information but h*ow* that information can be accessed, used, interpreted, destroyed or hidden to suit the agenda of ordinary individuals, researchers, archivists, capital and the state.

Archives and archivists play a pivotal role in creating and controlling digitization projects, particularly those that involve the digitization of African heritage and liberation archives. It is therefore important to unpack the fraught and often disorganized archival realm.
The mission of archivists as collectors of cultural and political debris is supposedly to document society.[1] Archives-as-profession and archives-as-institution therefore play a powerful role in framing and controlling our understanding of the past, in constructing the national psyche and in "storylessness". In addition, documents found in archives, which are sometimes treated as unproblematic representations of a recoverable past, may actually be deliberately preserved, power-infused creations of privileged authors of that residual past.

But at the same time, and juxtaposed, archives provide the bedrock for society's understanding of the past. They underpin citizens' rights, assert identities and are crucial to truth recovery. They are also irreplaceable evidential testaments of human experience on which social equality is built. Archives, particularly in countries in the process of transition to democracy, are of fundamental importance as evidence that supports victims' rights for reparation, an essential element of collective memory, a means of determining responsibilities for rights violations, and a basis for reconciliation and universal justice.

Archives are not only about *what* records are created, but also *how* they are managed and accessed. Removed from the domain of their creators, who have already pre-selected or destroyed, archives are compromised and even insidious spaces. They are also hugely layered, secret and skeleton-in-the cupboard places. Rather than being inert and static, archives are continually transforming and taking on new meanings.

Archivists, through whom archival practices such as appraisal, selection, arrangement, and description take place, are not passive guardians. They are gatekeepers, active participants and contextualisers who posit layers of interpretative frameworks. They thus play a proactive role in the production of knowledge and in creating, preserving, controlling, altering, reinventing and reinterpreting fragments of personal identities and social memories.

Archivists are agents of social change. They can be biased and narrow-minded, shredders and removers. They can also be activists and ideologues, analysts and critics, submissive and reactive. Archives and archiving are therefore not only social constructs but they are also contested sites of power, ideology and memory. As such, archives, as spaces, as records, as theory and as processes, are not impartial. There is no neutrality, no objectivity and no passivity; and interwoven with the meaning of archives and archivists are notions of power: power over identity, memory and evidence-seeking, where specific narratives are privileged and others marginalised and silenced.

1 Richard J. Cox (1990). American archival analysis: the recent development of the archival profession in the United States. Scarecrow Press. Preface.

The very nature of record making, record keeping and archiving is therefore clearly political and part of a political process. The concepts of ownership, custody, privacy protection and access rights that underpin appraisal, description and classification policies are also political. Archivists destroy or decide what to keep and record, and how it is kept. Moreover, archives have a contested ideology of their own. Thus there are not only archival politics but the politics of archiving and an ideological undercurrent to archival practice. As a consequence, archivists and archiving are surrounded by controversy and contestation.

Archives, as shapers of national histories, whether in paper or digital form, are continually transforming and shifting in meaning. They are however fundamentally political in nature and as such are mediated sites of power, ideology and memory. Ideological agendas and battles frame the contested archival terrain and notions of ownership, access, rights, control, privilege, monopolies, acquisitiveness, propaganda, lies and fabrication all underpin and influence archival policies and processes.

Digitization and access for whom: the global politics of cyberspace

Over the past decade a number of projects have emerged that involve the digitization of South African heritage. This has placed already contested archives in a hugely commodified cyberspace. Digitizing archives speaks to the way in which social memory and identities are produced, managed, accessed and owned. Globally there is increased access to Africa and there are structural changes taking place in knowledge production and dissemination. For countries in the South, this could reinforce and entrench notions of cultural imperialism and perpetuate hegemony by the North, and the North in the South.

It cannot be disputed that more and more types of information are being digitized. If we are to believe David Bearman,[2] over the next few decades we can expect to take part in a worldwide effort to represent the entire bulk of human memory in digital form. How does one begin to make sense of the implications of total digitization? The widespread view is that technology generally, and digital technology specifically, is useful and has led to what Postman calls the "the deification of technology".[3]

At a first uncritical glance the notion of so-called "global" access to information is appealing and positive and also seems to imply societal advancement: a panacea for society's ills, where access to information will create a better society, will empower people and will provide for their participation in an emerging and unstoppable "digital democracy". Those of us from the global South know too well, however, that the digital frontier is not value free, that it reflects power relations and creates an information aristocracy. Digitization projects are spaces where power is

[2] David Bearman, the founding partner of Archives & Museum Informatics in Toronto, Canada. Bearman is an archival trendsetter who has guided the development and policies in several countries.

3 Postman, Neil (1993). Technopoly: the surrender of culture to technology. Knopf.

determined. As Castells points out, "Throughout history, communication and information have been fundamental sources of power and counter-power, of domination and social change." [4] Access to the global information economy means access to wealth and there is therefore little doubt that the question of access to information has acquired pivotal social, political and economic importance. Digital technology does not merely add something, it changes everything, it brings social, political, cultural, environmental and economic changes and it accelerates the globalisation process. As Douglas Coupland points out, it is seen as a construct where "a set of individuals with access to a large database dominates another set with less access". [5]

For emerging democracies it is vital that nation-states and their citizens can access information about their own heritage so that they can interpret the past in order to understand the present and shape the future. In this branded world the digitization of knowledge and legacy materials is not a depoliticised space and access to knowledge is also a political question – particularly to knowledge produced in and/or emanating from the global South.

> Given the complexity of content issues in an environment where not only the titles but the means of production and delivery are matters for decision and where policy choices have important implications for public access to a nation's patrimony, governments will find it difficult to act quickly without significant input from the stakeholders. It is not too soon for the heritage community to begin to equip itself to participate in the debates."[6]

In the South African context the process of rigorous reflection and evaluation, and of trying to unpack what is at stake intellectually, technically and in terms of policy formulation, has not been adequate. As a country we are only now beginning to explore the implications of the digitization of our intellectual and cultural heritage resources. As stakeholders, as copyright owners, as custodians, as institutions, as government, South Africans are trying to understand this landscape so that they can vigorously engage with it and formulate informed responses. Custodians of South African heritage are facing a new battle, this time on the digital front, and what is plainly surfacing is wide-ranging apprehension around the ownership and hegemony of these newly aggregated and continually morphing digital assets. Some archivists and historians argue that many of these projects are fundamentally located in uneven power relations and perspectives which compromise national heritage; they do not represent the views and interests of the developing nations, they bolster inequities in globalization, and they exacerbate historic North/South imbalances.

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4 Castells, Manuel (2007). Communication, power and counter-power in the network society. International Journal of Communication. 1:237-238.

5 Coupland, Douglas (1995). *Microserfs*, Harper Collins, pp. 252-253.

6 Sherwood, Lyn Elliot. Cultural Heritage Information: Public Policy Choices. Archives & Museum Informatics,, Vol. 1, 1995.

Increasingly, the digitization of South African heritage material, for publication on the worldwide web, is becoming a site of struggle. The real challenges are not technological or technical but social and political. "The Internet… is very much a part of the physical and material world and is thus subject to the limits and regulations of that world. If we only conceive of the Internet as existing in some virtual reality or cyberspace, we will lose sight of the fact that it is inextricably linked to material conceptions of space, place, and, consequently, ownership of that space." [7]

Digitizing archives is more than merely collecting and aggregating documents in cyberspace. What is at stake is the political economy of digitization and the politics of memory in digital form, and the way in which whatever is selected for digitization projects frames research agendas and plays a role in curriculum strategies. The development dimension is also paramount: how these projects enhance the public interest, benefit researchers in the South and promote South-South dialogue; these projects need to be aligned to local and regional discussions and debates about the archive. It is important that the resource should be free to Africa and be sustainable over time. Ultimately these are the larger political, technical and intellectual challenges: national policies and processes around heritage, political identities, contested archives and the commodification of the archive.

Lessons from South Africa: the DISA Project

Digital Innovation South Africa (DISA) is a national, not-for-profit collaborative initiative, funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. It has drawn in a number of heritage and research stakeholders from government, tertiary institutions, libraries and archives. DISA grew out of a workshop on digital imaging, sponsored by the Mellon Foundation and held in Johannesburg, South Africa, in September 1997. The first phase of the DISA project was entitled "South Africa's struggle for democracy 1960-1994" and began in 1999.

In 2002 DISA sought to complement this first phase of digitizing journals of the liberation struggles. The original intention of the second phase (DISA 2) was to build on the serialized digital resource through archival content about the liberation struggle. The identification and selection of content was to be centred round the efforts of local scholars. This second phase began in 2003 and is entitled "Southern African Freedom Struggles, c.1950-1994".

The DISA Project provides the opportunity to open up to scrutiny the mediations of technology in knowledge production and intellectual production. DISA has been thrust headlong into the politically and ideologically highly charged and fraught nexus of constructing culture and knowledge through digitizing heritage from the global South, within the existing frustration with the current South-North flow of information. An added layer of complexity is the fact that the sources of the materials for digital projects, in this case archives, are social constructs and contested locales of power, ideology, identity and memory, where specific narratives are privileged and others marginalised and silenced.

7Shuler, Jack (2005). Ever onward: the Frontier Myth and the Information Age. *Fast Capitalism*, 1.1 2005.

The compilation of new archives through digitization speaks directly to the politics of collecting and the privileging of certain "knowledge". The way in which digital resources are assembled and shaped means that definite choices have been made around selection: what to digitize, who decides, how those decisions are made and what influences those choices. Such decisions then intellectually frame, mediate and control a digital project such as DISA. The questions of what intellectual product is being created, how that information is packaged, how history is being rewritten and how this speaks to and shapes post-colonial and post-apartheid research agendas and debates about the Archive is intricately bound into this construct and in creating new monopolies.

In DISA 2 content selection has been largely influenced by production targets set by ALUKA[8] and an intellectual architecture which is declining into an awkward one-dimensional repression/resistance narrative mainly aimed at an undergraduate studies audience in the USA. This reductionist structure has obvious implications, not only for the form this knowledge resource is taking or the form of the archive that is being constructed, but also in terms of its usefulness for South African researchers and public intellectuals and its inability to contribute towards critical citizenship in South Africa.[9]

There is the danger that everything that is not digitized will not only become unimportant but also will, to all intents and purposes, cease to exist; whatever is available on the Internet becomes *the* history, all the history there is. This is a very powerful concept, since the information that we can access, structures our view of the world. The issue then becomes one about form and quantity and not about context or content. Concern has also been expressed that these kinds of projects will mean that researchers from the North will only use these online resources, and this will ultimately diminish the sustainability of physical repositories in the South.

Public access issues, particularly within the framework of the global socio-economic environment and the so-called "digital divide", are of concern to stakeholders. A subscription model such as ALUKA places conditions on access to its digital resources, even if this is meant to be "free" to "appropriate" educational and cultural institutions pending the signing of a licensing agreement. Examples of these concerns are:

- Paying users who would ordinarily been able to access libraries do not usually have access to digital/electronic resources;
- If copyright owners and creators, particularly organisations as would be the case in South Africa, are given "free" access. But who gets access? The National Executive Committee members? Some leaders? All the members?

[8] ALUKA is an online digital library of scholarly African resources. These resources include African Cultural Heritage Sites and Landscapes, African Plants and Struggles for Freedom in Southern Africa.
9 South African History Archive/Rosa Luxemburg Workshop on Archives, University of the Witwatersrand, November 2006.

- How long will it be made available "freely"? For 5 years? For ten years? Forever?
- The use of proprietary software and technology platforms by ALUKA also automatically limits access to people in the South, because bandwidth is a real issue.

Sustainability issues could also negatively impact on access over time in the country where the documents originate. This is because funding for digitization projects is usually directed at production and so is inevitably short-term, transient and has strings attached. Long-term preservation is a very time consuming, energy intense, technical and expensive process and the financial temptation to hand over control of completed digital projects initiated in the South to eager, well-resourced institutions in the North is ever-present.

It is in the context of the *Zeitgeist* that the deeper set of moral and ethical questions that relate to the digitization, harvesting and extraction of heritage information about and from the South are worth analysing and interrogating. It is the content component of digitization projects which elicits the most interest, and which demands discussion. What is greatly needed is more public discussion and debate locally, regionally and with other countries in the South, about the more substantive questions which include: the political economy of projects like DISA; how these projects relate to the construction of democratic public spheres; and what tools and policies need to be in place so that valuable and meaningful digital resources can be developed for and engage with scholars, researchers, educationists, archivists, librarians and public intellectuals.

Partnerships and policy frameworks: our agenda in the South

Ultimately, our focus is partnerships with countries in the North and other African countries and institutions, with custodians, governments and the education sector, and other stakeholders. We do not wish to be mere suppliers of documents held together with a veneer of inclusivity (a shop-floor that supports a massive infrastructure with greater ambitions elsewhere.) As a continent and as civil society we need to vigorously engage with whatever partnerships bring to the table, and with whether local, regional and institutional mandates, missions and expectations are complementary or in opposition. In this regard some of the key question s we need to ask are:

- How do we share knowledge without being exploited?
- How do we enter into partnerships with countries in the North in ways that address but do not reinforce the digital divide?
- How do we ensure that such partnerships do not merely reformulate issues of heritage plundering and cultural asset-stripping?
- How do we take into consideration issues of connectivity and context, use and power?
- How do we ensure that these digital projects do not serve to replace the repatriation of actual heritage items with digital replicas, which would still ensure ownership and control by the North and would not address the problems and issues of cultural pillaging?
- Are these projects adding to pressures already being exerted on the states from which these objects originate, a pressure that it is difficult to resist?

- Is the temptation of financial aid producing a new form of imperialism that reinforces the digital divide?

In May 2007 the South African Department of Arts and Culture National Heritage Council (NHC) convened a consultative workshop of South Africa stakeholders, entitled "Archives, digitization and ownership," in an attempt to address the absence of national strategy in South African legislation and policy on digitization of heritage resources. The aim of the workshop was to share information on how to promote and protect national heritage within South Africa, within the sub-region and beyond, and to discuss the challenges brought about by the introduction of digitization of information, heritage and archives. The NHC key issues were: how digitized information would be used, accessed and interpreted; what public national interest would be served; concern that hegemonic control by the North and politicization posed challenges for the management of digital resources in the South; and the need to build solid partnerships in Africa.

The notion of "partnerships" was discussed at length at the workshop and the following points were emphasised:

- Partnerships with entities from countries in the North should address and not reinforce the digital divide, nor reformulate issues of heritage plundering and cultural asset-stripping;
- Transparency and equity in partnerships is pivotal; seeking funding should be a joint initiative with a joint mandate.

The key recommendations fl owing from the workshop emphasized that digitization projects should be located in the countries of provenance, locally controlled and defined and should serve local interests and beneficiaries. The need for a framework on capacity building and local resource-mobilization for digitization of national heritage was also stressed, as was the need in South Africa to support mechanisms to ensure long-term sustainability of the final digitized resource as well as the master digital materials. Optimistically, the ongoing national consultative process currently taking place in South Africa will determine a way forward and build national capacity.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that digitization plays a crucial role in the development of critical evidential resources for scholastic research. Their construction and creation must therefore be interrogated and unpacked, and their future freed from political interference. If content selected for digitization is politically loaded, this will impact negatively on the end resource and its usefulness for scholarly research: the intellectual stakes are very high. If we are not vigilant, in the writing, rewriting and repackaging of history through digitization projects, colonial patterns of knowledge production and control which ensure that dominant political forces control the process and frame the resource will persist, as will the predominance of production

of knowledge in the North, with Africa as mere consumer of knowledge. In this way institutionalized power will be entrenched rather than interrogated or challenged.

Policy-makers in Africa are facing enormous challenges emanating from the demand for access to its resources via digitization. The situation is particularly pressing because to date there has been virtually no attention to or development of policy. This absence of policy frameworks to guide institutions and countries is a fact both at national and at institutional levels, and has particular significance for any collaborative initiatives. It is vital that policy-makers shift their focus from discussions about technology as such to a new model which also includes the purpose of digital projects; what is being digitized and why; how the digital information will be used; by whom it will be used; and how it will be made accessible. In addition to the issues already raised in this presentation, policy-makers also need to vigorously engage with the following:

- Advocacy;
- Open Access;
- Open Source;
- Production vs. skills development;
- Long-term sustainability of the end resource and the digitized components, including the on-going need to build and support the infrastructure for digitization projects;
- Intellectual Property;
- Costs (for the entire life-cycle of the project);
- Mass digitization vs. “cherry picking”. Instead of digitizing whole collections, African digitization projects are often selective, for financial and political reasons. Projects that involve cherry-picking often impact negatively on institutions of origin; do not service their research and collection policies and priorities; and in the end incur costs to use and sustain these items (a case of the carrot becoming the stick).

Finally, policy-makers need to devise dynamic strategies that:

- Build local capacity;
- Provide guidelines and mechanisms for extra-regional relationships, to guarantee that they are equal partnerships;
- Facilitate strategic alliances in the development of digital resources;
- Take a principled stand on repatriation of heritage, particularly in relation to digitization as a substitute;
- Provide ethical frameworks that will locate digitization projects in the countries of origin and mandate local control;
- Ensure that digitization projects contribute to the preservation and protection of our physical materials;

- Develop common positions and prioritise regional discussions, interactions and perspectives on these issues, to ensure coordination, develop stronger regional knowledge sharing and understanding, build on existing linkages and share lessons learned.