

Strategic positioning of the National Library of South Africa (NLSA) as a change agent in social cohesion and nation building

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Abstract:

The roles, purposes and relevance of libraries in society have been studied and reported throughout the history of libraries in many forms. In developing countries such as South Africa, these debates happen within the framework of the many government policies, plans and funding models. The National Library of South Africa (NLSA) is a case in point. It was founded in 1999 as a result of the amalgamation of two institutions: the Library of South Africa in Cape Town and the State Library in Pretoria, each with its own history, purpose and roles in society. The National Libraries Act of 1985 which became active in 1987 declared the two libraries as national libraries (Westra & Zaaiman, 1991). The Act mandated the national libraries to “promote the rendering of information services to the population of the Republic by collecting, preserving and making accessible published and unpublished material” (Westra & Lor, 1993). During this period, the “population of the Republic” referred to the minority white population as was decreed by the apartheid regime.

After twenty years of Democracy and the framework of the National Development Plan 2030, the focus of the debate has shifted from a traditional national library intended to provide services to a few, to an agency of the Department of Arts and culture with service to the entire population of South Africa. The articulated responsibility to promote social cohesion and nation-building is the source of great excitement and anguish as the NLSA makes its strides beyond 2030.

The paper provides a historical analysis of a trajectory of purpose and relevance of the NLSA, the challenges and opportunities presented and a vision of its future

Keywords: national libraries, social cohesion, library roles, South Africa

Introduction

The National Library of South Africa has metamorphosed over several decades from its prototype in 1818 to the current national memory institution that it is today. Its story as in many countries mirrors the development trajectory of the country itself. The vision, mission, functions, services and resources reflect the thinking of the leadership, legislation of the time and the social needs of the nation itself as articulated in many different forms. Eric Wainwright (Wainwright, 1993) in his article on the future of national libraries provides a very useful conceptual framework on the forces and factors responsible for the directions usually taken by governments in the creation and development of national libraries. He suggests that the growth and development of national libraries throughout the world has been heavily dependent on the same forces that have affected the rise and fall of nations themselves. These key factors include the status of the nation state itself, Economic growth and Social Equity and Justice. (Wainwright, 1993 p. 113) The “social equity and justice” is well aligned with the concepts of “social cohesion and nation-building” in the South African scenario. It is through this historical lance that this paper seeks to address factors that have shaped the development of the National Library of South Africa through the years in terms of a trajectory of purpose and relevance, and continue to do so into the future.

Historical development of libraries and reading in South Africa

According to historical accounts there were no libraries or prototypes of libraries in South Africa before the 18th century. (Ralebipi, 1989). The idea of a library was developed and acted upon by a Cape settler of Dutch descent named Johann von Dessin. It was von Dessin’s collection of about 4500 volumes covering theology, law, medicine, philosophy, mathematics, natural history, geography and philology which formed the seed of the collection of the oldest cultural institution, The South African Library in Cape Town, in 1818. (Westra & Zaaiman, 1991). There is currently a number of books and articles on the historical development of libraries in South Africa (Immelman, 1953; Friis, 1962; Kesting, 1980; Manaka, 1981; Walker, 1994; Lor, 1996; Kalley, 2000 and Dick, 2007), which for the most part shows a pattern of progression from private reading societies to private and public subscription libraries subsidised by the government to Carnegie-funded libraries, to free public libraries with legislation to secure their financial viability.

Archie Dick in his article on the Development of South African Libraries in the 19th and 20th centuries (Dick, 2007) drills down to the role of many more players including women societies, cultural and religious groups who brought the notion of reading and libraries to a much higher social level. These libraries were developing in both the white and black communities “both inside and outside of formal library and educational structures even when an increasingly authoritarian apartheid state tried to direct and control thought, especially from the 1950s onwards” (Dick, 2007, p. 19). He further shows how the introduction of Bantu Education in 1958 led to the purge or closure of many black school libraries for example.

According to Bantu Education, "Blacks were not to aspire to certain positions in society and so education for such positions was not deemed necessary" (Christopher 1994: 150). Accordingly, funding and administration of 'Native' education was transferred from mission schools to the state since the missions were "fostering ideas, such as equality, which could not be encouraged" (Christopher 1994: 151). The "5,000 or so mission schools produced, in Nationalist eyes, an academic training with too much emphasis on English and 'dangerous

liberal ideas'. It was seen as the foundation of an African elite which claimed recognition in a common society" (Beinart 1994: 153).

Archie Dick's narrative is a testimony that the library is not a new phenomenon to South Africans. Rather, the library movement and reading development involving a diversity of South Africans played a very pivotal role in the struggle for independence of the country. One would therefore understand the vigour with which a national library as a literary heritage institution would form part of the new government's set of institutions responsible for social cohesion and nation-building.

The origins of the National Library of South Africa

The South African Library opened its doors in 1822 and was funded through the proceeds of a newly introduced tax on wine. (de Beer, 2007). Its purpose was to serve as a public library for the education of young people and to primarily promote religious education throughout the Cape. (Dick, 2007)

The second institution that formed part of the current National Library of South Africa is the State Library in Pretoria which was founded in 1887 by the Transvaal Government as a result of a donation of books from the Netherlands. Its stated purpose was to "advance the use of the Dutch language". It later adopted the role of a local public library and added English books to its collections. It also became a repository library for the publications of the United States Federal Government in 1898 (Informat, 1987; Westra & Zaaiman, 1991; de Beer, 2007). This library was funded by the state in terms of the State-Aided Institutions Amendment Act of 1954.

The National Library of South Africa as we know it today was formed on 1 November 1999 as a result of the amalgamation of the two former national libraries: the South African Library in Cape Town and the State Library in Pretoria. This institution is governed by the National Library Act of 1998 which articulates its national mandate, purpose, functions and administrative provisions. It is seen as the most important documentary heritage institution in the country which should reflect the culture of the South African nation as a whole through its collections and services. This view on heritage was strongly advanced by successive governments after the founding of the Union (white) of South Africa in 1910, and even more so when it became an Afrikaner nationalist-dominated republic in 1961. (Bredenkamp, 2007). The discourse and debates therefore, regarding the roles, responsibilities and services of the new National Library of South Africa could only take place in essence after independence in 1994 in support of the new democracy.

It is critical at this point to understand that the dominant view on the progress and development of the two former national libraries in South Africa and the country's cultural heritage was, until the country's independence in 1994, Eurocentric. "Cultural heritage" focused primarily on an appreciation of the colonial-inspired architecture and respect for Cape Dutch and British settler culture. (Bredenkamp, 2007). The collections of the Library therefore reflected the lives and experiences of these culture on the African soil. Access to and services of these libraries were regulated and restricted by the many legislative frameworks of those who were in power. The majority of people living in South Africa – Blacks, Indians, and Coloureds – did not have access to the services of the national libraries and public libraries in general, especially after Bantu Education was introduced.

As a result, many black South Africans, the majority of whom were educated during the Bantu Education era, do not relate to libraries as everyday institutions that exist to support their own development as individuals and members of their communities, and the development of the country as a whole. Because they have experienced their educational years without the support of quality library services, they have not learned to appreciate the library as a community information and knowledge resource or national literary heritage institution.

Constitutional role of the Department of Arts and Culture (DAC)

In 1994, South Africa emerged from a long history in which race; ethnicity and culture had been used as the basis for the imposition of a divided, unequal, and hierarchical society that excluded the majority of the population from citizenship and meaningful participation in the nation-state.

South Africa's transition to freedom and a non-racial democracy in 1994 had at its heart a response to the call from the Freedom Charter, which in its inclusive declaration, presented the dream for a future South Africa:

“We, the people of South Africa, for all our country and the world to know: that South Africa belongs to all the people who live in it, black and white, and that no government can justly claim authority unless it is based on the will of the people; that our people have been robbed of their birth right, to land liberty and peace by a form of government founded on injustice and inequality; that our country will never be prosperous or free until all our people live in brotherhood enjoying equal rights and opportunities; that only a democratic state, based on the will of the people, can secure to all their birth right, without distinction to race, sex or belief; and therefore we, the people of South Africa, black and white together – equals, countrymen and brothers – adopt the Freedom Charter”

It is commonly appreciated that aspects of the Freedom Charter were then fundamental to the drafting of the South African Constitution, Act 108 of 1996, which states in its preamble: “We the people of South Africa ... believe that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, united in our diversity.”¹ Chapter 2 of the Constitution then further discusses the basic principles of human dignity, democracy, freedom, non-racialism, and non-sexism. It is axiomatic and widely held that these statements extend to every inhabitant of the country, both citizen and non-citizen.

The Constitution is the supreme law of the Republic of South Africa and, along with the Bill of Rights, forms the legal foundation of a democratic South Africa, sets out the rights and duties of its citizens and defines the structure of the government. All laws of the country must be consistent with the Constitution and it further requires that all spheres of government work together to address poverty, underdevelopment, marginalisation of individuals and communities and other legacies of Apartheid and discrimination. In this light, all Government

Institutions, Entities, and Municipalities ultimately derive their mandate from the Constitution.

The Department of Arts and Culture (DAC), and the Institutions it leads, therefore derive their primary mandate from the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Act 108 of 1996, including from the Preamble and Founding Provisions

The democratic role of the NLSA

The role of the NLSA as prescribed by the Act is:

...to contribute to socio-economic, cultural, educational, scientific and innovative development by collecting, recording, preserving and making available the national documentary heritage and promoting awareness and appreciation thereof, by fostering information literacy, and by facilitating access to the world's information resources.

The National Library is tasked with the following functions:

- Build up a complete collection of published documents emanating from, or relating to, South Africa;
- Maintain and extend any other collections of published and unpublished documents, with the emphasis on documents emanating from, and relating to, southern Africa;
- Promote the optimal management of collections of published documents held in South African libraries as a national resource
- Supplement the national resource with selected documents
- Record the documents acquired
- Render a national bibliographic service and act as the national bibliographic agency
- Promote optimal access to published documents, national and internationally;
- Provide reference and information services, nationally and internationally;
- Act as the national preservation library and provide conservation services on a national basis;
- Promote awareness and appreciation of the national published documentary heritage;
- Promote information awareness and information literacy
- Provide appropriate information products and services;
- Provide leadership, guidance and coordination in cooperation with other LIS
- Undertake planning and coordination in cooperation with other LIS;
- Present, in consultation and cooperation with appropriate educational institutions and professional bodies, courses of training and education relating to the functions it performs;
- Undertake research and development; and
- Liaise with libraries and other institutions in and outside South Africa

At the second reading of the National Library of South Africa Bill of 1998, the Minister indicated that the new institution would be transformed to respond adequately to the information needs of all South Africans, and it would have to adapt to changes brought about by the new information technology and emphasise functions related to the national heritage and nation-building (Mtshali, 1999)

Social Cohesion and Nation Building

South Africa's vision 2030 statement, flowing from the National Constitution reads as follows:

“We the people of South Africa, have journeyed far since the long lines of our first democratic election on 27 April 1994, when we elected a government for us all. We began to tell a new story then. We have lived and renewed that story along the way. Now in 2030 we live in a country which we have remade. We have created a home where everybody feels free yet bounded to others; where everyone embraces their full potential. We are proud to be a community that cares. We have received the mixed legacy of inequalities in opportunity and in where we have lived, but we have agreed to change our narrative of conquest, oppression, resistance...we the people belong to one another. We live the rainbow. Our homes, neighbourhoods, villages, towns, and cities are safe and filled with laughter. Through our institutions, we order our lives. The faces of our children tell of the future we have crafted.” (National Planning Commission, 2012, pp. 11-22)

The National Development Plan (NDP), adopted by Cabinet in 2012, is the visionary blueprint of government, and in fact business and society as collaborative partners; towards achieving the range of socio-economic growth and development targets by 2030. DAC has been tasked with championing and leading the outcome of transforming society and uniting the nation. The ACH sector is tasked with leading nation building and transformation through social cohesion.

Vision and Strategic trajectory of the NLSA since 1999

From its inception in 1999 there has never been any doubt that the NLSA is a fully functional national library according to the debates and guidelines relating to the functions of national libraries. (Line, 2001; Lor, 1997 and Stephens, 2015). According to its first Annual Report which covered the first 17 months of its existence, the NLSA adopted the following four strategic directions to guide the new institution toward the future and align it with its role of “transforming society and uniting the nation” as encapsulated in “social cohesion and nation-building”.

<p>Holding a mirror to the nation</p>	<p>The National library promotes nation-building by providing access to the nation's published documentary heritage. The Library strives to be the number one source of information for the study of South Africa and all things South African; with comprehensive collections of material created in or relating to South Africa</p>
<p>Building a bridge to the information society</p>	<p>The National Library serves the people of South African by providing a bridge from the past and the present situation, which is characterised by gaping disparities in access to information and information technology (IT), to the future information society and in fact the future knowledge society</p>
<p>Levelling the playing field for access to information</p>	<p>The National Library strives to level the playing field to ensure equitable access to Southern African information resources in a balanced national and regional system both in South African and other Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries</p>
<p>Building a unified, dynamic, learning organisation</p>	<p>The National Library has a vision of becoming more than the sum of its historic parts, one which will develop vigorously and intelligently. The Library's component parts in Cape Town and Pretoria are being integrated to exploit their potential synergy while building on their strengths in collections and expertise.</p>

In addition to the national library functions which were fulfilled by the two previous national libraries, the agency role of the NLSA demanded that the institution reflects on how it would fulfil the following two responsibilities:

- Promoting awareness and appreciation of the national published documentary heritage, and
- Promoting information awareness and information literacy

Strategic programmes and projects

In order to respond directly to the call to promote awareness and appreciation of the documentary heritage and information awareness, the National Library launched a special programme called Heritage and Information Awareness in 2001. The programme focuses on South African literacy and documentary heritage in the Library's collections. Several exhibitions and events are arranged to promote an awareness of South African national published documentary heritage. Some are on-site at the Cape Town campus' exhibition gallery and several are at other venues throughout the Western Cape. While most of these

events generate considerable publicity and media exposure and heighten the visibility and value of the National Library, building a wider awareness and appreciation of South Africa's published documentary heritage remains a challenge. The National Library still needs to find a way to make these exhibits available throughout the country and ensure that the exhibits include and portray other cultural communities of South Africa as a whole.

Centre for the Book programmes and projects

For South Africans to optimally benefit from the resources and services of the National Library, the assumption is made that they are readers and consumers of information and knowledge resources as it is the case in many developed countries. The South African Book Development Council in 2013 indicated that only 14% of South Africans are avid readers, and that many families do not have leisure books in their homes. The National Library's Centre for the Book is a very unique outreach programme promoting the culture of reading in all South African languages; the culture of writing and publishing. It exists to ensure that there are enough books available and accessible to children and adults in South Africa through many of its projects such as:

Funda Mzantsi ("Read South Africa"): A reading campaign programme involving school children, in-mates throughout the Correctional Services sector and the youth in communities. It works by setting up reading clubs, providing them with books and sponsoring the Annual Funda Mzantsi Competitions and awards.

Children's Literature Project: This project focuses on the pre-school children who are bussed into the Centre from the local preschools. The readers are teachers and volunteers who assist in getting the children to appreciate the joy of reading at an early age.

Reprint of the Classics: This project reprints books that are considered "classics" by the communities where the authors come from and the books are donated to the community libraries throughout the country. So far, almost half a million copies of these classics have been printed and donated to the libraries.

Young writers programme: This programme trains and supports young authors to write and publish their books. It also provides them with financial support to complete their manuscripts. Launching the finished products is usually a big social event that the National Library hosts with pride.

Conditional Grant projects

The Department of Arts and Culture, since 2007 has provided the NLSA with funds to specifically promote the awareness and usage of Information Communication Technologies (ICT) in community libraries throughout the country. The NLSA has partnered with Provincial Library Services Departments and local government structures to ensure that the entire country is connected and ready to receive internet connectivity in all its community libraries. This is one of the programmes that seeks to ensure access to information and knowledge resources throughout the country in print and digital forms. The building of new

community libraries and revamping of existing ones has been one of the major government commitments since the Conditional Grant was made available in 2007. The challenge of the National Library and the community libraries that are springing up in rural communities and townships is that these libraries can be protected and utilised optimally by the communities themselves. Some of these libraries are built close to schools to provide services to school children who do not have school libraries. The promotion of the culture of reading is therefore paramount given these investments in social cohesion and nation building.

As the National Library provides professional leadership in this massive development of community library system, issues of quality staff and resources provide both opportunities and challenges. The biggest challenge is that communities need to own these libraries (and not burn them), protect them and use them to advance their own development as communities and individuals.

Mzansi Libraries Online (MLO)

This is a pilot project funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation through Global Libraries Programme. It is intended to strengthen and enhance the community/public libraries through the provision of ICT equipment. The 27 pilot libraries (3 per Province) will be enabled to: redefine their services based on free internet access to information; introduction and incorporation of new technologies such as: computers, printers, document scanners, software, tablets, e-readers and games. This project has created a fair amount of excitement among politicians, businesses, communities, the library and information sector and the larger Global Libraries community. The sustainability of this programme will mean long-term provision of relevant LIS services and products based on appropriate ICTs; enhanced access to information for economic, personal empowerment and lifelong learning for many South Africans who would otherwise not have the opportunity to escape poverty and lack of opportunities in life.

As the host of this pilot project, its success means the NLSA is succeeding in its responsibilities to improve the lives of South Africans and to through the social cohesion and nation building mandates.

Conclusion:

The National Library of South Africa is on a very strong footing. Its core and support programs are in place and its star continues to rise in spite of the many challenges that still remain. The staff of the National Library is a key resource that understands and appreciates the enormous responsibilities that the people of South Africa, through its government have entrusted to it. They work (together with their strategic partners) tirelessly to ensure that the heritage collections of the library truly mirrors the culture and experiences of the people of South Africa. They work to ensure that the people of South Africa enjoys optimal access to information (through the usage of relevant technology) both nationally and internationally for their own development and enjoyment; They work to promote economic development,

innovation and growth and they will continue to revision, reimagine and innovate to truly become a knowledge centre of excellence in South Africa and beyond.

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