

## **Libraries and survival: Reflections on the role of the National Library**

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The theme I chose for this keynote is “**Libraries and survival: Reflections on the role of the National Library**”. The wording is ambiguous – deliberately. It can refer to the survival *of* libraries, and survival *through* libraries. And I shall try, in due course, to apply both of these interpretations to our National Library, which, as we heard yesterday evening, has survived for 200 years.

Since I’ve been given a free hand, I shall start my talk very far away, in Europe, in Sarajevo, the capital city of the troubled ex-Yugoslav republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina, where a terrible civil war raged during the 1990s. On 27 August 1992, the Bosnian Serb army, which was besieging the city, first cut off the water supply to the part of the city where the National Library was located. Then, during a bombardment lasting 30 minutes, 25 mortar shells hit the National Library of Bosnia, while 40 shells hit adjacent buildings, effectively preventing rescue efforts. The fire lasted until the next day. A vast treasure of irreplaceable historical documents was reduced to ashes. For two days afterwards, charred scraps of paper drifted down in the city, like black snow.

You may wonder: what on earth has this awful war crime got to do with our national library’s centenary?

I started in Sarajevo because this barbaric attack illustrates the critical importance of a nation’s documentary heritage to its survival. Otherwise, why would the Serbian artillery have wasted so many shells on a library, in what appears to have been a carefully planned, deliberate action?

The answer is that repositories of cultural heritage, including libraries, are targets in campaigns of “ethnic cleansing”. Destroying a people’s cultural heritage is a means of uprooting it and sweeping it away. The deliberate destruction of a people’s cultural heritage, erasing their collective memory has been called “memoricide”. Memoricide can be used as an instrument of genocide because it attacks a people’s sense of identity.

The pioneer Jamaican Black nationalist and Pan-Africanist, Marcus Garvey, wrote that “A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots.”

Librarians are often worried that libraries are not regarded by their fellow-citizens as important. The good news is that libraries are truly important for national survival. The bad news is that a people’s enemies often realize this better than the people to whom the libraries belong.

The attempts by Islamist dissidents in Mali to destroy the ancient Arabic manuscripts and memorials in Timbuktu, because they considered them un-Islamic is another example of books and libraries being targeted – targeted because they are arsenals for the survival of cultures, including ethno-cultural identity, languages and religious beliefs. In South Africa too, books and libraries have been caught up as battlegrounds in the struggle against apartheid (as has been recorded by Prof Archie Dick in his book *The hidden history of South Africa's book and reading culture*, and more recently they have been casualties in service delivery protests.

All this by way of background to the role of the National Library in relation to national heritage. In our case, this is primarily South Africa's *published documentary* heritage.

What do we mean by “published documentary heritage”? It is everything that has been recorded in some form and made available for sale or free, to the public at large. Several thousand book titles are published in SA every year, not to mention all the newspaper and magazine issues, audio-visual media, and networked digital content that is published every day. These are published documents. Multiple copies of published documents are produced and disseminated. They end up in people's homes, offices, schools, and in various libraries. But eventually they are “used up”, lost, or discarded because they are longer of interest.

This is beautifully illustrated by the exhibition. I'm sure most of the people who had acquired many of the items currently on display did not at the time think that they were worth keeping for ever. It is only because the National Library received them in terms of our legal deposit law that a few copies were preserved and are today included in the exhibition as treasures of our national heritage.

Lots of published materials have a very short shelf life. Librarians call these materials “ephemera”. Tastes and fashions change. The popular attention span is short. But among the forgotten and discarded material are items of value. Cultural and economic historians, media sociologists, authors and journalists, community activists, lawyers representing dispossessed communities – these are some of the people who need continuing access to the documentary record long after the general public has lost interest. Even what seems to us to be very ephemeral, quite “worthless” stuff, may be a carrier of cultural history. You may not realize that advertisements in the “smalls” sections of newspapers, announcements of concerts, humdrum news reports, and obituaries of local personalities in local country newspapers can be a treasure trove for historians and writers. Increasingly, this kind of information has migrated to the World-Wide Web, posing an enormous challenge to national libraries to harvest and curate as much of it as is feasible.

We can't expect every library to keep everything for ever. But we do need to have a national system in place to ensure that somewhere, at least one copy can be found of everything. Well, not quite everything, but as much as possible of everything that can currently be identified as being of potential value, along with a representative sample of everything else. While most other libraries discard material that is no longer useful, the National Library is the ultimate guarantor of that documentary heritage – a place of last resort to look for treasures everyone else has dumped.

National libraries have a time horizon that spans centuries. To illustrate this: encompassed in the collections of the NLSA's Cape Town campus is the collection of Joachim Nicolaus von Dessin, bequeathed to the Cape Town Dutch Reformed Church in 1761, and later entrusted to the national library's predecessor in Cape Town. Von Dessin's collection included some works dating from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Later, much older books and medieval manuscripts collected by Sir George Grey were added. The oldest of these was produced before the year 900. This means that the NLSA is the steward of a heritage going back more than a millennium. This means that the NLSA has the challenge to curate these ancient holdings plus everything added today, day by day, an ever-growing hoard, for a mind-boggling length of time.

This is in line with its mission, as set out in Section 3 of the NLSA Act:

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

The functions of the National Library are set out in Section 4(1). Among other collection building tasks, the National Library has to "build up a complete collection of published documents emanating from or relating to South Africa" (Art. 4(1)(a)(i)). Note that this covers not only materials published in South Africa but also material "relating to South Africa". This could include:

- Material about South Africa published in other countries
- Works by South African authors published in other countries, in the original languages or in translation
- Works in languages indigenous to South Africa, not written by South African authors and not dealing with South Africa, that are published in other countries

This gives the National Library a wider responsibility than the collection of material published in South Africa as mandated by the Legal Deposit Act – which, by the way, is not restricted to traditional printed materials.

What are all these collections for? Certainly not merely for filling up shelves in the stacks. Of course, they have to be kept securely, recorded and preserved, but they also have to be made available for use. Furthermore, the use of the heritage has to be *promoted*. The National Library has to be seen to be relevant to the people. It also has to be seen by Minister Nene and his thrifty officials in the Treasury to be worth investing in.

I started this talk with a rather lurid account of the destruction of the National Library of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Some libraries end in that way. But in far more cases, the death of a library does not come by fire and water. The library in Sarajevo has been rebuilt and its collections are being reconstructed with help from the people of Bosnia and scholars and librarians from around the world. Great libraries are not killed by fire and water. The ultimate enemy of a great library is apathy.

It is for this reason that I want to close by drawing attention to the last two of the seven national library functions that are listed in Section 4(1). The first five are fairly standard; they are found in many national library laws world-wide. The last two are not so common, and I take some pride in their inclusion, since I proposed them and argued for their inclusion.

Function no. 6 reads:

To promote awareness and appreciation of the national published documentary heritage (Section 4(1)(f)).

This heritage must be put to work in the service of the people, so it is incumbent on the NLSA to make the people aware of its treasures. The “treasures” are very diverse. Let me highlight two challenges arising from this diversity.

(1) The variety of formats and the unrelenting growth of networked digital resources in particular (stuff on the web), poses a massive preservation and curatorial challenge.

(2) There is a subtler challenge: If truth be told, not all of our documentary heritage is pretty. There is a lot of material in the stacks which is ugly and hurtful. Yet, this ugly side of our documentary heritage is also part of our national heritage. We cannot understand our history and where we are now, nor can we move forward as a nation if we ignore or forget it. May we never go the way of totalitarian countries in which each regime wipes away traces of a past it does not like. Rather, we should equip our people with ways of understanding and engaging with the documents arising from our history.

False and misleading information has been spread in documents since writing was invented. What is written is not necessarily true. The same goes for other media, especially digital media. We live in a time of fake news and “weaponized” information. Our people needs to be fore-armed. “immunized”, and resistant to misinformation. That is why I think it is good that the last of our seven functions reads:

To promote information awareness and information literacy (Section 4(1)(g)).

Just as awareness of HIV/AIDS is critical to the public health of South Africa, it is critically important for a healthy democracy that our people should be not just literate but information literate – to be discerning, wide-awake, savvy users of information.

World-wide, libraries are scrambling to meet the challenge of functioning in a “post-truth” society. This is a challenge for SA’s libraries generally. Given its mandate, the National Library has a special responsibility to provide leadership to South Africa’s library community on how to face the challenge.

This brings me back to the theme of survival: ultimately, a literate, discerning, savvy population of information users is the best guarantor of the survival of both the national library and the society it serves.