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Burning Libraries for the People: Questions and Challenges for the Library Profession in South Africa

Abstract: Since 2005 at least fifteen community and public libraries have been deliberately set alight in South African townships and informal settlements, reportedly by individuals or groups from the communities which these libraries were intended to serve. This has given rise to dismay, horror and outrage among librarians. This article seeks to situate the deliberate destruction of libraries in a broader international context before focusing on the South African context of what are commonly called “service delivery protests.” An overview is given of some recent scholarly analyses of violent protests in South African communities in an attempt to answer four questions: (1) what were the circumstances in which libraries were set alight? (2) who did this? (3) were libraries deliberately targeted or were they simply collateral damage? and (4) if libraries were deliberately targeted, what motivated this? A fifth question concerns how the South African library profession responded to these incidents. Using the burning of the Ratanda Library on 20 March 2012 as a case study, the article explores the response of the South African library profession to the incident. In an analysis of the content of contributions posted on the discussion list and website of the Library and Information Association of South Africa (LIASA), four main groups of themes are identified. These concern expressions of revulsion, the impact of the incident, professional action, and underlying societal issues. The article concludes with some observations on the responses of the South African library community.

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Introduction

Since 2008, at least fifteen community or public libraries have been deliberately set alight in South Africa. South African librarians have responded to these incidents with dismay, horror and outrage, expressed in formal media

statements by the Library and Information Association of South Africa (LIASA) and in comments posted on LIASA’s discussion list, *Liasaonline*, and on the Association’s website. However, there is little publicly available evidence of a more thoughtful and analytical reflection or discussion of this issue by the South African library profession. When considering what will here be referred to as library burnings, many questions arise around the central problem of what might be appropriate responses by the South African profession:

1. What were the circumstances in which libraries were set alight?
2. Who did this?
3. Were libraries deliberately targeted or were they simply “collateral damage”?
4. If libraries were deliberately targeted, what motivated this?
5. How has the South African library profession responded to these incidents?
6. What can the South African library profession learn from them?

In this article it is not possible to answer all these questions definitively. Rather, the intention is to explore the phenomenon and provide some perspectives for further investigation and discussion. The South African library burnings are first briefly placed in an international context of library destruction by human agency before the extent of this phenomenon in South Africa is outlined. In response to questions (1) to (4), the South African context of “service delivery protests” is then reviewed on the basis of findings and theoretical contributions by scholars in political science, sociology and public administration. In response to question (5), the case of the burning of the Ratanda Library on 20 March 2012 is examined more closely, with particular attention to the response of the South African library profession. Finally, in an attempt to address question (6), some conclusions are presented on the challenges and opportunities such events offer the LIS profession. What follows is based on relevant literature and on an analysis of the content of published comments

by members of the LIS profession. The title chosen for this article is deliberately ambiguous: it concerns libraries established and operated *for the people*, and violent protests which may be thought to be *for the people* too, in the sense that they are intended to air grievances and effect redress on behalf of the community. In this article the terms “community library” and “public library” will be used interchangeably, as they tend to be in the cited literature.

Library Burnings in an International Context

The destruction of libraries is as old as the libraries. Over time, cultures and civilizations rise and fall, and their institutions and agencies decline and disappear with them. All institutions alike are subject to the destruction wrought by declining resources, physical neglect, weather, natural disasters, crime, conflict and warfare. It is intentional human agency that gives rise to the strongest emotion, particularly when there are apparently clear-cut cases of libraries being destroyed deliberately, as in the cases of the library of the University of Leuven in Belgium, destroyed in both world wars (Prescott 2005; Civallo 2007) and the National and University Library of Bosnia in Sarajevo (Peic 1998; Garcia 2007; Cook 2008). Deliberate destruction of a people’s cultural heritage, erasing their collective memory (“memoricide”) can be used as an instrument of genocide because it attacks their sense of identity (Riedlmayer 1995; Civallo 2007). In military conflict situations it is not always clear whether damage or destruction is intentional or collateral damage. A case in point is the National Library and Archives of Iraq, in Baghdad, affected by looting and arson during the US-led invasion of that country (Zgonjanin 2005; Al-Tikriti 2007). Given the confused situation at the time and after, the causes, perpetrators, and scale of the event are difficult to determine (Johnson 2005).

In civil and communal conflict, libraries may be specifically targeted by groups within society that object to their contents on political, ideological or religious grounds. The library of the South African Institute in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, was targeted by Dutch anti-apartheid activists in 1984, in an incident which, according to Knuth (2006, 67) “demonstrated that libraries can be destroyed because of a ‘good’ cause.” Ethnic, caste and religious conflicts in India and Sri Lanka have led to attacks on and the destruction of rare and irreplaceable library holdings, for example, those of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute in Pune, India (Caswell 2009), and the Jaffna Public Library in Sri Lanka (Knuth 2006).

Violent anti-government protests may also lead to the destruction of libraries. Sometimes libraries are destroyed or damaged when government buildings which happen to house a library along with other offices and facilities, are burnt down. But at times the library itself may be targeted by protestors who see it as a symbol of oppression. During riots by mainly youthful protesters in November 2005 some twenty libraries in poor neighbourhoods (*la banlieue*) in France were trashed or burned, apparently having been deliberately targeted (Merklen and Murard 2008). Cases of both kinds (collateral damage and deliberate targeting) occurred in South Africa during the struggle against apartheid, when a number of libraries (some of which were housed in civic halls and community centres), seen as symbols of the repressive regime, were burned down or damaged. Twenty such incidents were recorded between 1960 and 1988 (Dick 2007). During the same period, books taken from libraries were incinerated at the behest of government censors (Dick 2004).

Post-Apartheid Library Burnings

It has come as a shock to South African librarians to find that the burning of libraries did not come to an end with the end of apartheid in 1994. In a survey of developments in South African public libraries, Witbooi (2007) described encouraging post-apartheid library development planning and funding initiatives, but also pointed to glaring deficiencies and to uncertainty about which level of government was responsible for the funding of public libraries. She made no mention of library burnings.

However, such incidents were already taking place as early as 2005. During question time in the South African Parliament in March 2010, the then Minister of Arts and Culture, Lulu Xingwana, is reported to have revealed that almost thirty libraries had been damaged or destroyed due to service delivery protests, storm and weather damage, poor maintenance and burglaries during the preceding ten years, theft of computers being a widespread problem (Hartley 2010). Comprehensive details were not provided, hence it is difficult to pinpoint the causes, but at least ten of the cases mentioned by the Minister (as reported by Hartley) were due to social unrest. More recently, Van Onselen (2013), in a political blog, published a list of 17 libraries that had been damaged or destroyed “during unrest and protest” between December 2005 and June 2012. Van Onselen reported that it was difficult to assemble the data, as not all cases are necessarily reported in the media. A search by this author did not turn up additional cases,

but the cases mentioned by Hartley included at least one library (Zamane, Memel, Free State province) that was not listed by Van Onselen, making the total 18 libraries, of which 15 were public or community libraries. (It was not possible to match all the cases, as not all the libraries mentioned by Hartley were unambiguously identified.)

Seven of the public or community libraries listed by Van Onselen were “burnt to the ground;” another four were partially burnt or damaged by fire. The cost of damage in the nine libraries for which estimates were provided, was almost ZAR26 million (c. USD 2.6 million), a mean of R2.9 million (c. USD 290,000) per library. These costs are an understatement, as in one case the cost of replacing the building was not reported. They do not take into account the cost to the community of the unavailability of information resources and of safe, quiet spaces for children to study.

Reported causes of the disturbances listed by Van Onselen included protests over the changing of provincial boundaries, alleged fraud and financial mismanagement in the municipality, dissatisfaction with elected officials, and poor municipal services. There is bitter irony in some of these cases. The Meqheleng library, in the Setsoto municipality, Free State province, was burned down by students protesting at the death of activist Andries Tatane during an earlier public protest. Tatane had taught supplementary mathematics and science classes in this library. The Ratanda Library, in Lesedi municipality, Gauteng, was burnt down, it was reported to the library profession, on South Africa’s Human Rights Day.

Violent Protests in Post-Apartheid South Africa: Academic Perspectives

The continuation of violent protests in South Africa after 1994, when the apartheid government was replaced by a democratically elected government of national unity led by the African National Congress (ANC), would seem at first sight to be surprising (Nleva *et al.* 2011). However, protest action continued even during the heady days of the new democratic government, so much so that President Mandela issued a stern warning to “the forces of anarchy and chaos” when he opened Parliament in 1995 (as reported by Mottiar and Bond 2011, 3). Ngwane (2010), cited in Mottiar and Bond (2011) identified three phases of post-apartheid protest. The first phase, in the mid to late 1990s, was concerned with municipal services, housing and lack of infrastructure, and included trade union-led anti-privatisation strikes. The second phase started in the early 2000s and was characterised by quite broadly-based issue-driven so-

cial movements, such as the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), which campaigned on behalf of persons affected by HIV/AIDS. The third phase includes the recent (late 2000s and early 2010s) protests at the local community level which do not have a coherent ideological basis and appear to be isolated in nature. They are sometimes referred to as “popcorn protests” because they tend to “pop up” and subside again quickly (Mottiar and Bond 2011, 3-4).

The protests have been the subject of a considerable amount of journalistic comment (e.g. Coetzer and Terblanche 2013; Stone 2013) and a growing body of scholarly research. Although the protests that are of interest here are usually labelled “service delivery protests”, not all protests are about dissatisfaction with the delivery of services by municipalities (Karamoko and Jain 2011). The term ‘social protests’, as used by Mottiar and Bond (2011; 2012) would be more appropriate to cover the range of issues raised and the various forms taken by the protests. Alexander (2010) discussed different terms used to refer to service delivery protests. These reflect different theoretical orientations. He characterised service delivery protests as

...locally-organised protests that place demands on people who hold or benefit from political power (which includes, but is not limited to, local politicians). These have emanated from poorer neighbourhoods (shack settlements and townships rather than suburbs). Perhaps this is best captured by defining the phenomenon as one of local political protests or local protests for short. The form of these actions relates to the kind of people involved and the issues they have raised. They have included mass meetings, drafting of memoranda, petitions, toyi-toying,¹ processions, stay-aways, election boycotts, blockading of roads, construction of barricades, burning of tyres, looting, destruction of buildings, chasing unpopular individuals out of townships, confrontations with the police, and forced resignations of elected officials. (Alexander 2010, 26)

Allan and Heese (2013, 1), researchers at Municipal IQ, a private research firm which monitors the socio-economic performance of South African municipalities, used the term “service delivery protest” more narrowly to describe “a protest which is galvanised by inadequate local services or tardy service delivery, the responsibility for which lies with the municipality”.

Because the protests take many forms and address various issues, how protests are counted depends on the definitions used. Very high numbers are reported by the South African Police Service (SAPS), which, in terms of the

¹ Toyi-toyi is a dance that has long been used in political protests in South Africa. Toyi-toyi could begin as the stomping of feet and spontaneous chanting during protests that could include political slogans or songs, either improvised or previously created.

Regulation of Gatherings Act, 1993, records gatherings of 15 or more persons in its Incident Registration Information System. In the 2009/2010 reporting year, 8,905 crowd management incidents were recorded, of which 1,008 were classified as “unrest” (as distinct from “peaceful”). In 2010/2011 there were 12,654 incidents (973 classified as “unrest”), and in 2011/2012 there were 11,033 (1,091 “unrest”) (Mottiar and Bond 2012, 310). Much lower figures are arrived at if data from the Hotspots Monitor of Municipal IQ are used. The Hotspots Monitor covers only ‘major protests’ relating explicitly to service delivery that are covered in the media (Karamoko and Jain 2011, 3-4). During the period 2005 to 2009 the number of protests ranged from 2 to 83, with peaks in 2005 (35 protests) and 2009, when 83 protests were recorded for the period January to October (Alexander 2010, 28). Subsequently the number of protests declined somewhat, but the number of protests that were accompanied by violence rose steadily, to more than half of the protests (Karamoko 2011; Karamoko and Jain 2011). The Centre for Civil Society, University of KwaZulu-Natal has since 2009 maintained a Social Protest Observatory (<http://ccs.ukzn.ac.za/default.asp?2,27,3,1858>) based on media reports and press releases by civil society organisations and trade unions (Mottiar and Bond 2012, 328).

The research literature has been reviewed in recent articles by *inter alia* Alexander (2010), Karamoko and Jain (2011), and Mottiar and Bond (2011, 2012). Sociologists, political scientists and researchers in public administration have adopted a variety of theoretical approaches to the analysis of service delivery protests, for example Alexander’s (2010, 25) “rebellion of the poor” and theories of social movements. Some emphasise structure (e.g. the protests seen within the framework of resistance to neo-liberal capitalist policies adopted since 1994) and others agency (such as corruption, lack of capacity and political infighting) (Mottiar and Bond 2011). Other explanatory schemes include that of “dual repertoires” where communities participate in political struggle by voting at the national level and by protest actions at the local level (Alexander 2010), and “insurgent citizenship”, “class formation” and “differentiated citizenship” (Von Holdt *et al.* 2011). The literature deals with questions such as the following: Do the service delivery protests constitute a social movement? To what extent are they really about service delivery at the municipal level? Are they a new phenomenon or a continuation of apartheid era protests? Do they have revolutionary potential? What are their implications for the hegemony of the ANC?

Allan and Heese (2013) looked at service delivery protests from the perspective of municipal effectiveness, identifying rapid urbanization as one of the root causes. Peo-

ple migrating into the cities in search of a better livelihood find themselves unemployed and marginalized. Ironically, service delivery protests may increase in the better managed cities, as they attract the biggest inflows and the marginalized newcomers have a greater sense of relative deprivation and inequality. Other factors identified by Allan and Heese were poor communication and a lack of access to information relating to municipal matters, leading to the circulation of rumours.

Hough (2008, 11) reviewed violent protest activity at the local government level from a military strategic point of view, to consider whether such protests have revolutionary potential. He concluded that there are “certain underlying conditions conducive to both political violence and the creation of revolutionary potential”, but that it is debatable whether this will lead to a broader insurrection.

On the basis of a case study conducted in Phumelela Local Municipality, in the Free State province, Marais *et al.* (2008) challenged the established view which explained post-apartheid social movements mainly in structural terms, attributing these movements to resistance to the government’s neo-liberal economic policies. They questioned the classification of such protests as “social movements”. Instead, they pointed to the role of “real local service delivery problems, mainly attributed to ineffective governance and management ...” (Marais *et al.* 2008, 51), arguing that systemic and managerial factors also played a role, often in combinations of factors. They cited political turmoil in the leadership of the Free State province and internal divisions within the municipality, unfulfilled promises, poor labour relations, poor financial management, an incompetent Municipal Manager (the senior appointed official of a municipality), corruption and nepotism. Communication was also problematic. They pointed to “the lack of a complaint management system and the inability to create open communication channels (and thus, the inability to listen)” (Marais *et al.* 2008, 63).

Alexander (2010) provided a wide-ranging and thoughtful theoretical overview, reviewing earlier case studies and adding insights from rapid response research in which five protests in 2009 were investigated very shortly after they had occurred. Of interest is his linking of the nature of the protests with the political events at the national level, specifically the replacement of President Thabo Mbeki by Jacob Zuma in May 2009, and his identification of the prominent role of unemployed youth and school-going students.

Karamoko and Jain (2011) related the frequency of protests to other events taking place in South Africa. Protest activity declined during the Football World Cup and during the local government election in May 2011. The latter may have provided community members with an outlet

for expressing their grievances through the ballot box, but the authors suggested that protests would flare up again if elected officials were perceived to be neglecting the promises they had made during election campaigns (2011, 2). Concerns expressed by protesters were summarised by Karamoko (2011, 11-12): housing topped the list, followed by lack of access to clean water, unavailability and high cost of electricity, and poor sanitation. These concerns were often mentioned in combination and accompanied by allegations of corruption, nepotism and favouritism on the part of local government officials. Karamoko advised municipalities to “establish effective lines of communication with community members” (2011, 13). This is echoed by Sebugwawo (2011, 17), who identified “poor communication between the municipality and the community” as one of the key problems. In a study of the social mobilisation of two communities in the Cape Town suburb of Langa in a struggle for access to housing, Tapscott (2011, 66) concluded *inter alia* that, “the formal channels established to facilitate citizen engagement with the state have not only failed, but have given rise to social movements and protest action in demand of services and housing.”

Nleya (2011) carried out a survey of participation rates in protests. The study, carried out in Khalyelitsha, a township in Cape Town prone to service delivery protests, was aimed at determining whether the causal link that is implied by the term “service delivery protests”, can be established empirically. Nleya (2011, 11) found that service delivery affects participation in protests both directly and indirectly through its impact on other variables. Factors “..such as a general sense of improvement in the quality of life of the urban poor, and effective channels of grievance resolution and representation in forms of local governance are in a sense as important as the lack of services themselves. This lies at the heart of resolving service delivery grievances.”

In a more extensive quantitative study of protest participation in five study sites, Nleya *et al.* (2011) measured additional variables and found that the causes of service delivery protests were not limited to service delivery issues that fell within the ambit of municipalities, but also included poverty and fear of crime. A “constellation of factors” contributes to protests. Interestingly, the respondents’ degree of trust in government was positively associated with participation in protests: greater trust was associated with increased participation. The authors concluded that,

When combined with high levels of grievances high levels of trust precipitate in protests while lower levels of trust do not yield protests. This indicates that protests in South Africa are less revolutionary in intention but should be seen in similar vein as a cry from a child – whose aim is to draw the attention. (Nleya *et al.* 2011, 28)

Coincidentally this factor is reflected in the title of a report by Von Holdt *et al.* (2011, 9), *The smoke that calls*, the title having been suggested by a study participant who commented, “Then people said, ‘The Premier undermines us. He’ll see by the smoke we’re calling him.’”, implying that no attention is paid to the grievances of the people unless they use drastic means. The report comprised eight in-depth case studies of collective violence in 2008 and 2009 that were undertaken by an interdisciplinary research team using qualitative methods. It covered not only community (service delivery) protests but also xenophobic violence. Seven of the communities were given fictional names to protect the identities of study participants. The intention of the authors was to gain an understanding of the underlying social dynamics of collective violence in relation to local associational life, local politics and class formation (Von Holdt *et al.* 2011, 2). They pointed to the rapid processes of post-apartheid class formation, in which “a new elite is emerging” along with “a large underclass of unemployed and precariously employed persons”. They placed this in the context of the transition from apartheid to democracy, which they saw giving rise to “fierce struggles over inclusion and exclusion within the elite, between elites and subalterns, and within the subaltern classes themselves” (Von Holdt *et al.* 2011, 6). These struggles involve contestation over what it means to be a citizen, and play themselves out in community protests.

For librarians this report is of particular interest in that it pays specific, albeit brief, attention to the burning of a library in one of the communities (Von Holdt *et al.* 2011, 26-27). In three of the towns they studied, public libraries were burnt down. Like librarians, the researchers too were puzzled by this:

We found this a puzzle. Why libraries? Was there consensus in communities that burning libraries was a good or effective way of drawing attention to their grievances? If so, why? Or was it simply an accident, without any particular meaning, that libraries happened to be burnt down along with other buildings? Is burning down a library a taken-for-granted social practice in communities? (Von Holdt *et al.* 2011, 26)

In one case, a young man who had participated in the protest justified the burning of the library on the grounds that it was not a proper library:

You go to the library and there is no newspaper, nothing. There’s no Internet... That was not a library. What we burnt down was just a room. We burnt the place down so they would build us a proper library... that thing was there when we were born. (Von Holdt *et al.* 2011, 26)

This was said in spite of the fact that the library had contained a number of computers donated by the Norwegian government. In another community, twenty computers were stolen by a group of protesters before the library was burnt down. Conflicting explanations and responses were reported, some community members justifying the action, others distancing themselves from it. In a third community, some school students were unhappy at the burning of the library, which they had been using. One teenage student explained, “People said, this is the municipality, we are going to burn it down”, which suggests that the library was not targeted as such. Thus such actions have different meanings for different community members. Although a library, even if it is inadequate, may be a useful amenity for some, for others it is a symbol that,

...little has changed since apartheid, and government is failing the community. Its practical usefulness is immaterial. There is a continuity between the apartheid past and the democratic present in the symbolic meaning of library or clinic as a structure that represents authority, and an authority that is indifferent to subaltern voices. Burning it down is a symbolic disruption of that authority, an assertion of the anger and grievances of the community. (Von Holdt *et al.* 2011, 27)

As Von Holdt *et al.* (2001, 9) point out, this symbolic action embodies a contradiction, in that it perpetuates the “disempowerment or subordination of the community.”

The Smoke that Calls was followed by a second report, *Responding to the Smoke that Calls* (Bandeira and Higson-Smith 2011), in which each of the eight cases was examined to determine the causes of collective violence with a view to formulating possible community-level interventions to prevent such violence. Three categories of causes were identified: root causes (such as unemployment, inequality and poverty); proximate causes (poor local government, problems with service delivery and political friction); and immediate causes. The latter comprised “accelerators” and “decelerators”, such as youth involvement, the role of leaders and police action or inaction, which could lead to either collective violence or non-violent protests. The report outlined principles for community-level interventions and suggested strategies for addressing the root causes, citing illustrative examples from various countries. The report concluded:

It is important to guard against a superficial, defensive response to collective violence by focussing attention on what is wrong with people who try to use violence to solve problems. Rather, it is necessary to look beyond the violent smoke that calls and ask about the ways in which our South African democracy is failing its people. (Bandeira and Higson-Smith 2011, 32)

At the risk of grave over-simplification, the main points in the scholarly literature on service delivery protests can be summarised as follows: These protests are concerned with a mix of issues, some of which relate to service delivery problems at the municipal level, while others relate to much more general and more fundamental problems in South African society. Still largely isolated and lacking a coherent ideological base or programme, they do not yet constitute a social movement. Associated with service delivery protests there is a worrying tendency to xenophobia, prejudice and political violence. Although protests hold revolutionary potential, the preconditions for revolution are not met at this stage. There is a clear continuity of apartheid-era and post-apartheid protest in the cultural roots, rhetoric and repertoire of tactics employed. The protests are often related to political infighting within municipalities but where ANC-controlled councils are targeted, they do not necessarily imply a rejection of the ANC.

In respect of questions (1) to (4) the following answers can be given:

1. The burning of libraries has to be seen within the context of violent protests.
2. Unemployed youth and school learners are involved in spearheading violent actions, including the burning of libraries.
3. It is not clear whether libraries are targeted specifically as such, or because they are housed in municipal buildings.
4. Some young protesters who were involved in burning libraries have explained their actions as motivated by inadequate library facilities, but these may be *ex post facto* rationalizations rather than accurate assessments of the libraries concerned.

The Burning of the Ratanda Library

The Ratanda Library served the 70,000 residents of the Ratanda township² outside the town of Heidelberg in the Lesedi Municipality, Gauteng province. In a media advisory issued after its destruction, the LIASA President cited some facts about the library’s resources: 11,807 catalogued library books, seven “brand new computers” for use by patrons, a photocopy machine and a large screen television (LIASA 2012). In comparison with developed countries, these would be regarded as meagre resources.

² In South Africa the term “township” refers to “a suburb or city of predominantly black occupation, formerly officially designated for black occupation by apartheid legislation” (Oxford dictionaries, <http://oxford-dictionaries.com/definition/english/township>, accessed August 17, 2013)

When related to the size of the population served, the usage data cited by the President suggests that only a small proportion of Ratanda's residents were library users. Nevertheless the library was meeting concrete and practical needs:

- Computers used by 1000+ patrons per month
- Over 900 telefaxes sent per month
- 2,594 photocopies made during January
- Circulation of materials of 3,146 items per year
- On-site use of 10,133 items per year
- Outreach programmes for the elderly and the youth. (LIASA 2012)

According to press reports (De Wet 2012a, 2012b; Moshokoa 2012), on 19 and 20 March 2012 violent service delivery protests took place in Ratanda township, prompted by poor services and allegations of “rampant fraud and corruption” in the municipality (De Wet 2012a). More specifically “residents alleged over-charging and fraud in their municipality's delivery of electricity to the township, and said they had been treated with disrespect when they had tried to raise their issues” (De Wet 2012b). On Monday 19 March, the local offices of the municipality were burnt down. On the following day, the clinic was looted and the centre for disabled people and the library were burnt down: “In the burnt shell of the library, on Wednesday morning, a small group of men pulled copper wire from what little remained of the walls and ceiling; of the books nothing remained” (De Wet 2012a). The total cost of the damage was R2.96 million (c. USD 300,000). The library depot in Ratanda Extension 7 was also looted and damaged (LIASA 2012).

Although media reports placed the burning of the library on Tuesday 20 March, it was reported to the library profession that this incident happened on Human Rights Day, Wednesday 21 March. Human Rights Day is a national day that is commemorated annually to remind South Africans of the sacrifices made during the struggle for democracy and human rights. On this day in 1960, police opened fire on protesters at a police station in Sharpeville, killing 69 people and wounding 180 (South Africa. Government Communication and Information Service 2013). Sharpeville became a rallying call for the anti-apartheid struggle. In 2012, this public holiday was celebrated under the theme “Working together to promote unity in diversity and human dignity for all.” To add to the irony the library was burnt down during South African Library Week, celebrated from 17 to 24 March 2012 with the theme “Develop @ your library” (LIASA 2012).

Librarians Respond

This section addresses question (5): How has the South African library profession responded to these incidents?

The LIASA President reported this incident in a message posted online on 22 March. Photographs of the library before it was burned down (<http://liasa.org.za/node/769>) and after (<http://liasa.org.za/node/763>) were posted on the LIASA website on the same day. This elicited five comments from readers, expressing grief and disgust, calling for “swift and harsh justice”, and proposing that more be done to educate the people about the value of libraries. On 23 March the LIASA President issued the media advisory that has already been referred to (LIASA 2012).

Between 23 March and 2 April 2012 another 30 comments were posted on *Liasonline* and/or on the LIASA website (<http://liasa.org.za/node/763>; <http://www.liasa.org.za/node/768>). Curiously, only one brief mention of the Ratanda Library could be found in LIASA's newsletter, *LIASA-in-touch*. This concerned a report in the September 2012 issue by the Librarian of the Year 2011, Julia Paris, who had undertaken several practical initiatives to respond to the disaster (Paris 2012). These included a high-profile fund-raising event and the drafting of an incident response and disaster recovery plan (still in progress at time of writing). A message posted on 2 April 2012 expressed the concern of South Africa's National Council for Libraries and Information Services (NCLIS), and its unanimous support of the LIASA statement distributed in the media advisory mentioned above. Two further posts referred to the fund-raising event organized by Paris. A final mention of Ratanda occurred in a post on *Liasonline* dated 6 February 2013 responding to the reported destruction of the Ahmed Baba Institute library in Timbuktu, Mali (<http://www.liasa.org.za/node/899>). Among the 14 comments on this statement, many were concerned with the credibility of the various conflicting versions of the events in Mali; others expressed outrage and sorrow as in the case of the Ratanda Library. One specifically referred to the Ratanda Library.

Analysis of Responses

In an attempt to identify major themes in the responses of the library community, the 26 comments and statements that were posted between 22 March and 2 April 2012, together with five undated comments on the LIASA website which appear to have been posted during this period, were examined more closely. Posts in social media were not examined. A further limitation is that the posts are limited to

those of LIASA members or those subscribing to its discussion list. Since the use of such material for research purposes poses ethical issues (Pickard 2007, 78-79; Connaway and Powell 2010, 91-92), it is noted here that the comments were posted in a public forum and can readily be found on the Web. Three of the comments were anonymous and one gave a first name only. The other comments stated the authors' names. The author of this article contributed one of the posts soon after the incident and before the idea of subjecting it to scholarly investigation had arisen. Four individuals made two posts each. There were 24 individuals contributing. This does not, presumably, include the anonymous contributors.

E-mail and Web-based comments tend to be made spontaneously, in the heat of the moment. Emotional and intemperate language may be used. Thus the question arises whether, when their posts provide data for research, persons posting messages on discussion lists and similar media should be considered to be authors or research subjects. The recommendations on ethical decision-making of the Association of Internet Researchers (Ess and AoIR 2002) suggest that this depends on how secure and private the venues are. In the case of "e-mail postings to large listservs" and posts on public Web pages and blogs, the posters "may be understood as authors intending for their work to be public" (2002, 7). It would therefore be legitimate to identify the authors of the material considered here. But since the identities of the authors (other than office-bearers) are of no consequence in this analysis, in this article the authorship of posts is not attributed to named individuals.

"Official" Responses

As mentioned above, the first news of the incident was disseminated to LIASA members by LIASA's President on 22 March. This message touched on a number of themes which recurred in later comments:

- Sadness
- Shock and horror ("appalled")
- Loss of a valuable resource (for the community, and as a national asset)
- Need to increase awareness of the role of the library in the community (this received the most emphasis, and members were urged to use SA Library Week to highlight this)
- Anger and frustration of community members (the wish was expressed that community members should protect their libraries rather than destroy them "because they are angry and frustrated")

The President's "media advisory" on the following day touched on several of these themes, in a professionally formulated statement. It stated that LIASA was "shocked and appalled" at the incident. The irony of the burning occurring during SA Library Week was mentioned and the marketing opportunity was seized to publicize it; in fact almost half of the statement was devoted to SA Library Week. Information was provided about the resources of the Ratanda Library and its utilization as quoted above, thereby emphasizing the loss to the community, and the actions which led to its destruction were condemned. There was no mention of the anger and frustration of the community.

The Chairperson of the Gauteng South branch of LIASA responded in that capacity on 28 March. Her post expressed strong emotions of sadness and shock, as well as shame. The words — the burning of one of our libraries—and frequent use of the first person plural indicated a sense of immediacy and involvement. Much emphasis was placed on the importance of public libraries in a range of spheres, as suggested by the expressions: "a corner stone of democratic government", "knowledge economy", "reservoir of knowledge", "lifelong learning" and "the future of generations to come". Condemnation was expressed, and was linked to an appeal "to all the perpetrators to stop this unwanted behaviour". The word "perpetrator", recurring in subsequent posts, places a distance between the writer and the persons in question.

The final comment was posted on 2 April by an official of the national Department of Arts and Culture on behalf of the chairperson of the NCLIS, tersely expressing that body's concern about the "tragic event", referred to also as "wanton destruction", endorsing the official LIASA statement, and referring to the "need for a wider discussion".

Unofficial Responses: Four Groups of Themes

The official statements broached most of the themes that occur in the personal and unofficial reactions and comments of LIASA members. When the latter were analysed, three main groups of themes were immediately evident: first, those reflecting emotions of the participants; second, those relating to the impact of the incident on the community, libraries in general and the library profession; and third, those concerned with practical professional responses, including education of the public, marketing and advocacy and disaster response. A fourth group, which emerged somewhat later, was concerned with the need to understand and deal with the underlying issues.

It must be borne in mind that these themes have been isolated for purposes of analysis. The themes are interrelated. In the individual comments the various themes were interwoven. In very few comments was only a single theme touched upon.

Group A: Revulsion

The first group of themes was primarily concerned with the emotions of the participants: sadness, shock, horror, anger, shame, discouragement, condemnation and sympathy. Sadness was a common theme, e.g.: “heartbroken”, “it saddens me to the core”, “it saddens our hearts”. Discouragement (“we are disheartened”, “depressing”) accompanied feelings of sadness. The irony of this incident happening during South African Library Week and (so it was thought) on Human Rights Day was not lost on the participants. This was referred to frequently, which is not surprising as the initial post was headed “[Liasaonline] Burning of Ratanda Library on Human Rights Day and during SA Library Week”.

Shock and horror were frequently expressed, e.g. “abominable, very disgusting,” “appalled and shocked”. The related theme of shame had two sub-themes: the feeling that the incident had brought shame upon South Africa (“We are a shame to other countries”), and also the need to “shame” the “perpetrators”, that is, make them feel ashamed of what they have done: “Perhaps the perpetrators in this community will be shamed into clearing up and working to rebuild...”

Condemnation was expressed through language such as “barbaric”, “dastardly,” “abominable,” and “wanton destruction”. The strong language and biting sarcasm used in some of the posts also suggests deep anger:

What is it with people today? How do they believe that burning down a library or anything else for that matter will resolve things or improve things? It is reminiscent of the days when schools were burnt down and then children didn't have anywhere to go to get educated. These actions must be condemned as strongly as possible.

The implied comparison with apartheid days is probably the strongest condemnation, and appears somewhat ‘edgy’ when seen in the context of South Africa’s recent history. The wish was expressed that “the perpetrators” be brought to a swift and harsh justice, justice itself being an underlying theme, with particular emphasis on the injustice of depriving community members and especially children of resources for education and development. Related to this is a theme of sympathy, with some concern

being expressed not only for the community but also for the staff of the Ratanda Library:

I wish the community the very best wishes in rebuilding this library to its former glory

Best wishes to all public and community librarians. (What support is given to the staff of the Ratanda Library? I cannot even imagine the emotional trauma they must be experiencing.)

Group B: The Impact of the Incident

The second group of themes relates primarily to the impact of the incident. Although often expressed in strong language, these comments express less personal emotion and more professionally oriented responses. Most frequently they refer to the loss of resources which are intended for the use of communities. The emphasis is on the loss of resources for education, mainly in relation to education of children. In South African townships and informal settlements, where school libraries are few and far between and where many children live in overcrowded dwellings lacking electricity, community libraries are heavily used by learners and students in formal education as quiet and safe places for study. Also mentioned in the responses, but to a lesser extent, are libraries as resources for lifelong learning, community development, democracy and culture. These thoughts are expressed in rather abstract slogan-like rhetoric, reflecting the long-held beliefs of the library profession, for example: “the university of the poor,” “a corner stone of our democratic government in knowledge economy,” a “liberating resource,” “a reservoir of knowledge,” and “community hubs and a beacon of hope for fighting illiteracy and ignorance”.

The expression of such beliefs does not necessarily mean that they are generally shared by the communities that librarians wish to serve. The relatively low usage of the Ratanda Library, mentioned above, and the very fact that it was burnt down suggests that the community does not perceive it as quite the significant resource that librarians believe it to be. This was expressed in one of the posts which cited a media report indicating that a group of women in the community had given some thought to which facilities should be attacked and had decided that schools should not be touched: “If they burn those down, what happens to the kids?” The poster commented:

This reflects a level of strategic thinking, where the conclusion was that certain community centres were worthy targets, but the SCHOOL was perceived as being too valuable to burn down. It also reflects that the LIBRARY was not perceived to be

of sufficient value to the community to be exempted from the burning.

This comment touches on an underlying concern about lack of recognition of the role of libraries in communities:

The deafening silence of the media and the powers that be on the destruction of a library is also an indicator of the unimportant status of libraries in this country. In other countries where this would have brought forth a national outcry, this has become acceptable as another act of civil unrest in South Africa. What a shame!

It also extended to anxiety about the status of the profession:

...an open attack on the LIS profession and what we stand for.

Clearly there is still a long way to go for the profession to be respected and recognized by people.

A related theme was that of the vulnerability of libraries and the profession, suggested by the notion, occurring in several posts, that libraries had been targeted. The use of the expression “soft target” in two of the posts also embodies an assumption that libraries had been deliberately chosen.

Group C: Professional Action

Not surprisingly, in a profession which is so frequently exhorted to do marketing and engage in advocacy, and given that this featured prominently in the President’s initial announcement of the incident and was highlighted again in the media advisory, promotion in the form of raising awareness, educating the public about libraries, marketing and advocacy emerged as a prominent theme for professional action:

LIASA should release a media statement condemning this barbaric act.

Let us engage every structure in our communities to stop these actions and protect our libraries.

We have to educate our people more about the preservation of libraries and the resources in them.

Would it not maybe help to get an interview on TV, e.g. Carte Blanche or Special Assignment, and ask them to investigate the events that led to these shocking events, and to highlight the importance of libraries for these communities as a way of developing and educating them so they can rise above their poverty, etc.

A second theme in this group was concerned with disaster response. One of the participants volunteered to

...draft an Incident Response and Disaster-Recovery Plan to table at our next Executive Meeting. Such a Disaster-Recovery Plan could go a long way in assisting LIASA librarians with a tangible responsiveness to incidents of such magnitude to help them recover and rebuild their lives.

The participant requested articles, suggestions and other inputs to assist with this task.

Group D: Underlying Issues

The possibility that anger and frustration on the part of the community could be a factor in the incident was touched on in the President’s initial announcement. On the whole, however, during the earlier phases of the discussion, the condemnatory language (“perpetrators”, “unwarranted violence”, “senseless”, etc.) used by participants to refer to those responsible suggested a refusal to consider their circumstances or motivation. However, the theme re-emerged in a comment suggesting that the incident needed to be analysed so that lessons could be drawn from it:

While this kind of action can never, ever be condoned, I suggest that it reflects a deep frustration bordering on despair, a failure of grass-roots democracy, and the tendency of ordinary people still to associate municipal institutions with agencies of governmental control, as they were during apartheid. So one way of looking at this is [to] pose the question whether people in some poor communities still see their libraries as part of a municipal bureaucracy that they do not trust. If that is the case, the challenge for our profession is to transform our institutions so that they will be recognized by poor communities as agencies of liberation.

A number of participants supported this suggestion. One participant suggested that the challenge of transforming libraries so that they could be recognised as “agencies of liberation” needed to be addressed through “advocacy, ...marketing, and more”. This participant also suggested that a brainstorming session be held on the topic at the 2012 LIASA conference. (This did not take place.) Another participant added a number of questions to be addressed, which are also related to the previous group of themes:

I would humbly submit some further questions... that could be asked: How can librarians CONNECT with, and ENGAGE communities to educate ... people to understand the value of libraries to them?

How can librarians DEMONSTRATE the value of libraries to impoverished communities in South Africa? (It does not help

to tell people that libraries are valuable instruments of lifelong learning, which can help lift them out of poverty, people have to experience it for themselves)

Following the above two, how can librarians encourage community members to become ACTIVISTS and CHAMPIONS in support of libraries, so that librarians and the community work TOGETHER?

In addition, librarians could study activist organisations that have successfully reached grassroots communities, such as Equal Education ... and glean best practice methodologies from them to employ in a strategy of intervention, which is sorely needed.

On 30 March, towards the end of the discussion, an anonymous participant departed quite radically from the discourse up to that point, by putting the point of view of the protesters with overt sympathy:

While destroying and burning of Ratanda pivotal resources should be condemned, it is still with great sadness that Ratanda/ Heidelberg leaders haven't been able to master the Batho Pele Principles. Ratanda community has been engulfed with anger, bitterness and frustration of issues that needed to be addressed by their leaders.

If consultation, redress, and empathy was applied during the engagement with the residents prior to the protests all of these could have been avoided. A municipality is a municipality because of its community, no municipality is above the community. The current leadership and stakeholders who are running the offices of Lesedi Municipality are dictators [dictators?], authoritarians who are not prepared to engage and address community's challenges.

Certainly, Ratanda Community Library didn't deserve this BUT, let it start with our leaders!

This comment was the only one to address quite directly some of the problems at the root of service delivery protests. It comes closest to the themes that are dealt with in the academic literature reviewed above. This comment was not taken up, except by one participant who placed the incident in an overtly party political context, that of the local government elections of 18 May 2011:

Any violent conduct and burning of houses of Councillors and Municipal Buildings to highlight certain demands cannot be accepted because it is tantamount to anarchy and disorder. The majority of the people voted overwhelmingly because they want to strengthen democracy and any violent conduct reverses all the gains. I call upon ANC structures and communities to protect their public representatives and become more vigilant against destroyers of democracy.

As an answer to question (5) the four groups of themes that were identified (and which do not exhaust all possible interpretations) can be summarized as follows:

- Group A: Revulsion
Themes: grief, shock, horror, anger, shame, discouragement, condemnation and sympathy
- Group B: Impact of the incident
Themes: loss of resources, lack of recognition of libraries, anxiety about the status of the profession, vulnerability
- Group C: Professional action
Themes: promotion (raising awareness, education of the public, marketing, advocacy), disaster response
- Group D: Underlying issues
Themes: lesson drawing, transformation of libraries, sympathetic understanding of community grievances

Discussion

This discussion presents the author's interpretation of the incident and its impact and touches on questions (5) and (6). Other interpretations are possible. Those below are offered as a point of departure for discussion.

Question 5: How has the South African library profession responded to these incidents?

There is a wide gap between the responses of the discussion participants and the scholarly community as summarised earlier. This is not surprising. The scholarly community is expected to deal with phenomena such as service delivery protests and community violence with a degree of detachment. It has the benefit of theoretical frameworks that contextualize such events and of an international corpus of cases built up over time for comparison and interpretation. The library profession is more immediately and existentially implicated. This would account for the strong emotions (Group A) and the sense of loss, anxiety and vulnerability (Group B) in the comments of the librarians, which, it should be borne in mind, were posted in the immediate aftermath of the incident, without the benefit of scholarly reflection.

Also noteworthy in the librarians' responses is the quite prompt practical turn, focussing first on the loss of resources (Group B) and then on professional action (Group C). Given the constant heavy emphasis on promotion and marketing, which has been a major theme in the literature of librarianship over decades, it is not surprising that the theme of promotion (used here as an umbrella term for raising awareness, education of the public about the value of libraries, marketing, and advocacy) surfaced

at an early stage in the discussion (Group C). The President's media advisory statement is a textbook example of how to utilise bad news to gain attention and communicate a promotional message. It is only in Group D (lesson drawing) that the perspectives of the librarians approach those of the scholarly community. The need to learn from the incident was expressed quite tentatively. Only one (anonymous) participant took a more radical position, expressing understanding and some sympathy for the protesters. This comment was quickly rebutted, and did not give rise to any further discussion.

A general impression of the discussion is that librarians are well-intentioned and idealistic, committed to their profession and convinced of its value, but often naive and unaware of the complex social and political context in which they try to exercise their profession. Dearly held beliefs are proclaimed but not questioned.

Apart from the follow-up activities referred to above (the fund-raising event and the compilation of an incident response and disaster-recovery plan) and a single reference to Ratanda in a discussion of events in Timbuktu, LIASA members do not appear to have taken much further interest in this issue.³ Although six months elapsed between the burning of the Ratanda Library and the 2012 LIASA Conference, the suggestion that a brainstorming session on the topic be held there was not taken up. As far as could be determined, no sessions or conference papers have been devoted to the issue of library burnings at any LIASA conferences.⁴ In LIASA's newsletter, *LIASA-in touch*, the 'bad news' appears to have been drowned out by positive news items about conferences, branch and interest group events, promotional activities of libraries, and activities that formed part of South African Library Week, etc.

It is this author's contention that the intense but short-lived response of the library profession as reflected in the discussion following the Ratanda incident has been ultimately inadequate in that it failed to address the social and political context of the incident. The prompt turn to library promotion represents an unconscious avoidance of professional reflection.

Question 6: What can the South African library profession learn from them?

An avoidance of the complex problems raised by Ratanda and the preceding library burnings may be understood in various ways. The education and continuing workplace learning of librarians emphasises technical skills, the use of information technology and managerial activities. In their professional associations and publications there is much emphasis on marketing and promotion, putting forward a positive image. Community libraries are a relatively small and insignificant part of the municipal infrastructure. Their resources are limited; their staff hard-pressed. Thus librarians may well ask themselves whether libraries are really able to contribute at all to the solution of such seemingly complex and intractable social and political problems. In these circumstances it would seem best to simply pick up the pieces and get on with the job. It is also unlikely that librarians 'at the coal face' have the time to reflect or that they will have access to the scholarly literature cited above.

Incidents such as the burning of the Ratanda Library present both challenges and opportunities for the leadership of the library profession and for scholars in the field. For the profession, they offer an opportunity for in-depth discussion and reflection to raise awareness among librarians of the complex social and political context in which their libraries are situated, at the community level and at the national level. For teachers and researchers in LIS schools, they present many questions worth researching, for example, what role do libraries play in townships and shack settlements and what is their impact? How do residents of these communities see libraries and librarians? How do librarians relate to these communities?

Some research on these questions has been conducted in France, where the ambivalent relationship between librarians and poor communities has been studied by sociologists in the context of cultural change (Merklen and Murard 2008) with a particular focus on how the librarians perceive their communities (Merklen and Perrot-Dessaux 2010). Caswell (2009) has attempted to put the attack on the Bhandikar Oriental Research Institute within a broader context of caste politics and the responsibilities of archivists towards subaltern communities. Recently, discussing the response of the South African library community to the Timbuktu incident, Dick (2013) has pointed out that turning to digitization as a solution constitutes avoidance of the political dimension. Such contributions open up avenues for understanding these disturbing incidents. Responding with more and better marketing and promotion is too simplistic. The underlying problems need to be understood.

³ During 2009 to 2013 the National Library of South Africa presented a series of preservation training workshops for workers in community libraries. These workshops included disaster recovery training (Drijfhout, e-mail messages 26 September and 1 October 2013).

⁴ Papers on the subject were presented at the LIASA Conference in October 2013.

Conclusion

Incidents of collective violence in which libraries are damaged and destroyed, as illustrated by the case of the Ratanda Library, expose fault-lines in South African society. It is painful to be confronted with the failures that are undermining the idealistic project of building a new society of equal opportunities and full participation by all. The library profession may not, after brief expressions of dismay and concern, go back to business as usual, no matter how well-intentioned. The profession needs to get to grips with the social and political factors underlying these startling and unsettling incidents. They raise difficult questions, but the questions need to be addressed if the library profession is to have any relevance to the vast majority of the South African population.

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