

Librarians and crises in the 'old' and 'new' South Africa

Archie L Dick*

Department of Information Science, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa, 0002.

*Corresponding author:

Archie Leonard Dick, University of Pretoria, IT6-72, Lynnwood Road, Pretoria, 0002, South Africa.

Email: archie.dick@up.ac.za

Abstract

This article reviews the responses of librarians to crises in the 'old' and 'new' South Africa. It draws on primary and secondary sources to tell the stories of librarians during personal, political and professional crises. States of emergency, censorship legislation, political and xenophobic violence in South Africa since the 1960s are some of the sources for these crises. Librarians and the wider library-caring community have adapted their strategies to champion the freedom of access to information and freedom of expression.

Keywords: Crises, Censorship, Library destruction, South Africa, Xenophobia

Introduction

Much research in librarianship and information studies today emphasize scientific approaches that focus on and deal successfully with technical processes, information products and systems, performance, measurement, indices, and technologies. How librarians respond to personal, political, and professional crises however cannot be properly investigated along these lines. We gain better insights and understanding from approaches that are sensitive

to change over time, and that 'give voice' to librarians' own experiences during crises. There are several credible research methods that focus on personality, complexity, and other features that cannot be easily grasped in the sterile language of quantification (Bates 2004; Labaree 2006; Roberts 2002). Drawing on some of these methods, this article discusses how librarians responded to crises affecting freedom of access to information and freedom of expression in the 'old' and 'new' South Africa.

Crises in the 'old' South Africa

In his opening address to IFLA delegates at the Durban Conference Centre in 2007, Albie Sachs, then a Justice of South Africa's Constitutional Court, talked about the lack of books as his most sorely-felt deprivation during solitary confinement in prison in 1963. At first, he was allowed to read the *Bible* only. But soon after a court decision in 1964 allowed him access to reading material, a sympathetic police station commander arranged through his wife for Albie to use one of their family's library cards. An on-duty constable would take Albie's list of books to the Wynberg public library where a librarian's assistance helped to save him from a mental breakdown during his first spell of detention under apartheid.

Albie did not know who the librarian was, and he dedicated his IFLA talk to this 'unknown' librarian. A search through Cape Town City Libraries' annual reports and a few telephone calls to retired librarians revealed that Albie's 'unknown' librarian was the late Mr J.P. Nowlan. Albie was overjoyed when he discovered the identity of the librarian – it was not after all a 'she' as Albie had thought and referred to in his talk. Mr Nowlan, through a

commitment to the professional ideals of librarianship, had either unwittingly or knowingly helped Albie Sachs through a personal crisis.

‘Stone walls do not a prison make... if you have company or books’, Albie wrote in his jail diary. He recalls reading Miguel de Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, Thomas Mann’s *Buddenbrooks*, Irving Stone’s *The Agony and the Ecstasy*, James Michener’s *Hawaii*, and many other ‘long’ books ‘alive with people’ instead of books of philosophy, or politics, or criticism. ‘By means of the pages which I hold in my hands’, Sachs enthused, ‘I am restored to mental activity and, above all, I resume my position as a member of humanity’ (Sachs, 1990: 165).

Albie’s personal crisis sprang from a larger national crisis that followed public demonstrations to protest apartheid policies. The South African government responded to such open defiance and opposition by declaring states of emergency in the 1960s and 1980s. This led to crackdowns on political dissent, raids on homes, arrests, and detention without trial. The states of emergency gave the President the powers to rule by decree, and to censor any news coverage of political unrest.

But what did ordinary librarians like Mr Nowlan make of these national crises? Librarians who, in the routine performance of their duties of providing access to information and reading material, now also faced personal and professional crises. Apartheid proved to be a test for South African librarians and the South African Library Association, with mixed and sometimes surprising results.

Ironically, reading in 1972 about Albie’s prison experiences in *Jail Diary* ‘saved’ Koekie Meyer’s professional life as a young white South African

working at the library of the apartheid propaganda Department of Information. The library's collection of banned books included *Jail Diary*, and she was horrified at the treatment of political prisoners about which she said many ordinary white South Africans knew little if anything. She discovered that political prisoners were not the barbarians she had pictured them to be, but that they were educated human beings with strong convictions who had sacrificed much for what they believed. The book, she says, changed her outlook on life completely (Meyer, 2015).

In the same year of Koekie's redemption, apartheid state prosecutors in British photographer Quentin Jacobsen's trial tried to show links between his political activities and the contents of banned books seized during his arrest. Jill Ogilvie, an unassuming Assistant City Librarian of the Johannesburg Public Library (JPL), read out in court a list of library titles similar to those found in his possession. The charge of obtaining information that could be used to further the aims of communism was subsequently dismissed because the same information could easily be found in the reference section of JPL. Jacobsen was also left wondering why he had gone to such trouble for his books when he could just have gone to his local library (Jacobsen, 1973: 244). By simply doing her job as a librarian, Jill had ended the nightmare of solitary confinement for Quentin. But librarians were imprisoned too.

Annica van Gylswyk archived materials for the African Studies Documentation Centre at the University of South Africa (Unisa) library in Pretoria, in the 1970s and 1980s. She travelled across the countryside to collect posters and publications for the Documentation Centre, often using it

to hide her friends' banned or 'suspect' materials, such as a large portrait of the Black Consciousness leader Steve Biko. In 1986, soon after two Security policemen visited the Documentation Centre under the pretext of wanting to view some political posters, she was arrested.

Annica was interrogated for seven weeks without charge at the Pretoria Women's Prison, detained for a while in a police station cell along with prostitutes and drug addicts, and then deported to Sweden (Andersson, 2013: 49-51). The librarian's ordinary functions of collecting and documenting materials for use assumed at the same time frightening and heroic dimensions in Annica's work. Like Annica, many South African librarians painstakingly collected and documented the apartheid 'crisis', often at great personal and professional risk.

Librarians responded differently to apartheid, and opposition itself was divided. There were different liberation strategies and visions for a 'new' South Africa, and nothing was inevitable. This situation spawned self-made librarians of political movements. Dawood Parker who was a member of the Unity Movement, which differed in its political outlook from the African National Congress, was such a 'librarian'. In the basement of his home in Wynberg, and below a regular library of books for the South Peninsula Educational Fellowship, he ran a clandestine library of banned books since the 1960s. As a travel agent, Dawood frequented book shops in London and other cities where he placed orders for books banned in South Africa. He also scooped up hundreds of 'banned' books dumped on Cape Town's Grand Parade book stalls by nervous members of the public who feared raids by the security police.

Dawood kept book borrowers' records in old telephone directories stacked under the new one so that security police could not discover the identities of readers and what they were reading. He also used special codes for the places where he squirreled away these books in the underground library. Readers met secretly in unusual places, such as a farm house directly opposite the notorious Pollsmoor Prison and the caves of Devil's Peak, which flanks Table Mountain (Parker, 2007). Here they learned about spying from Somerset Maugham's stories in *Ashenden*, and about collective action from chapter fourteen of John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*.

An even more surprising place where librarians faced personal, professional, and political crises was Robben Island prison. Political prisoner Sedick Isaacs earned a librarianship degree by correspondence from Unisa while in that prison, and he ran the General Section library in the 1970s. Katharine Haslam, the music librarian at the University of Cape Town, sent Sedick boxes of books after he requested material for the prison library. One box included Karl Marx's *Das Kapital*, which the prison censor vetting the books considered to be acceptable because it was, he proclaimed to Sedick's amusement and relief, a book 'about money' (Isaacs, 2008).

Sedick faced a professional crisis when political prisoners implemented their own censorship. As a way of propagating their political views, the anti-communists stole the communist books and communists stole the anti-communist books from the prison library. Unexpected cell raids by prison guards, however, usually restored all the books to the library, which Sedick Isaacs used as an open space for debate and discussion.

Sedick taught speed-reading, which explains accounts by other prisoners of how they rapidly extracted information from smuggled newspapers, and transcribed and circulated the contents throughout the Robben Island political prison community (*Island in chains*, 1982: 155-6). He also offered basic reading instruction in Robben Island's 'primary school', and taught South Africa's President Jacob Zuma how to read (Isaacs, 2008).

Although public libraries were racially segregated by the 1980s, and the manipulation of library standards by senior library managers had resulted in the under-supply of books to libraries in black and 'coloured' townships, some white librarians secretly defied apartheid library regulations. Leta Naude snuck books on navigation and other aspects of sailing out of the back door of Wynberg library to Neal Petersen, a young aspiring 'coloured' yachtsman. He had read all the books on yachting available in the township libraries, which probably amounted to one or two. Leta's risks paid off when Neal eventually became the first black man to race solo around the world in 1998 (Dick, 2013: 109-10).

Frank Sassman's crisis was what to do when as a librarian at the United States Information Service Library in Cape Town he learned on the grapevine about Nelson Mandela's imminent release from prison (Sassman, 2007). He approached the US ambassador in Cape Town with this news. The ambassador thought it would be an achievement if George Bush senior could be the first international statesman to telephone and congratulate Mandela. Sassman informed senior ANC members Dullah Omar and Essa Moosa, who gave him Omar's home telephone number. On the day of his release, Mandela's colleagues took him to Omar's home in Athlone to calm him down

before proceeding to the Grand Parade in Cape Town where thousands of South Africans were waiting to greet him. While relaxing at Omar's home, Bush senior called to congratulate Mandela.

As a result of this call, Mandela was included on a short list of world leaders that Bush senior briefed regularly on important issues (Mandela, 1994: 699). Sassman was responsible for the telephone call and, fortuitously as a librarian, for connecting Mandela with this exclusive global information network that now embraced a 'new' South Africa.

Crises in the 'new' South Africa

Whereas crises in the 'old' South Africa were primarily about the overthrow of apartheid, crises in the 'new' South Africa spring from efforts to deal with apartheid's socio-economic legacies and building a democratic country. A significant initiative in the LIS sector has been the drafting of a charter to guide the transformation of library and information services. A recent publication that showcases the most important developments in the 'new' South Africa has the charter at the core of transformation (The state of libraries in South Africa, 2015).

The scale of South Africa's inherited LIS disparities and growing socio-economic inequality suggests however that a charter is not enough. How this charter will transform South Africa's LIS sector still remains unclear, and events in the past few years point to the need for auxiliary transformation agents if the charter hopes to live up to its aspirations (Dick, 2014).

Annica van Gylswyk returned to a 'new' and democratic South Africa in 1998, and worked with the Mayibuye Archives centre to set up a library on Robben Island. She helped to produce a comprehensive archive of the administrative system that had been in place there, and also became involved in the training of archivists (*We Pay Tribute*, 2012).

This kind of work in a climate of transparency about the past opened the 'doors of learning' in the 'new' South Africa to an 'embarrassment of riches' in archival records. Access to this wealth of information was probably unprecedented in South African history, and was especially valuable to black researchers who had not enjoyed equal access to the country's archives at any time in the past. But even as these doors were opening there were sinister forces at work to shut them. A past-student of mine who worked at the Mayibuye archives centre told me that he had recently been instructed by a senior politician to remove a file, and send it to Luthuli House, the headquarters of the African National Congress. Librarians and information professionals quickly began to face all-too-familiar information crises in the 'new' South Africa.

Unlike the brave acts of a few courageous librarians like Annica and others in the past, however, a now-united professional association, LIASA (The Library Association of South Africa), is not shirking its duty to deal with potential crises and actual crises. In the case of the potential threat of a return to censorship it has taken a firm and unambiguous stand on the Protection of Information Bill, or 'Secrecy Bill' as it is more commonly known. This bill is a controversial piece of proposed legislation that wants to give the security cluster (the South African Police Services, the South African National Defence

Force, and the State Security Agency) and other state institutions 'the power to classify information in a very broad way' (Duncan, 2014). This will weigh state interests up against transparency and freedom of expression, and people like journalists and whistleblowers who make this information available will be jailed.

The bill derives from the apartheid-era Protection of information Act of 1982, and contains clauses about 'Public interest', 'hostile activity offences', 'protection and authority to classify state information', 'receiving state information unlawfully', and 'failure to report possession of classified information' (Republic of South Africa), all of which have serious implications for the librarian's task of providing access to information. Resistance to the bill consolidated a wide range of intellectual freedom organizations that raised concerns, and that led to a Civil Society statement that formed the basis of the R2K Campaign, demanding certain exclusions, limitations, and guarantees (McKinley, 2013).

In September 2013 President Jacob Zuma, after sustained public protest, refused to sign the Bill into law and instead sent it back to the National Assembly for reconsideration. There are signs however that it may be signed into law very soon. This will force civil society organizations to take the matter to the Constitutional Court. Older librarians remember from developments in the 'old' South Africa that the censorship of books follows soon after such legislation is promulgated, and some joined the protests against this bill, voicing their concerns about parallels with the past.

Retired librarian Christopher Merrett, whose work on censorship in the 'old' South Africa is well known, warns that "the secrecy bill could prove the

tipping point, the right of access to information being far from fully developed in South Africa in spite of constitutional guarantees and the Promotion of Access to Information Act” (Merrett, 1994; Chetty & Merrett, 2014: 21).

At a protest rally, librarian Anna Brown said: “In the old days there was a communist under every bed. Now it seems like there is a spy under every bed.” Although she worked for the Department of Education she believed that the proposed legislation would be used to cover up corruption and prevent wrongdoings from coming to light. “We are not at war”, she said, and “There is no reason for this secrecy” (Handful protesters, 2015).

A statement by LIASA and its Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression (FAIFE) committee makes it clear that “classification and censorship of information are inherently anti-democratic and distinct reminders of pre-1994 politics”. LIASA fears that the legislation will permanently remove ‘important information from public access’ and calls on the Government “to withdraw the Bill in its entirety, as a matter of urgency” (Statement by LIASA, 2015).

An actual and on-going crisis that has stunned both librarians and the general public in South Africa has been the burning and destruction of public libraries from about 2005. Between 2009 and 2012 the average was four per year. In 2015, at least three had been destroyed by August. This is not random destruction resulting from vandalism, but deliberate and orchestrated violence. This seemingly senseless destruction is often associated with what are called ‘poor service delivery’ protests in townships, and more recently with xenophobic violence (Sewdass, 2015). The following table shows just for the

Gauteng Province how many, where, and why public libraries were damaged and destroyed in the past few years.

Public libraries damaged/destroyed in Gauteng Province in the past 2-3 years (Source: Koekie Meyer 29 July 2015)

How many?	Where?	Why?
3	Khutsong (Merafong)	Khutsong was moved from Gauteng Province to North West Province
3	Ratanda (Lesedi)	Human Rights Day celebrations was moved from Sharpeville to Soweto.*
1	Greenspark (Merafong)	Municipality did not appoint local residents (military veterans) to jobs
1	Waterworks (Westonaria)	Community was furious with one of the Councillors*
1	Mohlakeng (Randfontein)	Instigated by the EFF party, and driven by a Council official*
2	Zithobeni and Rethabiseng (City of Tshwane)	Poor service delivery
1	Winnie Mandela (Tembisa)	Poor service delivery

The asterisks indicate the actual reasons instead of the given reasons of 'poor service delivery'. Reports from librarians who interact with community members indicate that political reasons are primarily why the libraries are destroyed. Politics should therefore feature in attempts to understand why this is happening, and in the ways that librarians organize their services. A senior

library manager in the Gauteng Province, Koekie Meyer, explains that libraries are associated with municipalities and that the destruction of Council property is often irrational, targeting clinics, libraries, or the mayor's house (Meyer, 2015). She also says that senior political officials (MECs - Ministers of the Executive Council of a Province) instruct library managers where libraries should be built regardless of where the highest need is, completely defying the norms and standards for public libraries.

There has been some scholarly analysis of this crisis. Peter Lor asks the relevant questions about whether libraries were deliberately targeted or simply collateral damage, and if libraries were deliberately targeted, what motivated this? (Lor, 2013). However, without criminal charges and the prosecution of suspects in the country's courts there is still more speculation than credible evidence to answer these questions. Gareth van Onselen considers the destruction of books and libraries in a wider socio-cultural frame, and cautions against the hollowing out of South Africa's complex historical past. When taken together with the destruction of statues and monuments, and attempts to re-write our history, he explains that this is like 'tearing pages out of the South African book' (Van Onselen, 2013, 2015). What is clear from these analyses is that librarians can no longer separate the world of libraries from that of politics.

As in the 'old' South Africa, however, professional librarians and the wider library-caring community in the 'new' South Africa are responding courageously to these professional and political crises. In the Gauteng Province, Khutsong Libraries, Ratanda Libraries, and Greenspark Library have already been re-built, and funding has been made available for

upgrading the Zithobeni and Rethabiseng libraries. LIASA and the National Library of South Africa (NLSA) have issued statements condemning xenophobic attacks as attacks on freedom of expression, and underscored mutual relationships with fellow Africans (LIASA Statements, 2015; NLSA Statement, 2015).

Roodepoort Community Library hosted an anti-xenophobia programme in May 2015, inviting speakers from various African countries to speak out against xenophobia (Roodepoort Library anti-xenophobia, 2015). The wider library-caring community also responded to the destruction of township libraries. Reminiscent in some respects of the strategy adopted in the 'old' South Africa, an 'underground' library sprang up earlier this year after the Mohlakeng Community Library in Randfontein was destroyed. This library had provided precious study space and electricity for township students living in cramped quarters.

Young people from Mohlakeng started a movement to collect books for an 'underground' library, and to foster a love for reading. The library is a tiny one-room house with precast walls and a corrugated iron ceiling (Mohlakeng Youths, 2015). Two years ago they had started a literacy programme to turn the books they read into performance pieces, which they enact outside the library. This was because younger children could not read the script for performing stage plays. After collecting books from house to house, the children took these books home to improve their reading skills, and they now perform Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *Romeo and Juliet*. The Mohlakeng Youth Movement also use 'books written in the vernacular, especially poems, which young people enjoy and can relate to' (Mohlakeng Youths, 2015).

After a newspaper ran the story about the 'underground' library's need for more books, several donors responded. The Bedfordview Girl Guides identified a need for reading as part of the eighth millennium development goal and started to collect books. When a ten-year old girl guide was asked why she helped to donate the books she replied that: 'We need to show the world South Africa shouldn't only be known for the bad things' (Township library opens hearts, 2015).

Another actual and ongoing crisis is that the majority of South African schools do not have libraries, and many are under-resourced (SA school library crisis 2013). Through collective action librarians, the Department of Basic Education, community leaders, school staff, and the private sector are addressing this crisis. One example is the work of AVBOB, a mutual assurance society that specializes in funeral insurance and burial services. In 2013 it commenced a corporate social investment project that will eventually supply mobile container libraries to forty primary schools across the country. These containers can be converted into fully functional libraries fairly easily and quickly, and they are convenient, durable, and secure.

Through cooperation with librarians and the Department of Basic Education the books are both educational and for reading for pleasure. The sustainability of such projects is always problematic, but the AVBOB library project involves several phases that emphasize sustainability, and it is collaborating with another NGO, Touch Africa, which has extensive experience in dealing with schools on a national scale (AVBOB Foundation,

2013). One of AVBOB's employees has just completed a dissertation on the impact of container libraries on literacy, and there is an initiative underway to train dedicated school librarians.

Conclusion

In 1962 Douglas Foskett proclaimed that the librarian's creed should be: 'no politics, no religion, no morals'.

Questions about librarians, neutrality, and politics are therefore not new, and the elements of Foskett's creed have surfaced in several countries (Green, 2015; Kagan, 2015). Perhaps it is time to re-state this creed today as: 'all politics, all religions, all morals'. This positive re-formulation provides stronger reasons for libraries to be than not to be, and more compelling arguments for librarians to do than not to do - to anticipate crises, to avert crises, and to act during crises. In this way, too, we answer the true vocation of librarianship, and strengthen the global commitment of IFLA to freedom of access to information and freedom of expression.

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