

## Information heroes

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### Abstract

Through their brave actions, information heroes have assured access to information in times of social conflict, revolution, and war. They deserve to be recognized, and their achievements remembered.

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The Malian librarian and archivist, Abdel Kader Haidara, is an information hero. In mid-2012, at great personal risk, he spearheaded a clandestine operation to move thousands of ancient manuscripts to Timbuktu's safe houses (Hammer 2014). This initiative safeguarded the precious manuscripts from certain destruction by militant extremists. In

August 2013, Monica Hanna was inside the Malawi National Museum in Minya, in Egypt, when looters ran riot, stealing most of the museum's artifacts. This information hero, a young archaeologist, used her cellphone to send out a tweet asking for assistance. She was soon joined by colleagues and local police officers who helped move surviving relics by truck to a place of safety, as young men hurled Molotov cocktails and fired automatic weapons nearby (Mashburg 2014). These information heroes were instrumental in saving some of Africa's antiquities, and preserving its cultural heritage.

Like Haidara and Hanna, many librarians, archivists, and scholars around the world have distinguished themselves as information heroes in times of social conflict, revolution, and war. They deserve to be recognized, and their achievements remembered. As South Africa celebrates twenty years of democracy it is perhaps fitting to pay tribute to its apartheid-era information heroes. The anti-apartheid struggle was also an information struggle, which included exposing the government's corrupt projects to present a positive image of its race policies abroad, combating draconian censorship practices, curbing book burning, and campaigning against the banning of anti-apartheid political organizations and individuals (Merrett 1994; 2001). As information professionals, librarians and archivists were inevitably drawn into this struggle, some as information villains but some too as information heroes.

Annica van Gylswyk worked at the University of South Africa in Pretoria as a librarian, and archived materials for an African Studies Documentation Centre. She travelled across the South African countryside to collect posters and publications for the documentation centre, often using it to hide banned materials belonging to her friends. In 1986, soon after two Special Branch policemen visited the documentation centre under the pretext of wanting to view some political posters, she was arrested. Van Gylswyk 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).

Dawood Parker, a non-professional librarian, ran an underground library from his home in Cape Town since the 1960s. As a travel agent, Parker 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 visits from security police. Parker 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 prepared reading kits for young people who 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.

Allan Jones was a reader who assisted with the organization and running of the library. He explained that a post-box rented under an assumed name was one way of getting banned books. Forty-seven volumes of Karl Marx were obtained in several small parcels from abroad by this method (Dick 2013: 105). Political prisoners on Robben Island also read Marx's books in spite of a strict censorship policy.

Sedick Isaacs earned a librarianship degree by correspondence while in that prison and ran the General Section library in the 1970s. Katharine Haslam, music librarian at the University of Cape Town, sent Isaacs boxes of books after he requested material for the prison library. One box included *Das Kapital*, which the prison censor vetting the books considered to be acceptable because it was, he said, a book 'about money' (Dick 2013: 131).

Ironically, political prisoners implemented their own censorship when anti-communists stole the communist books and communists stole the anti-communist books from the prison library as a way of propagating their political views. Unexpected cell raids by prison guards usually restored all the books to the library, which Isaacs used as an open space for debate and discussion. Isaacs also taught vertical or speed-reading, which explains accounts by other prisoners 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 (Interview 2008).

Another qualified prisoner-librarian was Ahmed Kathrada. He headed Robben Island's Special Section library and the Pollsmoor Maximum Prison library, of which Nelson Mandela was a member in the 1970s and 1980s. As a result of Kathrada's library skills, Mandela was able to read works of economics, law, political science, and religion. He also read all the unbanned novels of Nadine Gordimer, Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, and Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (Mandela 1994: 595). Kathrada often used his position as librarian to communicate information and have discussions with General Section political prisoners when he delivered, collected and took stock of library books.

Less suitable for such debate and dialogue in the 1980s were South Africa's townships, which erupted in protest marches, school boycotts, and violent clashes with security police. The librarian Vincent Kolbe worked at Bonteheuwel public library on the Cape Flats where many young library members had close links with the African National Congress military wing *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (MK, or Spear of the

Nation). On several occasions, activist library members were arrested and dragged out of the library, which was under surveillance by security police. Kolbe learned from a staff member that security personnel stationed at his library by senior library management to 'protect the staff and council property' actually intended to use the library as a vantage point for snipers. He objected fiercely to this subterfuge to harm young activists, and forbade the presence of police in the library. He and his colleagues kept the library open during the 'unrest' in order to challenge the strategies of political activists.

Kolbe became a source of banned literature, trade union material, books by Antonio Gramsci and others that dealt with the Nicaraguan, Chilean, and Cuban revolutions. He collected African American political activist Angela Davis's books, and British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) audio recordings and videocassettes. He hid these in a sporting equipment bag under the lending desk, and activists secretly used them (Dick 2013: 106-8). Some of Kolbe's library colleagues were clandestine political activists themselves.

The Elsie's River librarian, Mogammad Dollie, was an operative for MK. He was a political intelligence recruiter, and used the library for secret political meetings. Reading circles and study groups met in the Elsie's River Public Library under the guises of 'The Dove Club' and the 'Cultural Society.' School learners planned street marches at such

meetings, and when security police searched the library the students sat on their school blazers and read books to avoid detection. Library work, according to Dollie, was good preparation for becoming a member of the ANC's underground spy network (Dick 2013: 108-9).

Some white librarians secretly defied apartheid library regulations. Letta Naude supplied Neal Petersen, a young aspiring 'coloured' yachtsman, with books on navigation and other aspects of sailing. She secretly slipped books to him through the back door of the Wynberg Public Library after he had read all the books on yachting available in the township libraries, which probably amounted to one or two. Naude's risks paid off when Petersen eventually became the first black man to race solo around the world (Dick 2013: 109-10).

The Cape townships were highly volatile during states of emergency, and school libraries became both places of refuge and political reading. Security police knew through their political informers that June Baatjes, school librarian at Belgravia High School, harboured protesting learners. Baatjes taught learners how to analyse newspaper reports of the protest marches, and circulated sensitive information. She was pregnant when she was arrested, and she miscarried as a result of tear-gas inhalation, but she joined many protest marches after her release. Her father gave her banned books and pamphlets, which she passed on to learners.

She also visited white school libraries to find out what books they were ordering after her school library burned down in mysterious circumstances, and was rebuilt within a few months. She refused to use the 'coloured' prescribed list. Comparing the lists, she noticed differences in the titles. Better-quality books in English and political books that affirmed apartheid and perpetuated the racial superiority of whites dominated the white lists. She then used them to order books at local bookstores, with the financial help of the school principal. Visiting school inspectors reprimanded and reminded her that she was dealing with 'a different child, from a different culture', but Baatjes was determined to provide the best reading material for her learners (Dick 2013: 110-11).

Frank Sassman also helped many activist readers through his job as librarian at the United States Information Service Library in Cape Town. He was involved, however, in a historic event on the day of Nelson Mandela's release from prison. Sassman had learned on the grapevine about Mandela's imminent release. He approached the United States 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 briefed regularly on important issues (Dick 2013 111; Mandela 1994: 699). Sassman was responsible for the telephone call, and instrumental in Mandela's addition to this exclusive global information network.

The information heroes who participated in South Africa's anti-apartheid struggle and others world-wide whose brave actions continue to assure access to information, merit recognition on an information honours list.

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