

	<p style="text-align: right;">2nd Version Date : 07/09/2007</p> <p>THE DISA PROJECT. PACKAGING SOUTH AFRICAN HERITAGE AS A CONTINUING RESOURCE: CONTENT, ACCESS, OWNERSHIP AND IDEOLOGY</p> <p>Michele Pickover Curator of Manuscripts Historical Papers, The Library, University of the Witwatersrand South Africa</p>
Meeting:	137 Serials and Other Continuing Resources
Simultaneous Interpretation:	No
<p style="text-align: center;">WORLD LIBRARY AND INFORMATION CONGRESS: 73RD IFLA GENERAL CONFERENCE AND COUNCIL 19-23 August 2007, Durban, South Africa http://www.ifla.org/iv/ifla73/index.htm</p>	

ABSTRACT

The intention of the DISA (Digital Innovation South Africa) Project is to build a continual digital resource through content based on the initiative of local scholars and dovetailing with the discussion of what it means to constitute a serialised archive of the liberation struggle. The user demand for materials selected is secondary. It is the larger questions which frame this project, such as national policies and processes around heritage, political identities, contested archives, the commodification of the Archive and intellectual property rights.

In the South African context the digitisation of heritage material for publication via the www is a site of struggle and the real challenges are not technological or technical but social and political. Digitising archives is more than merely collecting and aggregating documents in cyberspace. What is at stake is the politics of memory in digital form and how what is selected for digitisation projects frames research agendas and plays a role in curriculum strategies. The development dimension is also paramount, how these projects enhance the public interest, service researchers in the South and promote South-South dialogue.

This paper will give a brief overview of the DISA Project, examine notions of partnership that cut across international boundaries, interrogate the ideological and intellectual ramifications including issues of content selection and access and review South African policy framework discussions and recommendations.

SETTING THE SCENE

Digital Innovation South Africa (DISA) is a national, not-for-profit collaborative initiative, funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation that has drawn in a number of heritage and research stakeholders from government, tertiary institutions, libraries and archives. DISA grew out of a workshop on digital imaging sponsored by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and held in Johannesburg, South Africa, in September 1997. The first phase of the DISA project was entitled *South Africa's Struggle for Democracy 1960-1994* and began in 1999. It has made accessible via the World Wide Web, South African material of socio-political interest. It focused on runs of serials (in some cases of short-lived and of poor typographical quality) spread within library and archive collections around the country. The three decades covered by the serial literature selected by DISA related to local resistance movements to apartheid and covered approximately forty titles which covered a varied spectrum of political organisations, including the African National Congress, the Black Consciousness Movement, the Azanian Peoples Organisation, the Pan Africanist Congress and the United Democratic Front.

In 2002 DISA sought to complement this first phase of digitising journals of the liberation struggles. The original intention of this second phase (DISA 2) was to build on the serialised digital resource through archival content about the liberation struggle. The identification and selection of content was to be centred round the efforts of local scholars. This second phase began in 2003 and is entitled *Southern African Freedom Struggles, c.1950-1994*.

DISA is firm on its insistence on the use of open source software and platform independence so as to provide a model that is appropriate to the African context. In addition to developing content, DISA has contributed to the enhancement of

local knowledge in digital imaging and is also playing an advisory, advocacy, training, and research and development role.

NOTIONS OF PARTNERSHIPS: SMALL CARROT BIG STICK

The DISA project cannot be interrogated without an examination of the concept of partnerships. Digital technology can be a mechanism of domination particularly by countries in the North, at the expense of local interests. Consequently, projects such as DISA provoke a complex set of challenges and are chartering new and uncertain ground. And this has been further complicated by its affiliation with ALUKA¹ which in turn has influenced, and in some cases confused, public and stakeholder perceptions of DISA.

As soon as DISA had sent in its funding proposal to the Mellon Foundation for Phase 2, in October 2002, it was informed by the Foundation that “NewOrg” (subsequently “ITHAKA”²) was going to be set up and that, because of possible future links, DISA should revise its funding proposal so that a relationship with “NewOrg” could be included. The Foundation also advised DISA to alter its proposed focus with less emphasis on capacity building and research and development, and more on building content “efficiently”. At the time DISA, possibly naively, felt that the ITHAKA development would benefit it in terms of expert advice and sustainability. The revised proposal was submitted to the Foundation in late October 2002 and an interim grant was awarded for the first stage of DISA 2.

It was agreed between DISA and the Foundation that during this interim phase DISA would remain receptive to suggestions from the Foundation regarding strategy and content. Later in the year DISA was told that ITHAKA had launched its first initiative to create a network of international digital resources, to be known

1 ALUKA is an online digital library of scholarly African resources. These resources include African Cultural Heritage Sites and Landscapes, African Plants and Struggles for Freedom in Southern Africa.

2 Ithaka is the “incubator” to projects such as JSTOR, ARTSTOR, NITLEY, ALUKA and PORTICO which provide strategic technology-based services to higher education institutions in the USA

as Aluka. In the second half of 2003 the DISA Committee focused on the DISA 2 proposal. Final adjustments were made in November in accordance with the desire of the Foundation to have DISA relate more closely to ALUKA's needs.³

Thus, in many ways DISA and ALUKA occupy the same space, carry out parallel operations and share a core mission of creating a digital resource of materials related to the Struggles for Freedom in Southern Africa. But the relationship is about much more than just sharing information. And it is this subtext which has not only led to uncertainty by DISA stakeholders but I would argue stagnation of the resource and the loss of DISA's independent identity.

THE IDEOLOGICAL AND INTELLECTUAL MILIEU

In the globalised world, knowledge and information have been commodified and are seen as strategic resources and tools. It cannot be disputed that more and more types of information are being digitised. If we are to believe David Bearman⁴, over the next twenty five years we can expect to take part in a worldwide effort to represent the entire bulk of human memory in digital form. How does one begin to make sense of the implications of total digitisation? Inextricably linked to this notion is the Internet, the vehicle for what Marshall McLuhan referred to as the 'global village'.⁵ It was developed by the United States military and is now growing like a vast amoeba and giving birth to a new world culture. The widespread view is that technology generally, and digital technology specifically, is useful and has led to what Postman calls the "the deification of technology".⁶

3 DISA Annual Report 2003

4 Bearman, David, Founding Partner of Archives & Museum Informatics in Toronto. Bearman is an archival trendsetter who has guided the development and policies in several countries,

5 McLuhan, Marshall and Bruce R. Powers. *The Global Village: Transformations in World Life and Media in the Twenty-First Century*. Oxford University Press, 1989.

6 Postman, Neil. *Technopoly: The Surrender Of Culture To Technology*. Albert A. Knopf, 1993.

At a first uncritical glance the notion of so-called 'global' access to information is appealing and positive and also seems to imply societal advancement. A panacea for society's ills, where access to information will create a better society, will empower people and will provide for their participation in an emerging and unstoppable 'digital democracy'. But those of us from the global South know too well that the digital frontier is not value free, it reflects power relations and it creates an information aristocracy. Access to the global information economy means access to wealth and there is therefore little doubt that the question of access to information has acquired pivotal social, political and economic importance. The Internet relies on technology that is much less accessible and much more expensive in the South than in the North. In terms of pure volume of information produced and consumed, developing nations lag far behind. The manner in which information is used and who has control therefore become pivotal issues. Structural changes that are taking place in knowledge production and dissemination in the digital age are not only perpetuating an uneven South-North information flow but are also ensuring hegemony by the North in the South.

Digital technology does not merely add something, it changes everything, it brings social, political, cultural, environmental and economic changes and it accelerates the globalisation process. As Douglas Coupland points out, it is seen as a construct where "a set of individuals with access to a large database dominates another set with less access".⁷ For emerging democracies it is vital that nation-states and their citizens can access information about their own heritage so that they can interpret the past in order to understand the present and shape the future. In this branded world the digitisation of knowledge and legacy materials is not a depoliticised space and access to knowledge is also a political question – particularly to knowledge produced in and/or emanating from the global South. DISA has thus been thrust headlong into the highly politically and ideologically charged, and fraught, nexus of constructing culture and knowledge through

⁷ Coupland, Douglas. *Microserfs*, 252-253, Harper Collins, 1995.

digitising heritage from the global South within the existing frustration with the current South-North flow of information.

Sherwood has cautioned that, “given the complexity of content issues in an environment where not only the titles but the means of production and delivery are matters for decision and where policy choices have important implications for public access to a nation's patrimony, governments will find it difficult to act quickly without significant input from the stakeholders. It is not too soon for the heritage community to begin to equip itself to participate in the debates.”⁸ In the South African context the process of rigorous reflection, evaluation and of trying to unpack what is at stake both intellectually, technically and in terms of policy formulation has not been adequate. As a country we are only now beginning to explore what the implications are of the digitisation of our intellectual and cultural heritage resources. As stakeholders, as copyright owners, as custodians, as institutions, as government, South Africans are trying to understand this landscape so that they can vigorously engage with it and formulate informed responses.

Custodians of South African heritage are facing a new battle – this time on the digital front and what is plainly surfacing is wide-ranging apprehension around the ownership and hegemony of these newly aggregated and continually morphing digital assets. Some archivists and historians are arguing that many of these projects are fundamentally located in uneven power relations and perspectives which compromise national heritage; do not represent the views and interests of the developing nations; bolster inequities in globalisation; and exacerbate historic North/South imbalances. Increasingly the digitisation of South African heritage material for publication on the www is becoming a site of struggle and the real challenges are not technological or technical but social and political. As Shuler has noted, “the Internet... is very much a part of the physical and material world and is thus subject to the limits and regulations of that world. If we only conceive of the

⁸ Sherwood, Lyn Elliot. Cultural Heritage Information: Public Policy Choices. Archives & Museum Informatics,, Vol. 1, 1995.

Internet as existing in some virtual reality or cyberspace, we will lose sight of the fact that it is inextricably linked to material conceptions of space, place, and, consequently, ownership of that space.”⁹

Digitising archives is more than merely collecting and aggregating documents in cyberspace. What is at stake is the political economy of digitisation and the politics of memory in digital form and how *what* is selected for digitisation projects frames research agendas and plays a role in curriculum strategies. The development dimension is also paramount - how these projects enhance the public interest, benefit researchers in the South and promote South-South dialogue. These projects also need to be aligned to local and regional discussions and debates about the archive. It is also important that the resource should be free to Africa and be sustainable over time. Ultimately, it is these larger political, technical and intellectual challenges – of national policies and processes around heritage, political identities, contested archives and the commodification of the Archive - which frame projects such as DISA and that DISA tackles on a daily basis.

Content Selection

The DISA Project provides the opportunity to open up to scrutiny and criticism the mediations of technology in knowledge production and intellectual production. However, an additional layer of complexity is that the sources of the materials for digital project – archives - are social constructs and contested locales of power, ideology, identity and memory where specific narratives are privileged and others marginalised and silenced. So the compilation of new archives through digitisation speaks directly to the politics of collecting and the privileging of certain ‘knowledge’.

How digital resources are assembled and shaped means that definite choices have been made around selection - what to digitise, who decides, how decisions are made and what influences those choices. These decisions then intellectually

⁹ Shuler, Jack. Ever Onward: The Frontier Myth and the Information Age. Fast Capitalism, 1.1 2005.

frame, mediate and control a digital project such as DISA. The questions of what intellectual product is being created, how that information is packaged, how history is being rewritten and how this speaks to and shapes post-colonial and post-apartheid research agendas and debates about the Archive is therefore intricately bound into this construct and in creating new monopolies.

In DISA 2 content selection has been largely influenced by production targets set by ALUKA and an intellectual architecture which is declining into an awkward one-dimensional repression/resistance narrative mainly aimed at an undergraduate studies audience in the USA. This reductionist structure obviously has implications, not only for the form this knowledge resource is taking or the form of the archive that is being constructed, but also in terms of its usefulness for South African researchers and public intellectuals and its inability to contribute towards critical citizenship in South Africa.¹⁰

Moreover, there is the danger that everything that is not digital will not only become unimportant but also will, to all intents and purposes, cease to exist, so whatever is available on the Internet becomes THE history - all there is. This is very powerful because the information we can access structures our view of the world. Furthermore, it then becomes all about form and quantity and not about context or content. Concern has also been expressed that these kinds of projects will mean that researchers from the North will only use these online resources and this will ultimately diminish the sustainability of physical repositories in the South. What is more, as Lalu has asserted, "globalization reinforces the old pattern of the intellectual division of labour: the Western producers vs. the African consumers of

10 South African History Archive/Rosa Luxemburg Workshop on Archives, University of the Witwatersrand, November 2006.

knowledge. Combined with the legacies of the Cold War, this makes for particular conditions for the writing of Southern African history.”¹¹

Access Barriers

Public access issues, particularly within the framework of the global socio-economic environment and the so-called ‘digital divide’, are of concern to all the stakeholders in DISA. The ALUKA subscription model places conditions on access to its digital resource – even if it is supposed to be ‘free’ to “appropriate” educational and cultural institutions pending the signing of a licensing agreement. For example:

- Paying users who would ordinarily been able to access libraries do not usually have access to digital/electronic resources.
- If copyright owners and creators – particularly organisations as would be the case in South Africa- are given ‘free’ access, who gets access? The National Executive Committee members? Some leaders? All the members?
- How long will it be made available ‘freely’? For 5 years? For ten years? Forever?

The use of propriety software and technology platforms by ALUKA also automatically limits access to people in the South where bandwidth is a real issue.

Sustainability issues could also negatively impact on access over time in the country where the documents originate. This is because overseas/external funding for digitisation projects is usually directed at production and so is inevitably short-term, transient and has strings attached. DISA continues to grapple with, and work towards, finding solutions to issues of who controls and who has access to the technological infrastructure and how long-term migration and refreshing of data

11 Lalu, Premesh. The Virtual Stampede for Africa: Digitisation, Postcoloniality and Archives of the Liberation Struggles in Southern Africa. Unpublished Paper. Department of History University of the Western Cape, 2007.

can be ensured and funded so that the image collection it has created will not only be freely available to all Africans but will endure over time. Long-term preservation is a very time consuming, energy intense, technical and expensive process and the financial temptation to hand over control of completed digital projects initiated in the South to eager, well-resourced institutions in the North is ever-present. In this way vital information relating to developing countries can be concentrated in cities in the North. Cultural heritage from the South can be further exploited by reformatting it in digital form largely for consumptive use by people in the North. In a real way this practice represents a new form of cultural theft.

NATIONAL POLICY FRAMEWORK

Some of these issues were recently articulated at a consultative workshop of South Africa stakeholders convened by the Department of Arts and Culture's National Heritage Council (NHC) in May 2007, entitled Archives, Digitisation and Ownership. The aims and objectives of the workshop included:

- The sharing of information on how to promote and protect national heritage in South Africa, within the sub-region and beyond;
- The development of a model framework for the coordination of digitised material;
- The need to outline key issues for a strategy for the promotion and protection of digitised national heritage;
- Recommendations for a plan of action beyond the workshop;
- The need to address challenges brought by the introduction of digitisation of information;
- The need to address the lack of national strategy, legislation and policy on digitisation of heritage resources;
- The need for a framework on capacity building and resource mobilisation for digitisation of national heritage; and
- The long term sustainability of electronic/digitised heritage resources.

At the workshop the NHC's Chief Executive Officer, Advocate Mancotywa highlighted that in the past few years, a number of heritage digitisation projects had emerged that had been initiated by both local and international institutions. For Mancotywa the key issues were:

- How digitised information will be used, accessed and interpreted
- What public national interest will be served;
- That hegemonic control by the North and politicisation poses challenges for the management of digital resources in the South;
- The need to build solid partnerships in Africa.

Key recommendations flowing from the NHC workshop included:

- Issues of accessibility have to be addressed to ensure that projects such as DISA continue to serve local interests and beneficiaries.
- The need to set guidelines – technical, operational and in relation to project governance and oversight.
- The importance of establishing clear mandates on how to coordinate, build capacity and transfer skills locally in relation to digital projects, partnerships and collaborations.
- Digitisation projects should incorporate extensive participation from the appropriate bodies in the country of origin of the documents selected for digitisation.
- Projects should be located in the countries of provenance and locally controlled and defined.
- Benefit-sharing and related intellectual property issues need to be incorporated.
- That government and other local funding agencies should play a role in the funding digital content creation.
- The need for sustainability and digital curation over time and beyond the initial funding phase.
- Partnerships must not only deal with content but must tackle issues of governance, the establishment of principles to guide partnerships and the

need to determine the extent to which trade offs can be made in such partnerships. Specifically, the following points should guide partnerships on digital heritage:

- The ability to share knowledge without being exploited.
 - Partnerships with entities from countries in the North should address and not reinforce the digital divide or reformulate issues of heritage plundering and cultural asset stripping.
 - There should be clear benefits in establishing partnerships and partnerships should favour the South.
 - Institutional and national policy frameworks need to guide partnerships.
 - Transparency and equity in partnerships is pivotal.
 - Seeking funding should be a joint initiative with a joint mandate.
 - The project needs to be clearly defined and should have limited production targets.
 - Written agreements must be reached on how knowledge is used and how profits will be shared.
 - Preservation and protection of the original physical materials used should be a component of international partnerships and should assist in building African repositories and promoting visits to their facilities.
 - Where extra-regional relationships are embarked upon, there are national mechanisms in place to guarantee that they are equal partnerships.
- It was suggested that the Department of Arts and Culture should embark on a process to study and review the contracts relating to digital heritage projects before they are signed by institutions.

At the end of the workshop a Task Team was formed to take all of the above issues forward, including, legislative and policy formulation and issues of

ownership, accessibility and Intellectual Property. Optimistically the on-going national consultative process currently taking place in South Africa will determine a way forward and build national capacity by:

- Providing guidelines and mechanisms for extra-regional relationships to guarantee that partnerships are truly equal.
- Facilitating strategic alliances in the development of digital resources.
- Providing a framework for the development of individual institutional policy.
- Devising dynamic strategies that provide local funding for digital heritage projects, reducing donor dependence and addressing future sustainability issues.

CONCLUSION

Notwithstanding attempts to merely evaluate the usefulness of the DISA Project as an electronic library resource, it is the deeper set of moral and ethical questions that relate to the digitisation, harvesting and extraction of heritage information about and from the South which make the DISA endeavour worth analysing and interrogating. And it is the content component of the DISA Project which elicits the most interest and demands resolution. What is sorely needed is more public discussion and debate locally, regionally and with other countries in the South about the more substantive questions, including: the political economy of projects like DISA; how these projects relate to nation building and the construction of democratic public spheres and what tools and policies need to be in place so that valuable and meaningful digital resources can be developed for and engage with scholars, researchers, educationists, archivists, librarians and public intellectuals.

REFERENCES

- Coupland, Douglas, *Microserfs*, Harper Collins, 1995.
- Lalu, Premesh, The Virtual Stampede for Africa: Digitisation, Postcoloniality and Archives of the Liberation Struggles in Southern Africa. Unpublished Paper, 2007.
- Limb, Peter, The Digitization of Africa. *Africa Today*. Winter 2005: 52, 2.
- Lor, Peter Johan, Bridging the North-South Divide in Scholarly Communication in Africa – a library and information systems perspective. Keynote address presented to the CODESRIA-ASC Conference on Bridging the North-South Divide in Scholarly Communication on Africa: Threats and Opportunities in the Digital Age, Leiden, The Netherlands, 6-8 September 2006.
- Lor, Peter Johan, & Johannes Britz, Knowledge production from an African perspective: International information flows and intellectual property, *The International Information and Library Review*, June 2005: 37, 2.
- McLuhan, Marshall & Bruce R. Powers, *The Global Village: Transformations in World Life and Media in the Twenty-First Century*. Oxford University Press, 1989.
- Pickover, Michele, & Dale Peters, DISA: An African Perspective on Digital Technology, *Innovation*, 2002: 24.
- Pickover, Michele, Negotiations, contestations and fabrications: the politics of archives in South Africa ten years after democracy. *Innovation*, June 2005: 30.
- Postman, Neil, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture To Technology*. Albert A. Knopf, 1993.
- Sherwood, Lyn Elliot. Cultural Heritage Information: Public Policy Choices. *Archives & Museum Informatics*, 1995: 1.
- Shuler, Jack. Ever Onward: The Frontier Myth and the Information Age. *Fast Capitalism*, 2005: 1.1.