

ESARBICA JOURNAL

**JOURNAL OF THE EASTERN
AND SOUTHERN AFRICA
REGIONAL BRANCH OF THE
INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL ON
ARCHIVES**

Volume 33

2014

ISSN 2220-6442 (Print), ISSN 2220-6450 (Online)

ACCESS TO ARCHIVES IN SOUTH AFRICA IN THE FIRST TWENTY YEARS OF DEMOCRACY: IS THERE TRANSFORMATION OR DEFORMATION?¹

Zofia Sulej

Historical Papers Research Archive, William Cullen Library, University of the Witwatersrand,
Johannesburg, South Africa
zofia.sulej@wits.ac.za

Received: 20 November 2013

Revised: 5 February 2014

Accepted: 10 October 2014

Abstract

Even after 20 years of democracy in South Africa access to archives is still facing many challenges and continuously going through process of transformation. This article concentrates on the present state of accessibility of archives in South Africa. It also exposes the limitations of this process caused by the government's control over them whilst only serving the state in the apartheid era. The exclusion of the general public as users during this time was one of them. The article makes an attempt to compare the specifics of accessing archives between two important chapters of South African history, prior and post-1994. A short description of the impact of the new legislation developed and implemented after 1994 on the functioning of archives in the new environment is provided. It also presents the significant changes in the role of archival institutions in the new era of democracy in South Africa from the role of traditional records keepers to the more user friendly places more easily accessible to the public. Despite the great improvement in the accessibility of the archives in South Africa, these institutions still face many daily challenges which impact on their proper functioning. The major issues are: lack of resources, shortage of professional skills, lack of interest and support from the government. They need urgent attention and implementation of some strategies to eliminate those problems. There is still much work to be done in this sector which requires the involvement and cooperation of all country wide archival institutions and plenty of support from the South African government. The contents of the article are based on an extensive literature review. However, the author's personal professional experience in the archival field has also substantially contributed to the process.

Keywords:

Access to archives and information, transition to democracy, legislation, transformation, Archival institutions in South Africa

Introduction

Archives in South Africa are still considered by many as inaccessible institutions to ordinary citizens. They are often perceived by vast numbers of people to be a foreign bodies isolated from the public. In South Africa's due to its political dispensations the issue of accessing archives was quite a complex one. During the apartheid era archives were fully controlled by the government serving its needs. Its offices were documenting all the activities of the South Africans including racial classification, employment, culture, association, peoples' movement and even sport. All these areas of public life were recorded by the security police and other state intelligence units. Large quantities of records were confiscated from the organizations and individuals opposed to apartheid. Access to archives during that time was exclusively for whites completely excluding black South Africans from the process as it was considered a privilege and not a right for many. It was a combination of a system which misrepresented the access to records, their processing

and destruction. The year 1994 completely changed the political situation in the country by accepting a democracy and implementing a New Constitution. This document guarantees and provides an equal and democratic right to the access of information to every citizen of the country without any discrimination. Since archives are a very important source of information they, too had to be included into this provision.

Unfortunately, many members of the general public are still not fully aware of their rights and often don't know how to exercise them. Education and practical guidance needs to be provided to these citizens to teach them about their constitutional rights in terms of accessing this information. The new legislation developed and implemented after the first democratic elections in South Africa in 1994 had a significant impact on the functioning of archives and their openness to the public. The transformation process of archives has followed and it has brought significant changes in the conditions of their access. New archival and heritage institutions were established and their operating has played an important role in the preservation, protection and promotion of archives and the heritage of South Africa. The article will discuss the specifics of access to archives over a period of the first 20 years of democracy in South Africa by providing a short historical overview of this process including the transformation and the present situation, as well as offering some ideas to be used by archival institutions in order to offer better service to its users.

Access to archives in South Africa during the apartheid era and the legislation regulating the process

In order to understand the issue of accessing archives in South Africa during the apartheid era, some historical background needs to be provided about the political situation in the country and the operational system of these institutions at that time. The State Archives Service (SAS) had its operating facilities across the country and held a mandate as an institution to collect and hold public records. The archives depots of the four provinces at that time were centrally controlled by SAS (Harris 2000; Ngulube 2009).

The Archives Act of 1962 equipped SAS with regulatory powers and helped to develop its records management capacity. During the apartheid era the State Archives Service mainly served white users, academics and researchers, with few black users. Until the 1970s SAS provided racially separate reading rooms and toilet facilities. In the 1980s during the state of emergency restricted access to archives and information was imposed by the apartheid Government. Only white Afrikaans speaking males could occupy professional and administrative positions as archivists. By 1990 not one black person occupied any professional post in the archives sector. There was no transparency in the service (Harris 2007; Pickover 1996).

The restrictions of open access to certain records were imposed by the political leaders of the apartheid government. Afrikaans was the official language of the higher management and policy documentation. Most of the archival appraisal processes were carried out by academic researchers, especially historians. Memories of Black South Africans were poorly documented and valuable material on their history has been lost. Often inadequate budgets and lack of skills contributed to the problem. Many other barriers such as illiteracy, low education standards and isolation from the cities were also the reasons of the limitations of access to public archives by the members of the general public. The archives in the underdeveloped homelands at that time were not user friendly and to the black majority inaccessible. Up to the 1980s the State Archives Service was highly centralized with the head office in Pretoria (Harris 2007).

The Archives Commission appointed in terms of the Archives Act No 6 of 1962 by the apartheid government was not transparent as its members were only white male academics and the Commission did not serve the majority of the users. Before the transformation to democracy the most significant public archives in the country were those which kept valuable public records created by the government offices and governed by the legislation. They included central provincial and local (municipal) divisions, belonging to the State Archives.

There were also private archives which included organizational and individual records of civil society such as churches, businesses, trade unions, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), clubs and individuals, as well as non-state, private institutions like universities, private libraries or documentation centres. Access to them can be limited or in some cases even refused depending on the purpose of using the requested material. The user is usually informed about the conditions of access. To this group one could include University of South Africa (UNISA) Documentation Centre, University of Fort Hare, University of Natal and Historical Papers at Witwatersrand (Wits) University. There are also business corporate archives which represent business 'giants' such as Eskom, Armscor, Barlow Rand, De Beers, Chamber of Mines and various banks. Access to their records is restricted and is available only on special request. Academic archives at many South African universities prior 1994 were operating independently from the State. At this time they were serving their own communities: administration, staff, students, lecturers and researchers. All university archives were excluded from the provisions of archival legislation and were operating independently.

One cannot leave out the church archives in South Africa and their contribution to collecting and providing access to archival material. One of the largest, being the archive of the Anglican Church in Southern Africa at the Historical Papers at William Cullen Library Wits University. The records of the Church of the Province of South Africa not only reflect the history and development of the church as an institution but also genealogical records of a family history.

Despite these difficult times in the history of South Africa there were some archival organizations that were operating in the country and carried out activities relating to archiving and providing access to archives and information. The first professional establishment for archivists in South Africa was the South African Society of Archivists (SASA) founded in 1960 although operating under the control of the National Archives and accepting only government archivists as members. SASA was carrying out its duties throughout the country and from the 90's started participating in the transformation process of archival institutions. This issue will be further discussed in the next section of the article.

New legislation implemented during the process of transition to democracy after 1994 and its impact on archives accessibility

The actual process of the transition to democracy in South Africa began in 1990 and continued until 1994, the year of the first democratic elections in the country which resulted in the complete collapse of apartheid and eliminated racial discrimination.

The era of transition between 1990 and 1994 was marked by a massive destruction of archival records by the apartheid state (Harris 2007). They were confiscated by the Security Police over many years from the individuals and anti-apartheid organizations. This process had a great impact on social memory and large number of records documenting the struggle against apartheid.

From 1994 with the new era of democracy in the country significant changes were experienced in every aspect of the political and social life including the archival sector. One of the first steps in this direction was the change in racial ratio by appointing black professionals into senior managerial positions in the archival service. The international isolation of South Africa was ended and the State Archives became a member of the International Council of Archives (ICA) in 1991 (Harris 2007).

The new archival appraisal programme was initiated and introduced. There were new developments in accessing archives and their operational system like bringing in open days, extending reading room working hours, allowing group visits and direct consultations with users. Another new initiative in the archival sector was the establishment of electronic records management.

An important contributor to the archives transformation discourse was SASA who during the 1980's established archival branches in all four provinces. New leadership was brought in with new ideas and better professional knowledge. The SASA publication, the *S. A. Archives Journal* was entirely transformed by including new voices and becoming more open and active to public debates. An organization which also significantly contributed to the process of transition was the Association for Archivists and Manuscript Librarians (AMLIB) which was founded in 1978. The Association's main function was to promote and support different types of archival establishments like libraries, business, churches, museums and universities.

From 1994 the State Archives Service was converted into a National Public Archives at the central level, and nine provincial divisions of public archives were created at the same time. In the same year the Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology appointed the Arts and Culture Task Group (ACTAG) which started its activities with its main task to advise the minister on Arts and Culture Policy (Callinicos and Odendaal 1996).

According to ACTAG's final report, archives were to become a part of the heritage sector. The new archival legislation was to be drafted. One of the very first and most significant pieces of new Legislation was the National Archives of South Africa Act accepted in 1996. The Act provided the frame work for developing a new national archival system. This important piece of legislature constitutes the objects and functions of the National Archives as a public institution which among others would be:

- “Preserve public and non-public records with enduring value for use by the public and State
- Ensure the proper management and care of all public records
- Make such records accessible and promote their use by the public” (Republic of South Africa 1996:3).

The promulgation of that Act provided the foundation and support for the transformation of the public archives system in a democratic South Africa (Harris 2000; McKinley 2003). The model for public archives controlled exclusively by the State was abolished. The New Archives Act also described the changes of the position of a National Archivist, as a manager as well as his professional responsibilities. The implementation of the Act has started a debate around the use, availability and access to public records including the first attempts of taking archives to the people. It also included the issues of collecting oral tradition and the history by public archives. They should be transformed from an institution for the elite into an entity which serves the community.

Other important pieces of new legislation which had an impact on the functioning of archival institutions at this time in South Africa were the Legal Deposit Act No 54 of 1997 and the

National Heritage Act of 1999. The Legal Deposit Act ensured access to the documents published in the country and provided for the preservation of the national heritage. The National Heritage Act No 25 of 1999 protects and manages the National Heritage of the entire country. This Act also assists in encouraging communities to preserve their history for future generations. In the year of 1999 under the Heritage Act, the National Heritage Resources Authority (SAHRA) was established. It is a statutory body which is the custodian of South Africa's heritage resources by carrying the responsibility for all declared cultural treasures and heritage objects. The same year the National Heritage Council was established which looks after the implementation and functioning of the Heritage Act.

Another significant piece of legislation whose provision was to guarantee the rights of the public to gain access to records and information was the Open Democracy Bill approved in 1997. Unfortunately, in practice the Bill is not always beneficial to users. There are many exemption clauses according to which the government can refuse access to records and information.

The denial of open access by the state can be based on national matters such as the government's management of the national economy or finances, commercial confidentiality or any other matters of a national interest. The Open Democracy Bill is proof of progress in accessing information and records but through its exemption clauses acknowledges that there are still pieces of information unavailable to the public. More efforts should be made during the implementation process of the Bill to increase public access to classified records.

One of the most significant Acts among the new legal documents was the Promotion of Access to Information Act 2 of 2000 (PAIA). The Act provides the constitutional right of access to information and records held by private and public bodies. It has become a powerful tool for accessing information for ordinary citizens and public entities. Unfortunately the power of the Access to Information Act in the process of requesting an access to information is in some cases is not effective enough, requiring an intervention of the courts including the High Court. The Act provisions can benefit users in accessing records but it can also be used by the authorities to deny access in order to avoid disclosure. This issue provokes the question: Is the application of PAIA's provisions achieving the constitutional objective of access? There are some exemptions when access must be refused if there is an attempt to disclose personal information or when the disclosure could endanger the life or safety of a person. A similar situation is in the case of confidentiality which also prevents releasing the information of an individual. The Act also provides appeal mechanisms against the refusal of access, which means that a requester is entitled to a submission of a written appeal to the minister of the department or a public body.

There are two regulatory authorities which have legislative obligations in relations to the regulations of PAIA. They are the Public Protector and South African Human Rights Commission. They are mainly responsible for monitoring users in obtaining access to information and records. PAIA is only applied to access records less than 20 years old. Older records should be freely accessible. In other instances access to records planned for declassification like military or intelligence records is delayed and the Act is used to prevent access based on classification. This case was used by the National Archives to refuse requests to access some of the TRC records. Education of the general public and public officials about the provisions and requirements of PAIA is essential (Harris 2007). So far only the Department of Defense and the South African Police Service have managed to provide educational programmes about the Act.

Production and distribution of manuals is limited and the Act's language is very difficult to understand for an ordinary citizen. These shortcomings should get more attention by the

government's departments dealing with records management responsible for proper implementation and use of this Act.

The latest piece of legislation called 'The Protection of Personal Information Bill' (POPI) will be dealing with the protection of personal information. It has been approved in September 2012 by the National Assembly and was signed by the president of South Africa in 2013. The Bill is going to have a huge impact on all institutions and organizations which collect, retain and provide personal information. It is a very significant piece of legislation to the citizens as South Africa does not have separate legislation strictly dedicated to the protection of personal information. There will be three key role-players in this process: the person who collects information about themselves, the person who collects, processes, stores and uses the information, the person (third party) to whom data is disclosed.

The protected information can include gender, religion, race, fingerprints, blood type (DNA) and medical records. The POPI Bill is applicable to natural persons – any individual and the juristic persons which could be any business entity: close corporations or private and public companies. There are eight core principles of the Bill which have to be implemented and respected in the process of the protection of personal information. Among them the most significant are:

- The purpose(s) of using the collected information;
- Obtaining the consent from a person(s) prior to using this information;
- Accuracy of the collected data;
- Retention of information for only the required period;
- Destruction of any collected information no longer needed; and
- Protection of confidentiality, integrity and availability of the information.

Ordinary citizens will have to be educated about this new piece of legislation especially about the conditions it imposes on the ways the personal information may be collected, processed, used and released. Certain bodies like archives can apply for exemption which will allow them to process and use personal information. Many archival institutions are concerned about the implications on access to archival material.

There are some other issues which have to be attended in terms of the Bill's implementation. Here are some of them:

- The way archivists process records/archives will have to be changed by using a special code of conduct for processing personal information;
- Some amendments of policies and systems of Records Management may have to be implemented accordingly to the rules of the Act; and
- Personal interviews and their transcripts from Oral History Projects containing personal information will have to be checked for consent by the interviewee before that information that can be revealed.

There will be an appointed Information Regulator whose role will be to provide guidance and making decisions about the use of personal information. Since this Bill brings some limitations in providing information and accessing it, archival institutions and other stakeholders collaborated to make sure that the Bill is implemented according to the law. POPI Bill became the POPI Act in 2013.

Summarizing this chapter on new legislation relating to accessing archives and their operational systems one can admit that democracy in South Africa after 1994 has brought many significant changes in this field and some progress has been made. They have had a positive impact on the access to information in the country but also indicated some challenges still faced during this process.

Here are just a few examples of some shortcomings visible during the implementation process of all new Acts and regulations which have not yet being eliminated. The most common were:

- Members of the general public and various communities are still uneducated about the benefits of the new legislature;
- There are still unresolved issues about the ownership of records, particularly public records when an individual or institution is allowed to purchase them due to sufficient funds being available. Public records in such cases are treated as private and access becomes restricted. The owner either grants or denies access to the researchers; and
- The role of archivists as professionals is still controversial and often their professional education is of low standards and limited. They are often not committed enough to making archives and records usage their main goal. The proper training in archives and records management as well as in legal issues should be provided to them which would enable these professionals to offer a better service to the users and make a better contribution into documenting the history of the nation.

Contribution on making archives accessible by various archival institutions in South Africa

This section covers the contribution made by the National Archives and Records Service of South Africa, Historical Papers Research Archive, The South African History Archive (SAHA) and the Archival Platform to making archives accessible in South Africa.

The National Archives and Records Service of South Africa

The National Archives and Records Service of South Africa were established in 1996 and officially operate under this name since 1997. This public archival institution was known under various names with the last one being the State Archives Service until December 1996. The process of conversion of the State Archives took place just after the general elections in 1994 and was confirmed by the implementation of the National Archives of South Africa Act of 1996. In terms of this Act and other new pieces of the legislature discussed in the previous sections, access to archives older than 20 years is provided to any member of the public free of charge. It is the constitutional right of every citizen of the country. The holdings of the National Archives and Records Service include: paper-based records, photographic and cartographic material, official publications, electronic records and audio-visual material. As they are a public archives, records originate mainly from the government sector (Department of Arts and Culture South Africa 2004-2005; Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology 1995-1997). These records describe South African governments operations and how they influenced the lives of the ordinary people as far back in history as the 17th century. This fact makes The National Archives the oldest archival institution in the country (Harris 2000).

In order to answer the question if and what kind of contribution the National Archives made in accessing archives in South Africa, a few facts about the functioning of this institution over the years should be mentioned. It is not an easy task as the professional literature to support this matter is very limited and very little on this topic has been published. As the main source of information relating to this issue one could consider the *Annual Reports of The National Archivist and The State Herald*, the website as well as some documents published by various archival institutions country wide. It is important to remember that during the apartheid years the State Archives only served the State and functioned as an instrument of the system. Access to ordinary citizens, especially Black South Africans was practically impossible. This issue has been described in detail in the previous section. It is obvious that under such circumstances The State Archives hardly made any contribution to accessing archives in South Africa by the public. The process of

the transition to democracy in South Africa (1990-1994) of which these Public Archives at the time were one of the contributors, has brought some changes to the way archives were to operate. During this period the new operational archives system was prepared and introduced for a young democracy in South Africa. The National Archives participated in drafting a new legislation which had an impact on public access to the archives and restructuring these institutions nationally and provincially. The service started concentrating around new ideas like: institutional transformation, freedom of information, outreach programmes and projects with public participation, promotion of people's history, etc.

Although assistance continued to be offered mainly to the academics and professional researchers, members of the general public were also encouraged to visit the archives more often as documents were made available to them. One could consider this as progress in the usage of archival material. During the first years of democracy in South Africa the National Archives ran a few projects throughout the country, such as:

- Extended reading room hours for the public in central and archives depots;
- Various activities helping to create an awareness of the significance and value of archives among the general public as well as promoting the availability of archival services;
- Issuing brochures containing guidelines regarding archival research;
- Celebration of the first Heritage Day in September 1995 with all reading rooms open to the public;
- Holding small exhibitions visited by schools and previously disadvantaged communities;
- Open Day tours for the visitors;
- Participation in joint projects with other institutions like seminars and workshops concentrating on exploring the ways of transforming the archives (1998 common initiative of the National Archives and Wits University "Refiguring Archives" discussing transformation);
- Facilitating of research for the TRC and assisting in preparations of the Commission to be transferred from Cape Town to the National Archives in Pretoria; and
- Assistance and advising the Department of Land Affairs in land claims.

In 2000/2001 a website for the institution was created (www.nationalarchives.gov.za) and the National Oral History Programme being initiated. These new initiatives had an impact on attracting more users and allowed easier access for the general public, especially those who have access to the internet. The National Archives also participated in the International Partnership Programmes between the Netherlands/South Africa and Michigan State University. This collaboration was staff training orientated, and attempted to expand the accessibility of the National Archives records. Further years of activities of this institution focused on reaching out to the broader community by attempting to implement a new initiative of "taking archives to the people" (About the National Archives and Records Service of South Africa n.d).

The main targets of this project were schools pupils and previously disadvantaged communities. It was to be achieved by visits of the National Archives staff members to various parts of South Africa. Irrespective, those few successful projects and initiatives of the National Archives and Records in South Africa oriented towards improving the access to archives in South Africa during the first 20 years of democracy in the country, there are still many serious challenges faced by the institution, both presently and in the future. They were indicated by the Archival Platforms' latest project, which started in 2012 as a series of visits to national archival institutions. The first post of this project concentrates on the responsibilities of the National

Archives relating to the public records and their significance for the past, present and the future of the country. This post also focuses on the role of those records in providing information about the functioning of the government, its accountability and credibility.

Inaccessibility of the records undermines the government's actions, viewed by citizens with distrust- especially in cases of suspicions of corruption, and complicates the role of the National Archivist who is supposed to make them available for the use by the state and the general public. Accessibility to credible public records allows the citizens to support their claims of poor service delivery by the government and to judge its performance. In this project according to the findings of the Archival Platform (2013) many records kept in the National Archives are vulnerable and inaccessible. Under its new democracy South Africa has a good and effective archival legislation, but it's not enough to keep the archives sustainable in order to protect the national memory. Continual lack of: government support, financial resources, professional skills, and the proper equipment, makes it extremely difficult for the National Archives to carry on its mission and fulfil its mandate. Important factors contributing to this difficult situation are a lack of proper leadership (no national archivist presently appointed) and politicians not understanding the role and significance of archives in the history of the nation. There is an urgent need for restructuring the national archival system and for preservation and conservation of archives (Ngulube 2007).

The other obstacle which impacts on the quality of service offered to visitors and researchers is a shortage of staff well visible to the researchers who have to wait long hours in order to get archival material. The lack of skilled people is the cause of a huge backlog of records to be processed and made available to users. Many collections containing material on the recent history are still not accessible, like the records of the Truth and reconciliation Commission (TRC) amongst others (Harris 2007). Irrespective of the final report of the Commission making recommendations that all its records should be accessible to the public, except in cases where there was a reason for denying access; they are presently unavailable to the researchers. Access is problematic as only some of the SABC and private archives are available, but most of them are out of reach by the public. The first post of the Archival Platform (www.archivalplatform.org) offers some solutions to this complex situation in the National Archives and identifies what remedy is needed. Here are a few:

- Proper leadership with a vision to take this institution into the future;
- Support of a political leader who understands the importance of archives in creating a national history;
- Financial support large enough to facilitate and manage the National Archives projects;
- A proper promotional campaign according to the status of the institution; and
- Improvement of its professional capacity by expanding the numbers of skilled archivists, records managers, conservators and fully trained information technology staff

If these issues are not addressed soon the consequences could be tragic in terms of a loss of information. The records will be endangered and the resources of the past and present will be lost leaving nothing for future generations. On a positive note, in spite of all these shortcomings in the functioning of the National Archives, there are also some developments in contributing towards accessing archival material, such as creating additional space for the collections and the improving of storage facilities through approved plans for digitization of the records of the Rivonia Trial and some other collections, new public programming initiatives aimed at making both public and non-public records accessible and the promotional use of the archives by members of the general public, such as guided visits of various social groups like students, school pupils, etc. , exhibitions which expose historical material kept in archives (papers, films,

photographs, maps, etc.), open days to enable public to visit archives and experience the environment and assistance with genealogical research.

Ultimately, on the role of the National Archives as a public institution one might say that it is actually disappointing that the oldest archival institution in the country which should provide a professional guidance to other archives country wide, does not receive enough support from the South African government to enable it to operate in its full capacity and to serve the nation.

Historical Papers Research Archive

The research archive was established in 1965 by the University of the Witwatersrand as part of the William Cullen Library where it operates to this day. It is one of the largest and most comprehensive independent archive in South Africa. The institution houses and preserves more than 3300 collections which make it one of the most valuable and prestigious heritage and research assets in South Africa (Allan 2009; Sulej 2008). The material includes large holdings from trade unions, political parties, churches, various institutions and private individuals.

Historical Papers Archive also holds a large collection of photographs, tapes, diaries, press clippings, posters and pamphlets, etc. All collections kept in this archive are listed in “Guide to the Archives and Papers” and were also listed on the website (www.historicalpapers.wits.ac.za) since 2008. The records of Historical Papers Archive mainly illustrate the history of South Africa, the social and political development of the city of Johannesburg, in the province of Gauteng as well as the entire country.

The Historical Papers Research Archive is a member of the International Council of Archives to keep in touch with the most significant developments in the archival world globally. This archival institution is one of the leading custodians of South African memory. Access to the archive and information is free to any user. Although some of the collections have partially restricted access at the donor’s request it is not denied to researchers. There is always a certain procedure to be followed by the users which includes consulting the donor of the collection and obtaining permission to use the restricted material. In some cases there is a fee attached to using the material, but only when the records are being used for commercial purposes like making films, public exhibitions or publishing books. There is a reproduction fee charged according to the rates set up by the institution.

Who is accessing the archives and who are served on a daily basis? Civil society, scholars, students, academics, filmmakers, publishers and authors from the country and abroad are some of major patrons. Of course the University community is also one of the users. The queries which attended to involve providing information on: the history and activities of various organizations, political parties, land issues, history of the Anglican Church and numerous genealogical topics. The information is provided either directly to the visitor/user of the archives, via telephone or email.

The question one could ask is: What initiatives is the archive implementing in order to improve access to its records? The most recent step in this direction was the launching of a website which is regularly updated and includes more than 600 inventories available online to both local and international users. The archive embraced the digital era and it can proudly announce the opening of a new Digitization Centre which serves not only the archive, but in the near future the entire university. The Centre is already dealing with various digitizing projects of some of the collections and some single selected items in terms of preservation and conservation of the

archives. As it was mentioned earlier Historical Papers Archive serves local and global communities.

It engages daily with ordinary members of the communities by empowering them through access to information. The work includes efforts to benefit and document these communities. It has already and still continues to be engaged with numerous NGOs who have been assisted in the preservation and accessibility of their histories. Just to mention a few: Legal Resource Centre, Gun Free South Africa, Women's Health Project, Aids Law Project, National Land Committee and many others.

The archive has also contributed to a number of national exhibitions in museums and theatres where its archival material has been utilized. Many other organizations and entities are accessing and using the archives regularly. They are the African National Congress (ANC), trade unions, Church of the Province of South Africa, tourism authorities, various museums and city councils, etc.

The Historical Papers Research Archive also organizes small exhibitions at the university made available to the university communities and the general public. Some of the most popular ones were: Nelson Mandela's 90th Birthday, Commemoration of Helen Suzman's life and work and the 30 Anniversary of the formation of the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU). That last project showcased one of the Archive's most important collections. Access to the exhibition was open to the university community and the general public. It was widely visited by members of the communities. The material from this exhibition and collection was compiled for educational outreach and published as a book distributed to schools and trade unions. The institution offers professional guidance to many archival and heritage institutions and assisting various communities in running their projects.

Another example of outreach projects was the archival workshop run for the Tlokwe Heritage Foundation based in Potchefstroom. During this workshop basic archival training was provided to the community which included educating people involved in the establishment of this community archives on how to run archives and make them accessible. The success of such projects and its sustainability depends on the resources this community will receive from the local or provincial government or any other institution. Some of the other projects contributing towards the improvement of access to information and archives involve the digitization of South African Heritage. The Archive is trying to digitize specially selected archival collections and make them available to the online users. It is well known that this process requires good resources, proper technical equipment and professional expertise (Molawa 2009; Pickover 1998). This issue raises a number of questions like:

- Can the country-wide archival institutions afford the digital technology in terms of funding and other resources?
- Is there proper expertise available to guide the decisions on the kinds of material that should be digitized?
- Will this process meet the needs of communities and how are these people going to access it with the majority still not having access to the internet?
- Who can access the technological infrastructure?
- Who controls access and decides which information can be accessed?
- Will digitization benefit the society as a whole?

There are some other factors in this field which affect access such as copyright issues and preservation. Sustainability is also an issue which could negatively impact on the access to

digitized records in the country where the documents originated. This happens because funding for digitization projects is usually directed at production and is short-term. Long-term preservation is a very time consuming, technical and expensive process (Ngulube 2007; Pickover 1998).

Although certain progress has already been made in South Africa, the digitization process is still at the early stages. As a country it is only now that it is beginning to explore what the implications are of the digitization of the intellectual and cultural heritage resources. As copyright owners, as custodians, as institutions, as government, South Africans are trying to understand this landscape so that they can actively engage in it and formulate responses. Regardless of all these challenges digitization can contribute toward the preservation and protection of the archival materials but it also needs to consider all these issues mentioned above. One has to admit that this process has some benefits too.

Recently in South Africa a new initiative called 'Community Walk-in Centres' was started. They provide open internet access to people without internet access. They operate in all nine provinces and are supported by the government. This system gives the communities living in rural areas a chance to access the internet and various type of information. Of course this brings a need to educating these people in using this kind of technology.

The South African History Archive

As an independent archive, the South African History Archive (SAHA) was established in 1998 and is actively engaged in the collection and preservation of archival material, especially the archives of the organizations opposed to apartheid. A number of them were created abroad. The archive has over the years made numerous attempts and submissions for access to government records using the Access to Information Act as a legal tool but it often was a battle to obtain this access, like the TRC records (Harris 2007).

The South African History Archive carried out many successful projects which made a significant contribution into educating communities and various groups of the general public about archives, their core functions and accessing them. The biggest achievements were through public programming/outreach projects. Here are a few worth mentioning:

- Educating high school learners through Oral History Competitions which involve students and all history educators. They had to learn how to use and access archival and historical material for the preparation of a presentation or a documentary film;
- Project "Art/Memory Workshops" which captured visuals and oral histories of communities and individuals effected by political violence in the East Rand area. The project was used as a method to let these people bring out their stories and record their memories;
- "Freedom of Information Project" in which SAHA staff members were offering professional training to organizations and individuals about the benefits of the Access to Information Act;
- "Forgotten Voices Project" which concentrated on producing a collection of individual oral histories told by residents from selected poor communities of post-1994 South Africa, who are still politically marginalized and live in great poverty forgotten by the Government. The stories from the past of these poor communities were captured by researchers and made a great contribution into the public memory and valuable archival records; and

- The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Archives Project launched in 2003 as a joint archival initiative by SAHA and Historical Papers at Wits University. The aim of this project was to identify, preserve and promote public access to the TRC archive.

All these initiatives were beneficial to both sides involved – SAHA researchers and the communities where the archives material was utilized.

Archival Platform

Over the past few years another development in archival sector is the ‘Archival Platform,’ established in 2007 through the common initiative of the Archive and Public Culture Research Initiative at the University of Cape Town and the Nelson Mandela Centre of Memory as a result of discussions at the Archival Conference that same year. It is “a civil society initiative committed to deepening democracy through the use of memory and archives as dynamic public resources” (Archival Platform Newsletter 2013).

The Archival Platform is operating thanks to funding from The Atlantic Philanthropies. Its main activity concentrates on archives as records of the past, its preservation and accessibility as well as the participation of all archival users and stakeholders in discussions, workshops, meetings and conferences to exchange ideas, opinions and engage with public archival issues.

The role which the platform intends to play is to be a kind of coordinator or negotiator in the process of bringing together archival practitioners, communities and the general public by publishing their views on archiving and accessing archives in South Africa. The other issues which this initiative is trying to address are: digitization and its challenges, inadequate funding, lack of training and poor communication between archival institutions. The main focus of the Archival Platform is memory, documenting the history of the country and historical places. Of course, the archive, its preservation and accessibility is the main concern of the Platform. One of the Platform’s recent initiatives was providing basic online education to the South African public relating to the rules of implementing and using the Protection of Personal Information Bill discussed earlier in the paper.

One of the latest projects run by the Archival Platform was the assessment of the state of archival institutions located in various parts of South Africa (Archival Platform Newsletter 2013). The project involves some staff members to travel around South Africa, visiting selected archival institutions, museums and heritage sites to find out how they manage to operate under very often difficult circumstances like: lack of or inadequate resources, under staffing or lack of professional expertise. The research proves that some archives are succeeding, regardless of the many challenges, while others are struggling to carry on with the necessary archival functions. The project is still in progress. The data collected during this research will be used in the Archival Platform’s State of the Archives Report, which will be published later this year.

Challenges facing South African archival institutions in providing free and open access to archives and records to the citizens of the country

The previous sections presented some significant changes in the processes of operating archives and accessing them in a post-1994 new democratic South Africa. Archival institutions in the country went through an extensive transformation and democratization. Powerful new legislation has been introduced and implemented opening the archives to people who never had access to them before. Yes, some great progress has been made but still a lot of questions can be posed about how effective and beneficial it is to the users. Are these new developments really working in practice and how can they be used? What initiatives could be introduced to get more

support from the government and the Ministry of Arts and Culture in order to function properly and to serve the general public? What are the challenges that various types of archives are facing at present while attempting to provide a good service and secure open access? Two Reports on Archives in South Africa, one being in 1996 and another in 2007, will provide some background on the situation in the operational system of archives in the country. The very first Report published in 1996 by the Sub-Committee of the Arts and Culture Task Group (ACTAG) at the early stages of the transition to democracy pointed out the most important shortcomings of the archival service in South Africa (Callinicos and Odendaal 1996). The findings of this Task Group established that:

- South Africa's archival resources were inadequate;
- The State Archives Service was badly affected by the lack of funds and unprofessionally trained staff;
- The destruction of records was taking place without authorization and before transferring them to the State Archives;
- There was inconsistency in the electronic record system between the design, implementation and maintenance of filing systems; and
- Records of formerly excluded communities, especially black South Africans should be recognized and properly protected.

Recommendations provided included:

- The ratio of the users of archives must be changed and include all the national groups in South Africa, especially the ones previously excluded;
- The collection of archives and the efficient conservation and preservation must be carried out;
- Transformation of the public archives services should be implemented in order to serve the new government;
- The process of using archives in the education of pupils and students by teaching them history, geography, literature, arts and culture should be implemented;
- The National Archives should provide support to those provincial divisions which lack resources and infrastructure;
- Encouragement of community-based outreach programmes by taking archives to the people; and
- Public records should be made accessible and their public use promoted.

The Committee's recommendations are very progressive but not all of them were fully implemented in practice. It was still a difficult time in the history of the country during the transition to democracy including the transformation of archives. The greatest achievement of this period was the guarantee to every citizen of South Africa of the constitutional right of access to state information.

Another significant event in the archival world in South Africa took place in 2007. It was the Archival Conference entitled "Archives at the Crossroads" organized through the collaboration of the National Archives and Records Service, Nelson Mandela Foundation and the University of the Witwatersrand. The event was supported by the Minister of Arts and Culture. The main task of the Conference was to assess the state of the national archival system of South Africa since 1997. As it was the tenth anniversary of the National Archives Act implementation, the aim was to check how useful, successful and practical the archival system is in the country. The Conference brought together specialists from the archival profession and the heritage sector. The most significant outcome of this Conference was an Open Report to the Minister of Arts and Culture entitled "National System, Public Interest". The Report found serious shortcomings

about the state of archives in the country and identified the key problems in the system and the sector. The document not only exposes current problems in the archival and heritage sectors but also offers some solutions as well as practical and useful recommendations. The Conference participants made some very important points relating to the present and future operations of archives in the country. They are as follows:

- The role of records and archives in a democracy: “Records management and archiving are key tools in the accountability of the government to the electorate”(Harris, Barstow and Saleh 2007:41) “Unfortunately the government has failed to prioritize records keeping and archives. Records keeping across government is largely without active management and personnel are untrained and unmotivated”. (Harris, Barstow and Saleh 2007:41) The available legislative tools are the most powerful but they are not fulfilling their role in record-keeping by not being effective in practice.
- Lack of access to the archive: There is still a continued lack of public access to the archive. The users accessing the archives should be better educated and trained about the provisions of The Promotion of Access to Information Act (PAIA) and its benefits.
- Valorized heritage and neglected archive: The heritage sector has become more publicized and recognized than archives. They both belong to the same framework but heritage seem to be more in a public domain and the archive is considered a storage area. Most of the time archives and heritage remain separate. The Conference has tried to bring to the government’s attention “the urgent need to facilitate communities and individual citizens”(Harris, Barstow and Saleh 2007:8) Community-based initiatives should empower them to use archives as a way to understand their past and their identities in the present circumstances in the country.
- Isolation of the archive: The archive is presently considered as an isolated institution from the archival system. The lack of support and proper recognition from the Department of Arts and Culture is clearly visible. The concept of the archive needs to be urgently redefined. The past records especially during the oppressive time should be saved, preserved and protected for future generations. Lack of professional associations in the archival sector contributes towards the issue of isolation.
- Failing archival services: The Conference has addressed an important issue of “the state of disrepair and a failure in the provision of archival services in the national system” (Harris, Barstow and Saleh 2007:10). The factors contributing to this situation are the following: a lack of resources and professional skills crucial to running the archives and underpaid staff often lost to more attractive employment. Training of archivists is very limited and offered in few institutions. Records management training is also insufficient. The departments often hire extremely expensive private consultants to carry on tasks relating to records management.
- The digital future: The digitization is an option which could help solve some problems experienced by the archives today in terms of access and daily operations but it has its own challenges as it is a very costly exercise and requires the provision of extended resources.

As a result of the Conference a new initiative has been formed and named The Archival Platform which is referred in the previous section.

Finalising this section a few more challenges still faced by the archives in South Africa should be exposed. The most critical are:

- Presently the situation in the South African National Archives and many provincial divisions is critical as they are still under resourced, struggling with a lack of space for expansion and growth. Archiving becomes an ongoing battle for the demoralized staff little interested in their profession ('it's just another job in the civil service') as they are underpaid and often lacking professional skills;
- The National Archive lacks leadership and doesn't have a permanently appointed archivist merely in an acting capacity;
- The national archival system should be restructured and a better strategy implemented to manage the various demands of open access, urgent needs for preservation and conservation of archives as well as respecting international archival standards;
- The act of archiving is itself actually becoming outdated in the public sector and needs some restructuring as collections are lying on the shelves unprocessed, gathering dust and inaccessible to users. Vast amounts of information are getting lost in many government departments;
- In spite of the many years of democracy the user profile in the country has not changed much. They are still mostly foreign academics and local researchers, business people, publishers, film makers and genealogical historians but very few ordinary South African citizens and people from the communities, especially from rural areas. The only archives which are flourishing are the ones in libraries, academic archives in universities, museums, some privately owned and of the heritage organizations. They actively collect a wide range of material, process it and make it available to users. It looks like the act of archiving became 'a duty or a burden' to archivists at the universities; and
- Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) archives which rely mainly on outside funding are battling to stay afloat as the funding is 'drying up', especially from foreign donors. There are also serious staffing issues.

The major question still remains: How will archival institutions in South Africa be able to get the broader citizenry to occupy archives and what strategies should be implemented to attract more people interested in the profession and motivated enough to change the whole concept of archives and archiving.

Conclusion

This article has discussed some of the issues related to the operational system of archives in South Africa with special emphasis on accessing them over the different periods in the country's history. The main focus was on the significant changes in the archival sector which have taken place during the 3 most important chapters in South African history:

- The apartheid era;
- The transition to democracy; and

- The post-1994 period till present.

The general statement relating to accessing information and archives in South Africa which could be made is that this process over the years had been complicated and had its challenges. Under apartheid it was the government who had a monopoly for the entire country on making decisions relating to accessing of archives, their processing, preservation and destruction. The General Elections in 1994 and the introduction of a new democracy in South Africa changed the situation in the archival environment and its services. A new legislation for the archival and heritage sectors has been introduced and implemented. For the first time in its history archives were open to the people of the country without political barriers and racial segregation. Recently in the last couple of years that progress has slowed down and is experiencing many new challenges requiring the urgent attention as well as an affective intervention of archival professionals and the proper authorities. The proper preservation of archives is crucial as without it the memory and history of the country will be lost and little be left for future generations (Ngulube 2007; 2009). A crucial role in this matter should play the State who is still in charge of archives and can use its authority to show its support and assist the archival institutions country wide in their attempt to improve its service to their users. A few other challenges which could compromise users' access to archives could be: absence of the appropriate finding aids, backlogs of unprocessed collections, shortage of staff and a lack of professional expertise. In order to overcome these obstacles a few simple ideas could be recommended for implementation by the service providers. The most effective could be:

- Education Programmes to increase awareness about archives within the general public and various communities by organizing field related seminars, workshops and training programmes;
- Tours and visits to archival institutions offered to school groups, students and other visitors during 'Open Days';
- Promotional programmes offering brochures about archives to individuals, groups and institutions as well as media use (TV, radio, press) for public announcements about archival events;
- Making archives more accessible by opening reading rooms over the weekends, and publicizing this service to enable as many people as possible to use it;
- Organizing exhibitions and displays (permanent and mobile) as a form of educating the public about the historical value of the archives and their access; and
- Implementing a new community archival initiative through the promotion of the community archives which could be assisted by the state archives using their resources and support.

To make these recommendations successful, close cooperation between various public and private institutions of the archival and heritage sector and the South African Government, especially the Ministry of Arts and Culture, as well as better education from both, the provider and the user is needed. We have a very long way to go to achieve our goals and only time will tell if we succeed.

Endnotes: Article based on a paper presented at the Conference on Democratizing or Privileging: the Future of Access to Archives 25-26 April 2013, Apex Hotel, Dundee, Scotland.

References

- About the National Archives and Records Service of South Africa. n. d. [Online]. Available WWW: www.national.archives.gov.za (Accessed 10 May 2014)
- Allan, K. 2009. *Paper wars: access to information in South Africa*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.
- Archival Platform Newsletter 2013. [Online]. Available WWW: <http://www.archivalplatform.org> (Accessed 15 February 2013).
- Callinicos, L. and Odendaal, A. 1996. Report on archives in South Africa. *S. A Archives Journal* 38:33-45
- Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology. *Annual Reports of the National Archivist and the State Herald, 1995 – 1997*. Pretoria: Government Printers.
- Department of Arts and Culture South Africa. *Annual Reports of the National Archivist and the National Archives Advisory Council, 2004 - 2005*. Pretoria: Government Printers.
- Harris, V. 2007. *Archives and justice: a South African perspective*. Chicago: Society of American Archivists
- Harris, V. 2000. *Exploring archives: an introduction to archival ideas and practice in South Africa*. Pretoria: National Archives of South Africa
- Harris, V., Barstow, O and Saleh, R. (eds). 2007. National system, public interest. Archival Conference 23-24 April 2007. Open Report Archives at the Crossroads 2007.
- McKinley, D. T. 2003. *The state of access to information in South Africa*. Report prepared for the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, Johannesburg.
- Molawa, S. 2009. *The first and third world in Africa: knowledge, access, challenges and current technological innovations in Africa*. Paper read at the First International Conference on African Digital Libraries and Archives (ICADLA-1), 1-3 July, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.
- Ngulube, P. 2007. Preserving South Africa's paper trail and making public records available for present and future generations. *ESARBICA, Journal* 26: 45-69.
- Ngulube, P. 2009. *Preservation and access to public records and archives in South Africa*. Saarbrücken: Lambert Academic Publishing.
- Pickover, M. 1996. *I want, I want, I want. Accessing and controlling the past in South Africa in the 1990s*. Working Paper. University of the Western Cape Conference, July 1996.
- Pickover, M. 1998. Digital imagining projects in the South: Access for whom? *S. A Archives Journal* 40: 59-65.
- Sulej, Z. 2008. Changing landscapes: The University Archive in a new South Africa. *ESARBICA, Journal* 28: 146-171.

Further readings

- Blais, G. 1995. *Access to archival records: a review of current issues: a RAMP study*. Paris: UNESCO.
- International Council on Archives. 1997. Access to archives: legal aspects. Proceedings of the Thirty Second International Conference of the Round Table on Archives. CITRA-1997. Edinburgh 1997.
- Republic of South Africa. 2003 Manual of the National Archives and Records Service of South Africa compiled in compliance with the Promotion of Access to Information Act (PAIA) (Act No 2 of 2000. [Online]. Available WWW: http://www.national.archives.gov.za/nars_dmlib_3476.pdf (Accessed 5 May 2010).
- Republic of South Africa. 1996. *National Archives and Records Service of South Africa Act (Act No 43 of 1996)*
- Sulej, Z. 2009. Outreach and Archives: How to 'sell' the archive to people: Historical Papers (Wits) experience. Paper read the Society of South Africa Archivists Conference on Challenges and Opportunities of Managing Archives and Records in a Changing Environment, Pretoria, 2009.