

The Natal Society Library: Looking Forward

During the first 150 years of this library's existence, little changed in the whole scheme of things. We did what public libraries around the world did. Change within libraries was initially not that significant, and the library of 1851 was little different from that of 1900 or 1980: the number and range of books available differed but, basically, libraries were the same. With the growth in information technology, particularly over the last 25 years, libraries have changed forever. We have reached the point, in today's library, where it is not only each new generation that feels removed from its elders, but even technological laggards within the same generation feel removed from their innovative peers. Information technology will change tomorrow's libraries beyond our wildest dreams (or nightmares). The challenge for our library is to continue doing its original job but to do it differently, using what is affordable and appropriate from the new technology available, rather than just adopting technology for technology's sake.

What then can we predict will happen in the Natal Society Library during the next five years? On the basis of existing trends and with a view of the logic behind them, it is possible to make some educated guesses about our library's future. Here, then, is a short-term forecast.

Urbanisation

During the next five years African people will be absorbed into South African cities and towns at an unprecedented rate. Pietermaritzburg will be no exception. This will result in the formerly 'White,' 'Coloured' and 'Indian' suburbs becoming more and more integrated. Many thousands of people will also be moving into the new formal and informal houses being built on the hills and valleys around Pietermaritzburg. The majority of these new residents will be young Zulu speakers, while what remains of the 'White' and 'Indian' groups will essentially be middle-aged people. The great challenge we face is to satisfy the reading and information needs of these two age groups with our limited resources.

Fiscal constraints

One of the main driving forces for change in our library has been the fiscal constraints imposed on us as a result of local government restructuring. These constraints will continue. Up until the mid 1990s, we were automatically given funding by both the Province and the Msunduzi Municipality. Now, and even more so in the future, we have to justify any expenditure on salaries, books and other resources. We are now expected

to serve the needs of more people with less money, fewer books and fewer staff. While many talk about addressing our users' needs by looking at what is happening globally, we have to balance what is needed locally with what we can afford.

Members

Citizens of Msunduzi Municipality overwhelmingly affirm the use of the Library and its resources. Our membership database now contains the names of 56 000 members, and as many as 4 000 people use the Main Branch each day. These figures will continue to grow as parents and teachers recognise the value of the Library to their children. Our library has been open to all races since 1975. All people living or working in what was greater Pietermaritzburg have been encouraged to join the library since that date.

The collapse of apartheid, therefore, did not result in an influx of new members, mainly because the barrier to membership was a lack of transport. What will increase membership will be the construction of branch libraries in areas such as Imbali, Willowfontain and Azalea, which are far from the City Centre. In terms of current legislation, the provision of public library services is the joint responsibility of the Provincial Library Service and the municipal councils, with the former providing library buildings and book stock, while the latter are responsible for staffing and maintenance. Although grants to construct libraries are available from the KwaZulu-Natal Provincial Library Services, the Msunduzi Municipality is reluctant to commit itself to providing funding for staff and maintenance. Following the second democratic municipal election, the rural people from Vulindlela and Sweetwaters were also absorbed into the municipal boundaries. These people have never had access to libraries and live up to 20 km away from our nearest branch. Thus the poorest with the least resources have the furthest to travel should they want to use a library. This is something we are in the process of remedying by investigating the construction of a library at Vulindlela.

New Technology

The new technology that evolved during the closing years of the 20th century was thought to be the one great threat to the printed word. For years, library literature suggested that printed materials would slide into oblivion. However, the effect of the new technology on the reading and learning process has been negligible thus far. In fact some elements of electronic publishing have the potential to make a positive contribution, which I mention below.

e-books

Adult lending will continue doing very much as it has always done, and will not be bothered with gimmicks. By 2002 Penguin will have 200 e-book titles available. The Penguin website will be the primary retail outlet for these books as well as the hand-held readers needed to read them. I do not think this will have much impact on the library. We will continue supplying our readers with the same type of printed books provided 150 years ago.

Periodicals

During the year 2000, 814 of the Legal Deposit periodicals received by the library ceased publication. The state of the economy was probably the main reason for this

significant decline, but there is another reason: more and more organisations, societies and businesses are distributing their publications through the Internet. By doing this, they save on paper, printing, postage and labour costs. This change to electronic Internet publishing will escalate over time. A significant segment of our cultural heritage will be lost forever as costs make it impossible for our Legal Deposit department to print, bind, accession and store each document received in this way. Our library, together with South Africa's other four Legal Deposit libraries, is going to have to find a way to preserve this information.

e-Periodicals on SABINET

SABINET, the national bibliographic database, has identified 35 periodicals which will soon be available to subscribers as a full text online resource. No longer will libraries need to subscribe to hard copies of a journal and pay for the costs associated with binding, storage, preservation and retrieval.

Initially, academic, legal and medical journals will become available to what is already an Internet-literate audience. Later, the more popular periodicals such as *Get-away* and *Living & Loving* will be added. Most South African academic journals are likely to be available in online form within three years.

This too could have an effect on our Legal Deposit collection. Should SABINET guarantee to keep the text for an indefinite period, we might no longer be required to preserve the hard copy in the Legal Deposit Collection.

Reference Books

Reference books and encyclopaedias in print are being put out of business by the Internet and CD Rom. This shift underlines the importance of the educational and information-seeking use of the Web.

Some of the Reference books to which this library has subscribed for over 100 years could well be cancelled. For instance, the information available in *Wisden Cricketers' Almanack* and *Whitaker's Almanack* might well be available through subscription in e-book form. We might also find the required information on certain free websites.

Internet

It is becoming clear that our users want the library to do different things. In order to remain relevant, the reference Library has gradually begun catering for adults and children who require the Internet for their information needs.

The structure and organisation of information on the Internet makes it impossible for a novice, and almost impossible for the expert, to find what is relevant to them with the multiplicity of sources available. At present more than one billion pages exist on the Web. We will thus also have to provide advice on the use of web browsers and search engines. The search engine *Google* gets 13 million queries per day, which shows the usage made of this system.

The introduction of the Internet has led to a crisis of confidence for some staff (including myself) who find working with computers frightening. They also feel intimidated by children who know more about the technology than they do. Ideally, we need a computer trainer to bridge this gap, both for our staff and users. Unfortunately it is easier to motivate for computer hardware than for the salary of a trainer.

Textbooks

Textbooks will continue to be published in book form, but gradually over the next five years the e-book format will begin to grow. Students will be able to order the entire book or any selected chapters via the Internet at a price. E-textbooks used online or downloaded from the Internet will bypass the bookseller and also be much cheaper. This will change the face of the book business as it will destroy the traditional text book retailer entirely. No longer will the publisher have to bother with glossy covers and expensive binding. High-speed printers in libraries, or the futuristic new e-book store, will replace photocopy machines. These high-speed printers will also be equipped to bind whatever portion of the book is purchased. This method of acquiring textbooks will soon be implemented at Stellenbosch University Library.

We will continue buying the traditional textbooks as it is impossible to cater for all our users by means of computers in the library, and most of our users do not have computers at home.

Strategic Partnerships – CATNIP

One only has to visit a university or special library to see that information technology has now out-distanced the wider community's ability to cope with it.

We are extremely fortunate that in Pietermaritzburg over 30 libraries have joined a University of Natal initiative called CATNIP to share resources. This has enabled all partners within the CATNIP consortium to share books, cataloguing, skills, training and, most importantly, the URICA library system. Symbiotic and resource sharing relationships established at local level will grow as budgets shrink and skills become scarce.

Computerized Lending

The computer revolution has already transformed quite a few functions in our library. In the future it could be possible to save on staff time by having the public check out their own books at an automated issue desk. One disadvantage would be that members of the public would no longer be able to develop friendships with library staff over the checkout counters. This could lead to the perception that computers have a depersonalising effect on our library, whereas they would in fact be saving the library money by taking over many routine tasks and doing them quickly, accurately and cheaply. This would allow the remaining staff to offer the public the service they expect and deserve.

Current Crises*Book Budget*

The grant given to the library by the Msunduzi Municipality to purchase books has remained the same for the past three years. This crisis is made worse by the fact that the rand has depreciated significantly against the US dollar and sterling from where the majority of our purchases come. Municipal budgets reflect the priorities of the moment, and libraries are not high on the agenda of the Msunduzi Municipality.

Without sufficient funds for an adequate supply of new books to provide the latest information, to inspire and sustain human creativity and endeavour, and to encourage entrepreneurship, the library will be unable to fulfil its vital role. Citizens will be denied

their right to the latest information, and the whole community will consequently be impoverished. This policy is particularly damaging to children, as the Education Department's OBE policies place libraries at the centre of education and lifelong learning, yet neither schools nor our library have the resources to implement this policy. The financial position of this library will get worse over the next five years. As we are unable to purchase as many new books as we used to, a special effort will be made to promote the use of the existing book stock in our stack room.

Staff

The entire library system is in the process of being overhauled. Restructuring workshops for the library council, management and staff have been held and a new structure has been implemented. The result will be fewer but better utilised staff.

Our staff complement has dropped from 107 staff to 78 at present. Had we not frozen the above 30 posts, the library service would essentially have been bankrupt.

Information Literacy

One of the challenges Natal Society Library management and staff face in the next five years is to ensure that the general community does not continue to fall behind in terms of information literacy. There is a huge 'skills divide' evolving between rich and poor which we cannot bridge because of our limited resources. We barely cope with supplying books, and even if we had the money to purchase the latest technology, the majority of our users either don't know about it, want it or care about it. As a result, the technology would not be optimally used. To be proficient, staff need to utilise this technology every day. Staff also need to have time to be trained and to train the public in the use of this technology.

The underlying ethos of democracy accepts that free access to information is essential for an informed society. Clearly the public library has a vital role to play in this regard, thereby ensuring that the potential dangers of the information divide are avoided.

Despite profound changes, the library remains an institution with the same ethos that its founders envisaged 150 years ago. We will promote literacy, stimulate the imagination, expand personal horizons and also inform and empower citizens with relevant information. Additional services such as the study areas, Housebound, Travelling Library and the Music Library, as well as the Children's Reference Library, help make the library more attractive to users. The core of our business will remain the printed book, as it is still the most convenient, attractive and accessible tool of learning, and the only sensible way of reading for pleasure.

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