Challenges in digitising liberation archives: a case study₁

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Abstract

The article reports on a study of the challenges facing a liberation archive which is attempting to digitise its collections and of how the Archive has responded to the challenges. The article is framed by the critical writing on digitisation which looks beyond the surface issues identified by technical and management research and uncovers the power contestations which arise as part of the digitisation process. It focuses particularly on whether the digitisation process alters the power relations within the Archive and between it and other role players within the South African context. The role-players include the state and the Archive's external management, artefact copyright holders, digitisation vendors and organisations, and Archive users. The research investigates: the rationale for digitising archival collections; who the stakeholders in a digitisation project are, how they relate to each other and what the power relations between them are; the risks of digitisation; and the implications of selection of materials for digitisation. The research finds that personal connections, serendipity, ad-hoc behaviour, trust, distrust and the fear of exploitation has had an impact on the digitisation process; but concludes that the Archive has maintained its balance among competing interests to uphold its integrity.

Introduction: archives and society

The Party said that Oceania had never been in alliance with Eurasia. He, Winston Smith, knew that Oceania had been in alliance with Eurasia as short a time as four years ago. But where did that knowledge exist? Only in his own consciousness, which in any case must soon be annihilated. And if all others accepted the lie which the Party imposed - if all records told the same tale - then the lie passed into history and became truth. 'Who controls the past', ran the Party slogan, 'controls the future: who controls the present controls the past'. And yet the past, though of its nature alterable, never had been altered. Whatever was true now was true from everlasting to everlasting. It was quite simple. All that was needed was an unending series of victories over your own memory. 'Reality control', they called it: In Newspeak, 'doublethink'. George Orwell, 1984.

Orwell's words serve to introduce this account of a study of the challenges facing a South African liberation archive in its various digitisation projects and how its archivists have negotiated these challenges. Orwell's words on the political control of memory call to mind many questions relating to archives as voices of the past and repositories of memory. Such

questions include: Whose memory is recorded by the archive? How do the power relations within archives and between archives and the outside world reflect shifts in the surrounding society? The investigation covered the political, social and organisational aspects of the digitisation process, while the focus in this article is its exploration of how unequal power relations might affect the digitisation of heritage collections. Power is "the possession of control, authority, or influence over others and the ability to determine the course of events" (http://dictionary.penguin.co.uk/). It is hoped that an understanding of what might be called the 'ideological questions' surrounding the digitisation projects of one archive will shed light on these issues for other archives in Southern Africa. The identity of the Archive is withheld as the study's participants were promised anonymity; throughout the article it is referred to as the Archive.

The choice of the Archive as research site was informed by knowledge of its history, in the apartheid era and afterwards. Its present, probably unique, position amid different institutions, it was thought might illuminate the research focus on the balancing of different role-players' possibly competing interests. The Archive is physically hosted by a university which was given custody of some of its key collections in the 1990s after these had been returned to South Africa, having been smuggled out of the country in the apartheid era. The Archive is now a department of a museum on a "struggle heritage" site on the other side of its city, which, in its turn, falls under the national Department of Arts and Culture (DAC) of the African National Congress run government.

The study explored the organisational challenges for the Archive which is attempting to digitise its collections, and, more importantly, how it has responded to these challenges. While technical and managerial issues were not ignored, the study's fundamental question was whether the digitisation process altered the power relations within the Archive, and between it and other role- players within the South African context. The role-players include the state, the Archive's external management, artefact copyright holders, digitisation vendors, and the Archive users. The fact that the state holds the 'purse strings' suggests questions around power. As Pickover warns, decisions over what is selected for digitisation are decisions over what knowledge and whose knowledge is aired. She argues that it renders the non-digitised knowledge invisible, creating a monoculture (1998: 60).

Liberation archives
The term "liberation archive" has been used in a number of contexts. In the South African context, the term is used to describe archives relating to the anti- apartheid struggle in South Africa. Typically these have included the repatriated materials from the African National Congress (ANC), the Pan-African Congress (PAC) and the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) (Maaba 2013: ii). The colonial and apartheid history of South Africa is a history of state control of all spheres of life; and archives were no exception. They reflected the dominant ideology of the time, and explicitly presented the ideology of the powerful as the sole voice of society, while excluding the voices of the powerless. This was true both of colonial and apartheid archives. Lalu notes "[s]ince the nineteenth century, and in some instances much earlier, vast archives of discipline and punishment paint a harrowing picture

2

of the complicity of knowledge in achieving social subjection. The archive was never far from the needs of colonialism" (2007: 36). Under apartheid, this was also true. Harris notes: "[b]y their silences and their narratives of power, their constructions of experience, apartheid's memory institutions legitimised apartheid rule. A vast simmering memory of resistance and struggle was forced away into informal spaces and the deeper reaches of the underground" (2002: 69). These "informal spaces" included the overseas repositories of organisations such as the Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM) and International Defence and Aid Fund (IDAF).

In the post-apartheid era, South African archives have had to confront their pasts and reposition themselves. State archives, which might previously have presented themselves as "apolitical" and "neutral", were accused of collaboration with the apartheid state. Those aligned with the struggle movements, such as the AAM and IDAF, have also had to reinvent themselves. Power relations within the archive, as well as between archive and external players, have changed dramatically. Digitisation adds another layer of complexity to these changing power relations and struggles. In particular, questions of ownership and control of digitised versions of artefacts have become sites of contestation.

Critical archival studies

Despite being a relatively new field of research, digitisation of archival material has received a great deal of academic attention. The research can be divided into three broad groupings: technical research, which deals with the specifics of the hardware and software issues related to digitising artefacts; management research, which deals with the management of the digitisation process; and critical research, which tries to look beyond the surface issues identified by technical and management research and uncover the power contestations which arise as part of the digitisation process. Although there is some inevitable overlap between the categories, they remain distinct.

Archives are traditionally viewed as repositories of cultural heritage, whether in the form of paper documents, audio-visual or physical artefacts. In the past, archivists saw their role as twofold – to preserve cultural heritage for posterity and to provide access to heritage artefacts and other resources. Much of the literature on archives reflects this thinking: writing by archivists has been dominated by discussions on technical issues relating to preservation or the organisational management of archives. Significantly, archives and archivists are seen as neutral: preservers and conveyors of heritage.

Changes in technology, in particular the ability to digitise images, documents and artefacts, have had a dramatic impact on archives. Archivists have seen digital technologies as both a new method of preservation and as a way of increasing access to archival resources without damage to the artefacts. Again the literature reflects this: discussions amongst many archivists centre on the technological issues or the management of digitisation projects.

This perception of archives and their digitisation has been challenged, often from outside the fields of librarianship and archives management. Theorists such as Manuel Castells link technology and power, arguing that "technology is society, and society cannot be understood

3

or represented without its technological tools" (1996: 5). Stalder (2006: 24) points out that technologies reflect their societies, saying "technologies reflect the values and goals of those who make, and remake them". Manoff points to the influence of Jacques Derrida in views of archives and archivists as actors in their own right, rather than neutral conduits for the preservation of heritage artefacts. According to Derrida, the technology used in archiving changes the nature of the archive and historical record itself. "The structure of the archive determines what can be archived and that history and memory are shaped by the technical methods of what he [Derrida] calls 'archivization'" (Manoff 2004: 12). What is chosen for digitisation decides what will become part of society's memory and history, and what will not.

Historians in particular argue that archives are by definition not neutral; they do not exist in isolation from their societies and are not neutral preservers of heritage. Rather, they are sites of contestation, where the powerful and powerless each try to ensure that their voice is heard. What is selected for archiving, how it is presented and who is allowed to see it, are all ways in which power relations are maintained (or changed). As Schwartz and Cook warn, "[a]s scholars ... increasingly discover and focus upon context, it is essential to reconsider the relationship between archives and the societies that create and use them. At the heart of that relationship is power" (2002: 5). They also point out that "by treating records and archives as contested sites of power, we can bring new sensibilities to understanding records and archives as dynamic technologies of rule which actually create the histories and social realities they ostensibly only describe" (2002: 7). Archives are used by the powerful as a means of creating an official worldview which legitimises their authority, and excludes the voices of those who oppose or threaten them.

The digitisation of an archive is an opportunity to examine these relations and, where possible, ensure that power imbalances are addressed. In his book Firing Back: Against the Tyranny of the Market, Bourdieu links globalisation, the technologisation of society and "political apathy" (2002: 38). Lalu argues that it is this apathy that limits archival discussions to "technical matters of preservation and access" (2007: 34) and creates a "fetishism with technology" which ignores the hidden power constructs (2007: 31). In his seminal article "The Virtual Stampede for Africa", he argues for a debate on the "politics of digitisation that aims to politicise the archival disciplines", while setting these in the context of digitisation initiatives in Southern Africa (2007: 28).

The neutrality of digitisation is thus as much an issue as the neutrality of the archives themselves. Lor, formerly Director of the National Library of South Africa, argues that "digital technology is not politically or culturally neutral" (2008: 126). Pickover, of the Historical Papers Research Archive at the University of the Witwatersrand, argues that digitisation is a form of cultural imperialism in the context of the global "North–South" socio-economic and political divide. Information and knowledge become commodities so only the rich can afford access to them, and only the richer organisations can afford the digitisation: this gives them power and control over the knowledge in the archives (1998: 60-61). This means that power often rests with the rich institutions of the north. According to Pickover (1998: 66): Digital technology does not just add something, it changes everything, it brings

4

social, political, cultural environmental and economic changes and it accelerates the globalisation process... Clearly cyberspace is not an uncontested domain. The digital medium contains an ideological base – it is a site of struggle. So the real challenges are not technological or technical, but social and political.

A thread which links these critical views of digitisation is the awareness of power. According to critical commentators such as Lalu and Pickover, power is linked to histories of inequality that take a particular shape in the South African context. Digitisation upsets existing power balances among those who interact with the archive and archival artefacts. The possible role-players are diverse including the subjects portrayed in the artefacts; those who originally donated the materials to the archive; copyright holders; international donors and benefactors (in the South African context, especially those from the so-called 'North'); digitisation "partners", also from the North; other academic institutions and archives; private collectors of archival material; technology vendors; the state and controllers of the dominant ideology in society; users of the archives; and last, but not least, the archivists themselves. There are perhaps three key intertwined areas of contestation of power among these groups: ownership and intellectual property rights of digitised materials; access to digitised material; and the neutrality of archivists in selecting what is to be digitised.

Ownership questions

Ownership is complicated in liberation archives by the fact that during apartheid many artefacts were delivered anonymously and without provenance to overseas organisations such as the IDAF. Digitising an artefact (whether it is an image, a film recording, or a document) creates a new object, even if it is an exact copy of the original. The ownership of this new object becomes an area of contestation. Those laying claim to the digitised version could include:

- a person portrayed in a photograph;
- copyright holders and those who originally donated artefacts;
- funders of the digitisation process;
- digitisation vendors; and/or
- the state or the archive's parent institution (or state departments).

Donors and philanthropic "partners" from the North at times see themselves as dominant in the relationship due to their financial and technological advantages (Kagan 2007: 7). Universities from the North, for example, have argued that, since they are providing the funding for the digitisation and their technology will provide accessibility to a wider audience via the Internet, they should take ownership of the end-product. However as Pickover warns, the hosting institution controls all aspects of the delivery of the images to a wider audience, and information "gets reinterpreted, processed and redistributed to suit the needs of countries in the North" (2005: 9).

Access questions

Proponents of digitisation argue that anything that increases access to artefacts has to be welcomed, pointing out that non-digital artefacts are only accessible to people who can afford to travel to the physical location where the artefacts are stored. However, this might be seen as a deceptive argument as digital artefacts are just as inaccessible to the poor. People who own suitable technology may indeed have better access to digitised artefacts than they do to physical ones, but this group is a minority, especially in Africa. The people who are subjects of films, photographs and interviews in liberation archives (and who perhaps most deserve access), often cannot afford the technology needed for that access. In many ways, the digitisation process perpetuates existing inequalities of access. The argument here is not against digitisation but rather that it cannot be assumed to be a neutral and value-free and "accessible" process.

Questions over selection for digitisation

Historically, archivists have prided themselves on being neutral purveyors of knowledge of the past, and as preservers of history. However a number of authors have pointed out that the role of the archivist is inherently biased (Lalu 2007). The choices that archivists make in selecting objects (that will become artefacts in an archive) involve making choices as to what is relevant and important for the archive and its patrons, and what should be ignored. It is clear that archivists need to be aware of the pressures on them, and actively maintain their independence. They also need to understand reflexively the ways in which they themselves are implicated in setting up particular discourses or narratives. In his discussion of the "meanings" of the work of archivists, Ketelaar quotes Carl Popper's use of the metaphor of a searchlight: "[w]hat the searchlight makes visible will depend on its position, upon our way of directing it, and upon its intensity, colour etc., though it will, of course, also depend very largely upon the things illuminated by it" (Ketelaar 2001: 133).

The critical school sees a very different role for the archivist from the traditional: that of activist fighting to give a voice to the voiceless (as are many of the subjects of liberation archive artefacts). Pickover (2005: 2) argues that archivists are "agents of change" and that non-state archives should be "instruments of empowerment", rather than providing support for the already powerful. The critical school would insist that questions that archivists should be constantly asking are "Who benefits?" and "Who gains advantage from my choices?" This is perhaps even more critical in the case of liberation archives, if the liberation movements themselves may feel that they are the only legitimate voice of the voiceless.

South African digitisation initiatives

Growing concern over the lack of control over the digitisation of South African heritage resources is evident in a number of initiatives since the early 2000s. As background to the account of the case study in the next section, the following should be noted:

- A 1997 workshop funded by the Mellon Foundation led to the establishment of Digital Innovation South Africa (DISA project) in 1999.

- The National Heritage Council (NHC) organised a national consultative workshop in May 2007, Archives, Digitisation and Ownership, which led to the Heritage Transformation Charter in 2009.
- In 2009, the National Research Foundation (NRF) set up a national research project on digitisation and preservation, with the first phase (supported by the Carnegie Corporation of New York) attempting to register all digitisation projects in South Africa (Page-Shipp 2009: 17-18)
- The South African Digitisation Initiative was formed in 2012 by the NRF, the Universities of the Witwatersrand and Pretoria, and the Goethe- Institut Johannesburg. Its national workshop a year later listed a number of aims including co-ordinating all current digital initiatives in South Africa and examining ways of building a national portal to South African digital cultural heritage content (Pickover and Mohale 2014: 9).

In 2014, the DAC published its long-delayed national policy document, National Policy on the Digitisation of Heritage Resources. In its Preamble the document notes the "plethora of digitisation projects in the country" and "inadequate protection of ownership and copyright of the digital resources produced". It warns of "foreign funding offers":

Because foreign agencies came with huge budgets in dollars and euro's, our practitioners felt that these institutions to some extent were imposing unfavourable conditions that had dire consequences for the long term custodianship and preservation of South African heritage (p.3).

The policy includes plans for a national heritage repository and an Institute for Digital Heritage, under the auspices of the DAC's directorate, National Records and Archives Service. How far these plans have progressed is not clear.

Case study of a South African liberation archive

The critical commentary by authors such as Pickover and Lalu, which has been discussed in the introductory sections, frames the study of digitisation in one South African liberation archive that is the subject of this article. Their warnings on the risks inherent in digitisation in post-apartheid South Africa led to the interest in exploring the experiences and perspectives of archivists on the ground. The study gathered information on the rationale for digitising archival collections; the stakeholders and role-players in digitisation projects; the relationships among the stakeholders; the risks of digitisation; and the implications of selection of materials for digitisation. A common thread running through the study was a sense of curiosity over whether the Archive's staff was aware of the cautions in the writing of the critical school, and, if so, how it negotiated the different role-players' possibly competing interests.

The research problem dictated the choice of qualitative case study as methodology. Earlier in this article, the study's Archive was described as "unique". The uniqueness of a case does not mean that it cannot throw light on other sites. As Flyvbjerg points out, knowledge is built from many cases:

Context-dependent knowledge and experience are at the very heart of expert activity. Such knowledge and expertise also lie at the center of the case study as a research and teaching method ... (2006: 222).

As Stake argues in one of the standard texts on case study research:

The real business of case study is particularization, not generalization. We take a particular case and come to know it well, not primarily as to how it is different from others but what it is, what it does. There is emphasis on uniqueness, and that implies knowledge of others that the case is different from, but the first emphasis is on understanding the case itself (1995: 8).

Case study site

From its beginning, the Archive has included a diverse range of materials from various anti-apartheid organisations and individuals, inside and outside South Africa. The Archive comprises of a number of collections, including art works, films and video; exhibitions; historical papers from individuals and organisations; posters; photographs; sound and oral recordings. In addition to administrative staff, it employs a director, three archivists and a technical staff member who, together with an assistant, is responsible for the digitisation of artefacts. It is significant that, from the outset, many of the staff came to be employed though personal connections in liberation struggle networks.

The Archive was set up outside South Africa in order to house and curate artefacts and resources of the anti-apartheid struggle, many of which had been smuggled out of the country. It was a support, resource and memory-keeper for the liberation movements and the broader anti-apartheid movement. The vast majority of its collection is sourced from IDAF, which worked very closely with the ANC in exile. In the course of the case study, the director noted that the IDAF connections meant that much of the collection is ANC-related but denied that this implied that the Archive's collection and digitisation policy favoured the ANC, the political party currently in control of government. Nonetheless, the director acknowledged perceptions among other former struggle movements that ANC materials were housed at the expense of their materials; but claimed that these struggle movements have neglected opportunities to donate their items to the collection or to enter into discussions to fill the perceived gaps.

The collections were shipped to South Africa after the demise of the apartheid regime and were entrusted to a cultural/historical research and documentation centre, situated on a university campus but independent of the university's mainstream structures. One of its staff members explained the decision in terms of the "trust" in the director of the centre (a prominent political activist and historian) and in the university, which was known as a "university of the left" and which had strong ties to organisations such as IDAF:

NGOs working against the state and working in communities were then starting to close down in the early 90s due to funding problems, because they were funded as part of the anti-

apartheid movement. They found this [the university] was a good place to deposit their collections …. It was still more part of the left, that people were used to: they didn't trust many of the established archives.

The choice of the Archive as research site was informed by knowledge of its history since the late 1990s, which, it was thought, might serve to illuminate the research problem. Within a few years it became clear that the university was not able to maintain the Archive. With donor money diminishing, its financial problems threatened the Archive's existence, and in 2001 it was taken over as a department of a prominent heritage struggle museum (managed by the national DAC) on the other side of the city. The move was facilitated by the appointment of the Archive's director to head the museum. The agreement was that the DAC would pay for the salaries of the Archive staff and its running costs. The merger with the state institution was raised frequently in the case study's interviews.

There is acknowledgement that it provided security for both staff and collections; but, as one staff member reports, it led to some "ugly" moments:

Salaries come through [the Museum] – that was great at the time for us, because as we say we were only contract workers before that, so by… a long process that turned slightly ugly in, in… <nervous hand movement?> uh, on some occasions… for the staff it being absorbed into the [Museum] and getting a salary, getting the benefits… [which] we thought was great, I don't know about now, but anyway…

The incomplete sentence is telling. Other participants expressed similar reservations - suggesting that the Archive had lost its visibility and voice in the merger. One claimed that ignorance of the role of heritage and archives had meant that the Archive had been "buried".

Data gathering
The research design comprised of two intertwined phases of data-gathering, namely document analysis and interviews. The two components fed into each other. It was necessary to be alert to discrepancies between the documentary sources and the views expressed in interviews. The opposite was also true: documents were used to corroborate assertions made in the interviews. The analysis of the documentation relating to the digitisation of the Archive had two foci. Academic research conducted by staff of the Archive was examined to discover the extent to which it dealt with the challenges of digitisation of the Archive and in particular the power relations surrounding digitisation, as well as the role of the archivist as power broker and as selector of artefacts for digitisation. In addition, the authors conducted a document analysis of internal Archive documents and records. These included the founding documents for the Archive; management and strategic plans; digitisation policy documents; letters of agreement between the Archive, its host university and its parent museum; copyright contracts between the Archive and those donating items to the Archive, those making use of the Archive for research, and those wishing to make commercial use of the artefacts or digitised versions of the artefacts; and the Archive's website. These documents show how the digitisation work was planned and how it was expected to proceed. They

9

provided direct answers to some of the research questions, and raised questions which needed to be discussed in the interviews. The documents also led to new avenues of inquiry.

Seven interviewees were selected to include the voices of Archive staff (past and present), academics and museum management. Recording on video allowed the nuances of body language to enhance the words themselves, for example the shrug and angry head shake of an archivist in talking of the university's lack of appreciation of the value of the Archive on its campus. The interviews explored the links and relations among:

- The Archive's founders;
- technical staff;
- the Archive's management - the interface between the Archive and external role-players;
- long-serving Archive staff, who could provide insights into how the power relations changed as a result of digitisation;
- those deciding which artefacts should be digitised;
- academics using the Archive; and
- management at the museum which oversees the Archive.

Interviewees were asked to describe their working careers and their personal histories, as well as how they came to be connected to the Archive. They were then asked about issues related to the six research questions given above, initially about technical and management concerns, but later about power- related issues. The interview process was iterative: once the initial round of interviews was analysed, follow-up interviews investigated new lines of inquiry that were brought out by the initial interviews and by the triangulation between these and the documentary sources.

Data analysis: questions of trust
Qualitative thematic analysis was used to identify units of meaning across the interview transcriptions and documents. Eventually, two points of interest emerged from the sorting and mapping of meaning units. The first major theme was how ad-hoc opportunistic actions, rather than formal strategic planning, had influenced the Archive's work, including the digitisation process. From its beginning, serendipity and the influence of personalities have had significant impact on the Archive's operations and relationships with the outside world.
The second major theme was that of trust. Competition for control of artefacts, their digital copies, and their potential financial value have clearly led to distrust.

As the subject of this article is that of power relations, due to space restrictions, the focus in this section is on the data related to this second theme: the thread of trust, distrust, and fears of exploitation. The Archive's relationships with its parent museum, the university, the state, digitisers, other archives, and copyright holders and artefact subjects all reflect varying degrees of trust. The Archive's origins and operations reflect trust in colleagues and management, but their experiences with external role players have engendered some distrust. The reverse is also true, with awareness amongst the archivists that they hold items in trust,

and have a duty not to betray that trust. Despite this, they acknowledge that some external role players appear to distrust their motives and actions. Examples are given of descendants of subjects who are suspicious that the Archive is making money out of stalwarts of the liberation struggle.

The interviews convey the mutual trust amongst the Archive staff, possibly coming from their shared struggle background. In talking of the early days of the Archive, one reported:

I viewed … employment at the Centre firstly as a continuation of 'the struggle' and felt privileged to be working in this space and to be part of a team of people who were tasked with surfacing text-based materials, visual materials and material cultures that would never have seen the light of day in an archive or museum under apartheid.

However, their relations with management at their parent state-run museum are more ambivalent, as suggested in this extract:

Look, the management after the [Archive's director] left was… very difficult, and, um, they couldn't understand … what the reason was for this place, and why… why this place existed, and… and slowly our budgets sort of became phantom budgets, where… you know, so… um, they couldn't appreciate, they cannot appreciate what this place is, what it's done, what its unique, you know… Here we've got a collection that is so important, that needs to be preserved, for it was actually given to the nation when it was brought to South Africa. It's not only a university collection or whatever, a private collection. They've got a responsibility to look after it.

Other participants echoed the sentiment that the Archive was undervalued by the museum – as evidenced, they say, in its inadequate funding for digitising equipment. One participant looked beyond the museum to the Department of Arts and Culture in talking of the delays in government's policy efforts that were mentioned earlier, claiming that "[d]igitisation is not the priority it should be, nationally, nor at [the museum]." The historian interviewee agreed, arguing that there was a "disconnect between universities and the state" around digitisation.

In exploring relations with donors and philanthropic organisations, the key issue of paternalistic assumptions arose. In discussion over the prevailing lack of funds, the Japanese government was praised for its donation of equipment just because it had no strings attached and it had no intention of "taking [our] stuff":

They [the Japanese government] came in here – I don't know how they heard about this place, but they wanted to support us. But the nice thing, they wanted nothing in return, they wanted to give us equipment … and they would come here every year to find out, Is it working?..[Are you] still using the stuff? Where is that stuff? and that type of thing. But that's all they really wanted…it was better than what – the other idea of … coming and giving you money and taking your stuff. They wanted nothing, other than that… to make sure that we were actually using the stuff and we [were] finding it beneficial.

Several other cases were cited of people offering to digitise a collection, with the intention (at times hidden in "the small print") of taking ownership of the digital format. Perhaps even more contentious were the offers to take artefacts to universities or archives in the North or other better-endowed South African institutions and then "repatriate" the digitised images to the Archive. One of the archivists suggested that institutions had targeted the Archive because of its high international profile: "They were making money for themselves, trying to popularise their institution by using us as a means of saying, 'Oh, we've digitised their collection'." The historian participant expressed concern about "Africa generating primary resources, but these resources being processed and housed in European and American academies." To him digitisation thus risked bringing a "new colonialism" with access to source materials being taken away from African academics to serve those in the North.

There were a few anecdotes about digitisers on occasion bypassing archives to reach agreements with their parent organisations, for example:

They have the money and are usually from overseas universities who have been coming in and sometimes what you find is that ... they approach the executive structure of an organisation. And the executive structure of an organisation is not necessarily au fait or sensitive to some of the issues around, the implications around digitisation, around copyrights... so sometimes agreements are made at that level. When they filter down, the archivist says 'But....'.

The point is that that such approaches show how some donors consider archivists to be powerless "collectors and technicians".

Irritation at paternalism was evident in several anecdotes of how organisations had tried to take over digitising on behalf of the Archive. There was a strong feeling that the Archive must build internal capacity, rather than outsourcing its work; after all, in the words of its manager, "[w]e have proven that we can".

Another concern was that of control of items during the digitisation process. Agreements with any digitising partners now stipulate that no items may be removed from the Archive for digitisation, and that the digital images be kept under the Archive's control.

Not all the threats have come from outside South Africa. One archivist raised as example an incident with the South African national broadcaster which in the 1990s proposed a partnership where it would house the Archive's collections in return for publicity. The partnership did not happen, partly over issues of control, but also because of confidentiality concerns from archivists, who felt that they could not place private personal items under the control of a broadcaster.

Participants were firm that maintaining the trust of copyright holders and subjects was vital for a liberation archive. The Archive has a rule that researchers wanting to use recordings of

interviews with subjects, who might not have had any understanding that their words might end up in an archive, must ask for the interviewer's permission. The Archive does not digitise items for which the ownership is not clear. In such cases, items might be digitised for preservation purposes, but not made accessible.

I think we only look after things, we're not in charge of it, we don't own them. So we're sort of custodians of it, but I don't believe because we have it here it's open to anybody that [wants] to come in; I don't mean to censor it, I think you need to be accessible, but through a way where you – where [a copyright holder] can say, We can trust you, you're not going to cause horrible problems; [it] can happen [in] fifty years' time.

Overall, it is clear that the Archive's experiences over the past few years have brought the issues of exploitation and trust/distrust to the fore. The interviewees, it seemed, have learned the pitfalls of using external organisations to digitise their collections. It is noteworthy that they did not see the approaches as consciously exploitative attempts to gain control of resources but rather as naive and paternalistic. As one interviewee put it in talking of one case: "I think there was a fairly fundamental misunderstanding and the misunderstanding was partly a result of not doing homework adequately."

Discussion of findings

The preceding section has provided only a glimpse of the vast amounts of data gathered in the course of the study. However, it surely serves to contradict any conceptions of archivists as technicists who are unaware of organisational and political challenges. In the research, the archivists have demonstrated their political understanding of dynamics and have avoided what Lalu calls the "fetishism with technology" (2007: 31). Funders and philanthropists make digitisation economically possible; however the Archive is firm in maintaining its autonomy. Its awareness of the potential pitfalls of digitisation means that it has rejected several digitisation proposals by digitisation vendors and funders which would have disadvantaged the Archive and the people whose history it records.

Lack of funds has meant that the Archive uses unconventional and opportunistic methods to undertake digitisation work. It is clear that the Archive "cherry- picks" what to digitise. The argument is that there is simply not enough time, money and staff to do otherwise. So it tends to be pragmatic – selecting materials for digitisation that urgently need preservation, or that staff know will attract public interest, such as the Robben Island soccer collection that students digitised as part of a student project. Digitisation also occurs when opportunities present themselves: one example came in the anecdote from a staff member on the use of interns from the museum "to go full steam into digitising". They were in fact at the Archive to work on the government audit of heritage organisations. Another anecdote tells of the chance visit of a local lawyer with an interest in the recreation activities of political prisoners on Robben Island:

He came, he went through the collection and the first thing that he asked me was 'Has this been digitised? Do you have a plan of one day wanting to because if you want, I am willing to

13

actually support the move'. And that's where it was taken from. The willingness from him wanting to assist and just by looking at the nature of the collection itself.

The Archive has evolved an informal policy to guide decisions which categorises materials into three groups, namely: sensitive items, which should only be digitised with extreme caution; items for which the parent museum does not hold copyright, which should only be digitised with permission; and items which could be digitised at any point. The case study found that digital copies were made of artefacts that appear to be deteriorating, and digitising is done to make items more accessible. Proactive digitising most often comes from researchers' repeated requests for access to specific artefacts and collections.

The Archive staff display particular awareness of the potential dangers in selecting artefacts for digitisation. They are mindful of Pickover's admonitions (1998: 60) that, contrary to the common arguments, digitisation in a country such as South Africa, where less than 10% of the population have easy access to the Internet, might exclude the people whom the Archive from its beginning has championed. There is sensitivity to the possible vulnerability of subjects of documents, films and photographs. Some collections have not been digitised because of potential harm to the subjects of the images. And several interviewees pointed out that certain collections were not digitised out of concerns that copyright did not clearly belong to the Archive.

Conclusion: The Archive's balancing act

Digitisation is an intensely political process. What is selected is given a voice; what is not chosen for digitisation perhaps loses its power. Given the warnings by the critical school of thought, it is surprising to see how little the power relations have been changed by digitisation at the Archive. Interviewees are aware of the potential political pitfalls of digitising and acknowledge that they distrust outside role players offering to undertake the digitisation work. It is perhaps ironic that, despite complaints of the lack of interest from the museum and DAC, the neglect might well have worked to the Archive's advantage. Interviewees reported no pressure on them to digitise (or not digitise) specific items.

The case study is interesting for the contradictions that it raises. The archivists do not conform to the stereotype of "neutral" archivists – in fact they are still political activists. They trust each other and ensure that the trust placed in them by the donors of artefacts is not misplaced, yet are suspicious of the motives of outside organisations. They have avoided commercialising their Archive and are idealistic, yet do not hesitate to make pragmatic compromises to ensure that the work gets done. They are optimistic about their work, but disillusioned about the lack of support at state level for digitisation.

Despite these contradictions, the Archive has managed to balance competing interests and demands to ensure the survival of the Archive.

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Endnote

1 The identity of the case study archive is withheld as participants were assured anonymity.