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South Africa's LIS Transformation Charter: Policies, Politics and Professionals.

Genevieve Hart

Department of Library & Information Science, University of the Western Cape, Cape Town, South Africa
ghart@uwc.ac.za

Mary Nassimbeni

Library & Information Studies Centre, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa
mary.nassimbeni@uct.ac.za



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Abstract

The rhetoric of public librarianship includes many ringing claims for the role of libraries in democracy; and, on the 20-year anniversary of the advent of democracy in South Africa in 1994, it is an opportune moment to examine the rather confusing fortunes of libraries in our young democracy. In recent years, some 20 libraries have been destroyed in social protest; yet the LIS profession would argue that libraries are agents of development and social transformation. The paper reports on the work of the authors on the LIS Transformation Charter which, after a start-stop-start process of two phases over six years, has now been handed to government. The paper analyses the political and professional forces that influenced the Charter writing process; but we argue that the final Transformation Charter offers a vision of a transformed and integrated library system that has meaning to all sectors of South African society.

Keywords: South Africa, Democracy, Libraries, LIS Transformation Charter

Introduction

It is 20 years since the advent of democracy in South Africa and it is an opportune moment to examine the rather confusing fortunes of libraries in our young democracy. Since 2008 public libraries have received enormous injections of funds from government in apparent recognition of their developmental role; yet libraries are hardly mentioned in the major government blueprint, the National Development Plan (NDP). We have a new progressive

learner-centred school curriculum; yet, despite years of advocacy from the LIS profession, we have had no accompanying action to build a school library system to meet the curriculum's thirst for resources.

The rhetoric of public librarianship includes many ringing claims for the role of libraries in democracy. They have been described as “cradles of democracy” (Carnegie in Hensley 2001: 186), “beacons of democracy” (Brown 2004), “architects” of democracy (Kranich, Reid & Willingham 2004), and “democratic hothouses” (Madsen 2009). To the American Library Association, libraries are the “cornerstones” of democracy (2001). Given the newness of South Africa's democracy, these claims must provoke questions among South African librarians, such as: *Has democracy invigorated our LIS? What contribution have they made to our young democracy? How could they be more representative of our diverse society?* These are formidable questions but the aim of this paper is to begin to explore them – from the vantage point of our work in the last few years on the LIS Transformation Charter.

This year's election is the first in which “born- frees”, the post-apartheid generation, were able to vote. The African National Congress came to power in 1994 on the ticket of “transformation”. In his speech to Parliament to mark his first 100 days in office as President, Nelson Mandela described his government's Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) as an “all-encompassing process of transforming society in its totality to ensure a better life for all” (1994).

The imperative to “transform” has dominated South African public discourse ever since 1994 and has generated a number of transformation or “empowerment” charters across all sectors. As Roux (2002: 419) points out, transformation entails “the creation of a completely new paradigm, embracing change in behaviour, mind-sets, structures, systems, competencies and outputs”. This paper argues that the LIS Transformation Charter offers a vision of how the LIS profession might contribute more vigorously to the “better life for all” that Nelson Mandela envisaged in 1994.

Libraries as the “cornerstones” of democracy

A “better life” is one of the strands of argument for the role of LIS in democracy. The case is that the role of libraries in socio-economic development is their contribution to an equitable democratic society. There is not room here to cover the debates around the links between economic rights and human rights: it is enough to say that in South Africa, as elsewhere, there is agreement that constitutional democracy provides an enabling environment for development (Kamga & Heleba 2013). Thus, the library's educational programmes, in developing a community's social and human capital, strengthen its capacity to take informed decisions and participate actively in social and economic institutions. Several writers refer to the exclusion of minority groups from mainstream society brought about by “information poverty”. For example, the Knight Commission on Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy (2009) found the young, poor, and people in rural areas to be “second class citizens” in terms of access to information in the USA. It identified three areas to be addressed by libraries: unequal access to broadband, uneven literacy levels, and unequal participation in civil society.

Civic participation is a strong theme in the discussions of the role of libraries in democratic societies –perhaps in response to perceptions of increases in civic disengagement and apathy. The challenge of pervasive ICTs might also explain the interest since, according to Janes and Ptacek (2013), libraries, are looking for ways to “expand their footprint”. Civic engagement might take the form of community participation in the work of libraries as in building collections of indigenous knowledge (Greyling 2009), establishing boards for teenagers to advise on the kinds of libraries they want (King 2005) or in building teams of baby-boomer volunteers (Ristau 2010). However, some argue for a more explicitly political role. This might be extending traditional literacy programming to include civic and political literacy (for example Clubb 2006); or it could be turning libraries into centres for debate on local and national issues in order to nurture “deliberative” democracy (Kranich, Reid & Willingham 2004). Some see this as an extension of the mission of libraries to guard freedom of expression (Berry 2009). This implies a shift from their passive mediatory role. Madsen (2009: 11) quotes a Danish librarian who sees her library as an “agent provocateur”. In 2000, an election year in the USA, the American Library Association produced a tip sheet for American libraries which included a number of examples of “democracy in action” in libraries such as voter education corners and candidate forums. Running through the tips is the understanding that, in providing the arenas for political debate, the hosting libraries will gain opportunities to enhance their standing and for library advocacy.

Public libraries in post-apartheid South Africa

This last thread of comment is of particular interest for South African public librarians who in recent years have been caught up in the stormy waters of our youthful democracy. Some 20 public libraries have been burned down in so-called service delivery protests since 2009 (Van Onselen 2014). Peter Lor, former director of South Africa’s national library, attributes the burnings to “deep frustration bordering on despair, a failure of grassroots democracy, and the tendency of ordinary people still to associate municipal institutions with agencies of governmental control as they were during apartheid” (Van Onselen 2014).

The government’s report to mark the anniversary of the first democratic election documents the many advances of the past 20 years (South Africa. The Presidency 2014). However, there is also widespread recognition of “unfree freedom” (February & Calland 2013). People might be free to vote but they are still trapped by their poverty. The poverty gap is one of the worst in the world with more than 48% of South Africans living below the poverty line and 55% of South Africa’s children living in households with a monthly income of less than R800.00 (University of Cape Town. Development Policy Research Unit 2010). There is widespread dissatisfaction at the slowness of change. And there is concern over the threats that this discontent might pose to democracy. In its latest blueprint for socio-economic transformation, the National Development Plan, government borrows from its predecessor, the RDP, to acknowledge the threats to democracy posed by the massive inequalities that persist:

“No political democracy can survive and flourish if the mass of our people remain in poverty, without land, without tangible prospects for a better life” (National Planning Commission 2012: 24).

The authors of the RDP were clear that transformation would not come from government alone but from the participation of people at all levels:

“Democracy is more than electing representatives to power once every few years. It means enabling people, especially women, to participate in decision making at all levels of their lives - through people's forums, negotiating forums, work place committees, local development committees and referendums” (African National Congress 1994).

However, there is consensus that we are still far from mature participatory democracy – in which citizens at grassroots level are partners with government in decision-making (OECD 2001). The political scientist, Tapscott, lays the blame with local government:

“Despite the best intentions of legislators and policymakers, however, it is evident that the majority of municipalities have thus far failed to give effect to the principles of Batho Pele [putting the people first] and participatory democracy. Indeed, public frustration with what are perceived to be meaningless exercises in participation through ward committees, public meetings ... and the like is steadily growing” (2009: 84).

The library burnings have to be seen against this backdrop. Lor is critical of the superficial response of South African librarians to the burnings, who, he claims, “after brief expressions of dismay, go back to business as usual” (2013: 371). He contends that the profession needs to reflect more on the complex context in which South African libraries are situated and examine their role in townships and shack settlements. His words on the need for *relevance* echo those of the various think-tanks of the transition to democracy in the early 1990s.

In retrospect, the early 1990s was a hopeful time for South African librarianship. As in all other areas of society, the looming demise of the apartheid government led to lively debate on what kind of libraries the profession envisaged for the new democracy. Position papers spelled out a vision for transformation. There was talk of a new African and “radical” model that would contribute to the RDP (National Education Policy Investigation 1992: 55-56). A key element was acceptance of a “developmental” model, in which information was seen as a “key element in the implementation and sustenance of democracy and the education and empowerment of people” (p. 55).

However, the optimism of the early 1990s was dampened by the restrictions in public spending which followed South Africa’s inclusion in the global market economy (Dick 2002: 30). Lor, Chairperson of the Transitional Executive Committee of the new professional association LIASA, contended in a submission to Parliament in 1998 that budget cut-backs were “crippling” libraries (1998). Leach’s research (1998) confirmed Lor’s assertions, finding widespread rationalising and downsizing.

After years of lobbying by the LIS profession, the National Council for Library and Information Services Act of 2001 marked the beginning of improved fortunes for South African libraries. Although hampered by lack of resources, NCLIS has proved to have an important leadership and advocacy role. In 2005 it reported to Parliament the challenges confronting “over-stretched” and “under-funded” LIS. It put forward a new vision for the LIS sector suggesting that it be re-orientated in accordance with a developmental agenda and that political decision-makers and administrators be mobilised to prioritise funding. And, indeed, in 2005 government announced the Community Libraries Conditional Grant of R1

billion to be administered by the Department of Arts and Culture (under which South African public libraries fall). A further grant of R1.8 billion followed in 2012. The grants set certain targets such as “improved coordination and collaboration between national, provincial and local government on library services”, “transformed and equitable LIS delivered to all rural and urban communities” and “improved library infrastructure and services that reflect the specific needs of the communities they serve” (South Africa. Department of Arts & Culture 2012). By 2012 the Conditional Grant had funded 34 new libraries, upgraded another 229, and provided for 1575 staff contracts. It also provided funds for NCLIS to commission the LIS Transformation Charter, which is the focus of the rest of this paper.

The LIS Transformation Charter: political and professional dynamics

The last few years have brought a number of charters across different sectors, inspired by the 1955 Freedom Charter, the statement of core beliefs at the heart of our democracy, and part of the drive towards redress of injustices. Not all have been well-received, as a perusal of the online discussion threads soon uncovers.

The Technical Team appointed to write the Charter was made up of LIS practitioners and academics, and also academics and consultants from other disciplines with experience in drafting charters in other sectors. It thus needed to find common ground in a cross-disciplinary team grounded in various traditions. The composition of the team had the potential for tension and conflict because the librarians on the team were acutely aware that they were personally answerable to the professional community, whereas the other members could construct a safe distance between themselves and the LIS sector as technical experts and academics unbound of ties of loyalty and professional identity. Arriving at shared meanings proved challenging at times, as will be shown below.

We needed also to manage the expectations of the LIS community and correct possible misperceptions of what a Charter can do: viz. the Transformation Charter is not policy or law, but has the capacity to provide guidance on the setting of policy objectives, likely to result in legislation. We also had to be mindful that the Charter would reach (and ideally persuade) multiple audiences in addition to the profession: government departments, Cabinet, Treasury, civil society and the book trade.

In common with several of the charters in other sectors, the production of the LIS was unexpectedly slow. It comprised two phases, with a hiatus of three years between the two. In the first phase, various iterations of the Charter (from Draft 1 to Draft 6) were presented at meetings for comment and criticism. In 2009 Draft 6 was accepted at a National Summit by the professional community as the final draft, which then was submitted by NCLIS to the government ministers responsible for LIS. The Ministers received and accepted the draft before it was sent to Parliament for discussion by Portfolio Committees, a necessary step prior to submission to Cabinet for endorsement. Once the draft was handed over, the Technical Team had no means of expediting the process, which relied on political interventions to claim and secure the Charter as an item on the government agenda, a difficult task in the election year of 2009. The conventional post-election Cabinet shuffle inevitably brought new Ministers, who could be assumed to have no prior knowledge of the Charter processes.

However, what appeared to be a hiatus from 2010 to 2013, in which the Charter disappeared from our sight, was in fact a period of huge significance, as will be explained below. It brought some shifts in the political environment that necessitated some radical rethinking by the Charter Team that assembled again in 2013. Its second phase of work was to result in a different but enhanced document, the so-called final Draft 7.

Phase One: 2008-2009

The scope and purpose of the Charter launched in 2008 was to: “define the challenges facing the sector and to provide a framework for effecting the changes needed for the sector to contribute to the elimination of illiteracy, eradication of inequality in the sector, promotion of social cohesion, and building an informed and reading nation” (p. v). In common with other charters, it would be informed by the spirit and values of the Constitution and Bill of Rights and adhere to Government’s principle of aiming for a social compact through widespread participation by all stakeholders to enhance acceptance and endorsement of policy directions. Consequently consultative workshops were held in all provinces to engage the professional sector and citizens, to listen to their concerns and their suggestions.

The issues were outlined by the Technical Team, who thus controlled the agenda by framing the discussion in terms of the needs of a developmental state. This places a high value on those measures that “ensure equitable distribution of opportunities and wealth” (Johnson 1995). The Team’s aim was to find and articulate a common vision of transformed LIS which would mobilise librarians to participate in activities that would advance the national development agenda and redress past inequalities. One of the tasks of the Charter consultations was to prompt discussion of these imperatives and find examples of library practice explicitly promoting them. However, it has to be said that discussions in the provincial forums tended to focus on burning issues for the profession like low professional status, the low visibility of LIS and uneven employment conditions.

The longest chapter, separated from the discussions of the other sub-sectors, in the final draft of this first phase was devoted to another burning issue - the scarcity of school libraries, which by all accounts was impacting on other LIS sub-sectors. Thus, public libraries reported being inundated with school pupils in search of resources to cope with the demands of the transformed curriculum. In the absence of other explanations, it seemed likely that the possibly discomfiting highlighting of the neglect of school LIS by the Education Department was the stumbling block in the way of final government approval of the Charter and might explain its disappearance from view between 2010 and 2013.

Phase two: 2013-2014: the adoption of the ecosystem paradigm

This possibility was lent support early in 2013 when the two new Cabinet Ministers (Arts and Culture and Basic Education) requested a meeting with the Charter’s chairperson and some of the Technical Team. The issue of school libraries had indeed prompted the call for the meeting. It was apparent that the highly visible civic action by the NGO, Equal Education, in its campaign for school libraries from 2009, including a series of marches by thousands of school children and widely publicised court actions on the alleged string of “broken promises” from 2012, had put pressure on government to address the dire school library situation. In 2010 and 2011 the NGO had issued booklets titled *We Can’t Afford Not To:*

Costing The Provision Of Functional School Libraries In South African Public Schools and had drawn on insights and evidence from Draft 6 of the Charter.

In response to the pressures from civil society, the Education Department had embarked on some remedial actions such as the publication of school LIS guidelines in 2012 (South Africa. Department of Basic Education 2012) and a ten-year plan in 2013 for school libraries (which they acknowledged was still dependent on Treasury's approval). But at the meeting with the Technical Team both Ministers proposed an interim solution to the demands for the establishment of a school library in every school. They argued that, in the light of the unaffordability of this goal in the short or medium term, the solution should be sought in terms of a new paradigm which transcended institutional types to embrace a vision of shared responsibility for the provision of services to young people. They pointed to the potential for joint use school/community LIS, for example, through the strategic siting of new public libraries close to schools to facilitate targeted services for school children.

The Charter process was thus re-activated with the convening of the Technical Team, and a series of meetings with NCLIS and DAC to agree on the new terms of reference which were to produce a 7th Draft, taking into account the views of the two Ministers, and incorporating the developments within the Department of Basic Education. Another positive development that stemmed directly from the 6th draft was the drafting and publishing of the Public Library and Information Services Bill by the Department of Arts and Culture in 2010. Once enacted, this will lay the foundation for the drafting and proclamation of national norms and standards, which the LIS profession has lobbied for over many years.

The revision started in mid-2013, with the Team agreeing that the new paradigm could find expression in the metaphor of South African LIS as an *ecosystem*. Earlier, we mentioned the struggle at times to find shared meanings across the Technical Team. The adoption of the ecosystem frame provoked much debate within the Team. Thus, while we (LIS members) viewed the ecosystem as acknowledging diversity while encouraging mutuality, interdependence and collaboration, the other team members interpreted it as the creation of a single integrated system with enforced sharing, with all barriers between LIS sub-sectors being broken down. Their argument was that “these institutions came into being from a single overarching function” (p. v); however, they backed down from this radical position and it was agreed that ecosystem as framing device would be a sound analytical tool with generative capacity for innovation and genuine transformation. We drew on the literature of organisational dynamics to ground our approach (Mars, Bronstein and Lusch 2012), referring also to the work of a authors in the field of human/computer interfaces who had taken an early lead in exploring the notion of information ecology (Nardi and O'Day, 1999). In the final 7th draft we argue thus that:

“the term [ecosystem] captures diversity and complexity, and the idea of interaction between the system (or organism in ecological terms) and its environment. An ecosystem is one in which the sub-systems are inter-linked and inter-dependent, where there is continuous co-evolution, where change is systemic and where complementarity encourages niches for different roles” (2014: 13).

The two phases: continuities and discontinuities

The stress in Draft 7 on a human rights perspective is missing from Draft 6. Arguing for its progressive realisation as a worthwhile goal, the Charter notes that its establishment is “an attempt to rebalance power relationships and to produce long-term, reliable structures that will remove the need for dependence in the future” (p. ix). The paradigmatic shift towards the ecosystem strengthened the themes of collaboration and partnerships: across sectors, across library types, with civil society, with government, and with government’s social partners. Underpinning the Implementation Plan, the concluding chapter of the Charter, is a framework for indicators and milestones for progress for the 39 recommendations made, clustered into categories of: policy, legislation and regulatory, governance, human resources/capital, infrastructure, funding and finance. Two important new recommendations emerge from recent political developments. One relates to the plan by the Department of Arts and Culture to merge NCLIS with other councils in their remit, thus impoverishing its status; and one to the failure of some provincial governments to ring-fence the Conditional Grants funding, in contravention of guarantees. Thus the Charter recommends strengthening NCLIS by changing its status to that of an executive body with a budget and well-resourced secretariat (p. 91). It proposes that the Department of Arts and Culture be given the power to intervene to ensure that provinces are compelled to ring-fence funds from Treasury (p. 90).

The role of rhetoric was also consciously surfaced in Draft 7 in an effort to find or suggest resonance with current government thinking. We drew on the latest expression of government’s manifesto for development in the NDP which indicates that “for a mobilised, active and responsible citizenry to flourish, knowledge of and support for a common set of values should form the pillar of the country’s development” (p. 81). Thus we foregrounded the LIS sector’s value proposition arguing for its capacity to be an effective partner in delivering the government’s goals along the spectrum of literacy to research, knowledge production and innovation.

Conclusion: aspirations and implementation

The status of the Charter is frequently characterised as an *aspirational* document, thus stressing the importance of the LIS sector’s agency and signalling that legislation and funding are not automatic consequences of its approval. The Public Library and Information Services Bill is already a positive outcome of the Charter; and the subsequent report for Treasury, which lays out an expansive five year rollout plan, is a reassuring indication of a secure future for public libraries (South Africa. Department of Arts and Culture 2013). Evidence of a change in mind-set lies also in the recent guidelines for collaboration between the two key departments in order to improve services to school children (South Africa. Department of Basic Education and Department of Arts & Culture 2013). The Department of Arts and Culture has set aside funds in the current financial year to pilot a number of joint-use school/community libraries, an option presented in both Draft 6 and 7.

In his analysis of South Africa librarians’ responses to the recent spate of library burnings that was cited earlier, Peter Lor (2013) warns that the profession needs to confront the social and political factors underlying the incidents, if it is to have any relevance to the vast majority of South Africans. We would argue that the Charter lays out a vision for librarianship that both echoes the idealism of the early 1990s and, in learning some hard

lessons from the intervening years, lays out an attainable path for our libraries across all their sub-sectors to fulfil their mission in creating a “better life for all” in our democracy.

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