Bridging the digital divide: working toward equity of access through document supply services in South Africa.

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Introduction

South Africa's history presents unique challenges for librarians involved in document supply services in South Africa. The apartheid era left a legacy of unequally distributed resources, with some libraries being very well supported financially, while other libraries that were allocated to separately serve the black population of South Africa were atrociously under-resourced. Traditional Interlending services were one way to help bridge this gap. With the change in government, political and strategic priorities also changed, focusing on addressing and redressing this imbalance. However, at the same time, great advances were made globally with technological developments, and globalization occurred almost simultaneously. This left many of the strategic initiatives without funding, and many initiatives had to be re-thought to accommodate the global and technological changes.

In South Africa, Sabinet-Online led (and is still leading) the move towards digitization. As a private company, they are able to generate profits, and thus had the necessary resources to pioneer this digital revolution, while many state-funded institutions fell further behind, due to drastic budget cuts. Sabinet-Online have introduced ReQuest, which is an online Interlending module providing all functionality, including an electronic IFM (Interlending fees management) system. Most major educational, government and corporate libraries now use ReQuest to process their Interlending requests nationally. However, many smaller, under-resourced libraries, especially in rural and remote areas, are not able to afford Sabinet-Online's subscription fees, and thus are finding that they are being left behind.

This paper gives a brief synopsis of the developments and current state of document supply in South Africa, then moves on to look at digitization in Africa as a whole, and the problems digitization poses for equity of access. Finally, it concludes by looking at ways in which document supply services can be utilized to bridge the digital divide, and ensure equal access to information for all.

Document Supply in South Africa today – a synopsis

CHANGES
South Africa was uniquely positioned to experience a number of simultaneous changes at once, in the 1990's. There was the political transition from the apartheid government, to a new, free and democratic dispensation. The technological transition, with the advent of the Internet impacted at the same time. And the forces of globalization which have shifted the emphasis onto profit-generation as the most important aspect of any enterprise added the final ingredient to the changes.

In all this, libraries experienced the impact, especially from cost-cutting. At the very time libraries were moving towards incorporating equitable access for all in line with the

political paradigm shift, the government was cutting budgets to the bone. The state of public and community libraries in particular, is dismal, with fewer funds to stock libraries, and the closure of libraries due to inability to afford staff costs.

SOUTHERN AFRICAN INTERLENDING SCHEME (SAIS)
Lor describes the transition in Document Supply in South Africa throughout this period (Lor 1999: 171-177). Initially, the then State Library drove Interlending in South Africa through the Southern African Interlending Scheme (SAIS). However, when SABINET became SABINET Online, and emerged as the central provider in South Africa, together with the rise of the consortia for the tertiary educational institutions, the playing field shifted considerably. In November 1999, the former State Library in Pretoria, and the South African Library in Cape Town, were merged to form the new National Library of South Africa (NLSA). This absorbed the focus of the National Library for the first few years onto the internal issues of establishing a workable infrastructure following the merger, and the National Library lost prominence as a leader in the South African Document Supply field.

Previously, the SAIS included many public libraries, community libraries, tertiary education and school libraries, as well as special libraries. It also included countries from the Southern African region as a whole. SAIS was thus the hub of the Document Supply field in South Africa. The introduction of cost recovery tariffs in 1990 for all SAIS members was one of the first factors to negatively impact disadvantaged areas. (Lor 1999:172). It was an unavoidable necessity.

Table 1: Membership of SAIS by country: 1993, 1999, 2003

Country	1993	1999	2003
Botswana	3	6	3
Lesotho	2	1	1
Malawi	0	0	0
Mozambique	1	1	1
Namibia	14	14	10
South Africa	696	652	749
Swaziland	5	3	0
Zimbabwe	17	9	4
Total	738	686	768

From this table, it can be seen that there was a dip in membership in 1999, and that by 2003, membership has increased by 82 South African member libraries. This has been the result of the NLSA strategically repositioning itself, and this will be explored further in the section entitled "Using document supply as a bridge across the digital divide to enable equity of access". Membership decreased significantly for neighboring African countries.

CURRENT DOCUMENT SUPPLY SCENARIO IN SOUTH AFRICA TODAY
Currently, the dominant players in Document Supply in South Africa are Sabinet Online and the academic consortia:

- SABINET Online (Request, SACat, e-journals portal)
- CALICO (Cape Library Cooperative)

- GAELIC (Gauteng and Environs Library and Information Consortium)
- FRELICO (Free State Library Cooperative)
- ESAL (Eastern Seaboard Association of Libraries)
- SEALS (South Eastern and Academic Library System)
- COSALC (Coalition of South African Library Consortia).
- NLSA (SAIS)

In Australia, Kinetica is a comparable example to Sabinet Online. However, Kinetica is run by the National Library of Australia, whereas Sabinet Online is a private company. Without Sabinet Online providing the leadership and ICT infrastructure during this time of multiple transitions, South African libraries would be technologically much further behind the rest of the world.

Public and community libraries have separated out, and mostly do interlibrary loans within their regions and provinces, from public library to public library (Inter-branch loans). Due to the immense pressure they face, with many closures of libraries from the funding cuts, they are also looking at forming a Provincial library consortium.

PARTNERSHIPS
Sabinet Online, who require that their member libraries join SAIS in order to be able to access the SABINET online interlending module, has kept the National Library in the picture. The National Library continues to adjust and set tariffs annually, and this is amended on the ReQuest module. The NLSA maintain and update the address list of the members of SAIS. SABINET Online have in turn formed strategic partnerships with OCLC in order to remain at the cutting edge of service provision. In order to ensure that they are guided by professional librarians, they have formed a number of advisory committees, where they gather input from representatives of the various players. The Sabinet Online Information Resource Committee was formed in 2003, to deal specifically with the Interlending and Reference modules, and the various consortia, the LIASA (Library and Information Association of South Africa) Interlending Interest Group, as well as the National Library all participate. While it may seem odd that the National Library of South Africa is not driving the technological evolution and the digitization process (including e-journals, and full-text online material) in South Africa, it needs to be remembered that the National Library is simply not adequately resourced in terms of staffing capacity and funding, to drive this process. With the crippling budget cuts applied almost universally to all libraries in South Africa, only Sabinet-Online is in a position to drive this process, and is keeping South Africa in line with global trends, enabling the academic and research orientated libraries to continue to deliver a quality service.

CASUALTIES
However, there are casualties in this scenario. The very rural areas that so badly need libraries, and specifically, equitable access to online resources, cannot afford the subscription fees required to link to Sabinet Online's many databases and the portal to e-journals, nor can they afford the infrastructure costs of establishing Internet access, and even building libraries, for that matter. Overseas organizations concerned with assisting South African libraries, such as the Mellon Foundation and Carnegie Corporation are only prepared to fund projects that are sustainable in the long term. Where regional governments have slashed staff budgets, there is often no point in

establishing libraries where there is no provision for staff to run them. This brings us to the next aspect of this paper:

Digitization and the advent of the digital divide

A Nigerian librarian, Omekwu, states: "The whole gamut of librarianship or information work is primarily that of access to information". (Omekwu 2003:130). He points out that cooperation among librarians in developing countries is not a "nice-to-have", it is a necessity, owing to the financial inability of libraries in developing countries to be able to acquire all that they should. He is referring specifically to the Nigerian situation, and he is describing the difficulties experienced for librarians in providing access to published documents – electronic access is seen as even more challenging. (Omekwu 2003: 135).

DIGITIZATION IN SOUTH AFRICA
In the "first world" part of South Africa, progress is being made on the digitization of African and South African heritage materials. The Digital Imaging Project of South Africa (DISA) is being made possible by the sponsorship of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and the project is currently working on digitizing selected journals from 1960 –1990. (Peters & Pickover 2001:URL http://www.dlib.org/dlib/november01/peters/11peters.html)

Sabinet Online, as has been mentioned, is pioneering the move towards full-text online journals, providing a one-stop portal for all subscribing libraries.

TWO WORLDS
However, with regard to accessing this material online, Nicholson outlines the many factors in rural communities in South Africa (and applicable to most other developing countries in Africa), which are preventing the successful implementation of access to information, digitized, or in other formats. These include the high rate of illiteracy, poor facilities, absence of telephone lines, poor lighting, school buildings and facilities, inadequate healthcare, HIV/AIDS, poverty, and poor nutrition. (Nicholson 2002: 260). These factors all add to two different worlds in South Africa. A portion of South Africa is relatively "information rich", and is remaining on the cutting edge, despite the budgetary challenges, and anyone with access to a computer connected to the Internet can plug into 24/7 information anywhere in the world.

Lor describes this as "instant universal access", which is creating a First World Utopia, and a Third World nightmare (Lor 2001: 11). The poor and rural areas are becoming more and more information-starved.

THE MORAL DIMENSION
Lor and Britz describe the right of freedom of access to information as essential, because without it, it is impossible to establish sustainable development. Access to information is thus a "common good, which must be distributed equally and according to developmental needs of people." (Lor & Britz 2003: 6).

The Library and Information Association of South Africa (LIASA) is involved in initiating a number of strategies to lobby government, and engage them in addressing this critical situation. It is not an easy task, because there are so many competing, basic and unmet needs. Information access is seen as a luxury, not an essential aspect of empowering people, and this mind-set needs to be changed. Some progress has been made with government's initiative to establish Multi-Purpose Community Centres (MPCCs), which

are one-stop basic information centres, providing access to government documentation, and the Internet. However, the MPCCs have not partnered with libraries, and thus facilitation of access to the resources held by libraries is omitted.

All of the different categories of libraries in South Africa are focused on service provision for their own user groups – tertiary education, schools, public and community libraries. But rural and impoverished areas are not currently on anyone's agenda – not government, not libraries (especially those public and community libraries who are struggling to survive) and not commercial service providers. What can be done in the interim until this situation is on the national agenda, to bridge this divide, and reach out to the rural areas? And how can we stop the creation of a new "information apartheid"?

Using document supply as a bridge across the digital divide to enable equity of access

The answer of course, is quite obvious. Document supply, and interlending by traditional means (using post, courier services, and if there are telephone lines, telephone and fax) is the only way to keep a modicum of information flowing to the rural areas.

NATIONAL LIBRARY STRATEGIES AND SOLUTIONS
The National Library of South Africa has developed as one of its strategic priorities: "Leveling the playing field with regard to access to information". It is noteworthy that one third of the NLSA's SAIS members are not online, and have no access to SABINET Online's databases, and the national catalogues.

- The NLSA has implemented a "Teleholdings" service for those of its SAIS members who are not online. The NLSA's Interlending section receives requests by telephone, fax, or post from non-online libraries, with requests to find out which libraries hold particular articles or books. NLSA Interlending staff then search on SABINET Online databases, locate the material, and provide this information free of charge. Sometimes the library requests that the NLSA do the Interlending transaction for them as well. Word of this service by the National Library has spread, and the increase in membership is attributed to this new focus.

- However, more work has to be done to reach rural areas who are not even aware of the National Library's existence, and could benefit enormously from using the NLSA as the bridge to SABINET Online's sophisticated technology. The NLSA Interlending staff is currently working on a project to identify and reach out to rural areas, in the most cost effective manner, and provide an Interlending "broker" service to the rural areas, by doing the Interlending transactions through ReQuest on their behalf.

- The challenge for the NLSA is also a strong pressure by government to not only recover costs, but also show a profit. Document Supply is seen as one of the areas where more income could be generated. Thus, it is a challenge for the NLSA to continue to service its moral and legal obligation to provide equity of access to information for ALL South Africa citizens (which translates to: affordable access), while remaining connected to cutting edge technology.

Conclusion

In a world where globalization, technological evolution, and fierce competition have led to the creation of a new elite – those who are information rich, the knowledge workers – the vast majority of the world's population stands to be left behind. The failure to develop a new form of "social contract", which takes into account the information needs of citizens in developing countries, will have disastrous results for humanity as a whole. This paper has concentrated on South Africa and Africa, but there are many other developing countries that face the same potential abyss. It is essential that even old-fashioned methods of Interlending be used to facilitate equitable access to information until such time as the imbalances can be equalized, and everyone has "instant universal access". It requires partnerships between private vendors, libraries, government, and the communities themselves, and a moral commitment from all parties. Until such time as instant universal access is equitably available for all citizens, traditional document supply services in South Africa continue to serve as a bridge across the digital divide.

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