



The Relevance of Rare & historical collections to today's parliament

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Abstract

In today's fast paced world parliamentarians require swift access to impartial, current, accurate and timely information is fundamental to democratic legislatures. For parliamentary libraries the challenge is to constantly develop innovative new services and keep up with technological advances. This is to be done within the almost universal constraints of limited resources and a decline in requests for traditional library services accompanied by the need to prove return on investment or value of existence. Coupled to this the majority of libraries have issues with regards to insufficient shelving space to house the numerous books of their collections. Space management becomes an important organizational and management activity that can contribute hugely to infrastructure costs for extra accommodation and/or shelving.

In light of this the question of keeping *old* and *irrelevant* books has been uttered in the back passages of many libraries. What is referred to here, is not simply weeding a collection, but special collections made up mostly of Africana materials dating to the colonial and apartheid eras of South African history. Shouldn't we just get rid of these books that gather dust (if not properly looked after)? These feelings were uttered before South Africa's current debate surrounding the removal of colonial and apartheid statues. Does the statue debate further fuel the one surrounding other cultural representations such as books and manuscripts? Further questions raised include how relevant these collections are to today's information needs of our users. Is it part of the mandate of a parliamentary library to keep such collections and for what purpose? This paper hopes to provide some sort of answer to these and similar questions surrounding the issue of relevance of special collections to today's parliament.

Introduction

Many parliamentarians realize that information is of benefit for them to participate in parliamentary processes for an effective democracy. They understand that they need information to make wise decisions and to support the democratic principles enshrined in the constitution of the country. Thus in today's fast paced technological world parliamentarians require swift access to impartial, current, accurate and timely information. For parliamentary libraries the challenge is to constantly develop innovative new services

and to keep up with the technological advances. This is done within the universal constraint of operating within limited financial resources and a decline in requests for traditional library services accompanied by the need to show return on investment or value of existence. Coupled to this most libraries have numerous other challenges including insufficient shelving space to house their abundant collections since even in this digital age the library has a space shortage for all the information resources it hopes to collect.

Space management or collection management as it is officially referred to, has become an important organizational and management activity that can potentially contribute hugely to infrastructure costs. In light of this the question of keeping books perceived as “old and irrelevant” has been uttered in the back passages of some libraries. What is referred to here is not simply the weeding of a collection, but the relevance of keeping Special or rare and historical collections which in South Africa’s case is made up mostly of Africana materials dating to the colonial and apartheid eras of South African history.

Background

The Parliamentary Information Centre in Cape Town is one of the oldest existing libraries in South Africa (Mostert, 2004:91). Furthermore Mostert (2004) cites Laundry (1980) who states that the majority of parliamentary libraries started as traditional libraries, reflecting the nature of that specific society. It is also true that every parliamentary library in the English Dominion has a significant special collection incorporating a large collection of local literature. It is a national treasure of reference works for the future. Thus the collection reflects the notion of the day, being that of collectors of books, rather than disseminators of information. The emphasis of the collection was thus on cultural heritage and materials of local interest from a Euro-centric perspective.

We can begin with this discussion with why we collect books or specifically rare books in the first place. This is largely because books are largely seen as the documentary record or heritage of man and thus form part of what is seen as the inheritance of the world. Books are the natural product or result of the activities of individuals and organizations and serve as the recorded memory thereof. Likewise because Man is inherently curious about his beginnings according to Le Roux (2012:45) an Englishman in the 16th century began to regret the loss of many medieval illuminated manuscripts and thus started collecting them. Similarly Africana collecting only began in the twentieth century, mainly because indigenous printing in South Africa only started after 1824 with the publication of newspapers and almanacs. Book printing as such only started in the early twentieth century after a demand was created by the influx of Europeans seeking their fortunes on the diamond and gold fields of South Africa. Prior to this most books were imported from either the Netherlands or Great Britain (Le Roux, 2012:45). Some people also believe that old books are a medium through which we can touch our past as they provide evidence of the “great civilizations” of long-ago.

The challenge / problem statement

The challenge we often face within the South African context is one of cultural relevance. According to Hofmeyer (2015) the “colonial chestnut has been around for a long time and has its roots in imperial ideas where the book was a symbol of English authority but also a “gift” to help “civilise” colonised subjects.” The questions thus raised in general include how relevant these special collections are to today’s information needs of users. More specifically, is it part of the mandate of a parliamentary library to keep such collections and for what purpose? South Africans have been debating the relevance of keeping colonial and apartheid era statues and these debates also surface each time a place name is to be changed. Sparked perhaps by this discussion, questions were also raised during this year’s Franschhoek Literary Festival about the white-domination of the literary system within South Africa. Thus without going into the detail of the issue of cultural relevance itself, we can ask ourselves whether these debates further fuel the one surrounding other cultural representations such as books and manuscripts, and what role does a parliamentary special collection play in these. This paper hopes to provide some answers to these questions by discussing the relevance of special collections to today’s parliament.

The aim of this paper is to attempt to discuss the relevance or role of special collections within the greater Parliamentary information and research services provided. The methodology followed was to gather information using a literature survey, and by means of an internet search. The Internet was used to search for literature, but also to do an exploratory search on the available information sources.

Definitions

Before we embark on our discussion two concepts need to be clarified. The first is what makes up a special collection? Auchstetter (1990:222) asserts that special collections materials are a concentration of books on any given subject, are not necessarily rare, and that deserve special treatment that the general stack area is unable to supply. Similarly Waters (2009:2) states that special collections are those materials containing primary evidence for scholarship that require special treatment in their description or handling. The second concept is what makes a book rare that it may be kept within a special collection? Perry (1975:96) describes a rare book as one being old, but that it is also a valuable book which is not easily replaceable or is irreplaceable, and furthermore it could be described as a particular copy of a book. A rare book is defined by Norwich (1978:33) as being an important book, that is in demand and that is either not easily available or in circulation at a greatly enhanced price. Thus demand and scarcity should both be present simultaneously

for it to be rare. While these two terms represent two differing concepts in theory they are used interchangeably within this discussion. For Norwich (1978) continues by stating that for a book to be regarded as important it should illuminate the long struggle of man to recognise, understand and record the discovery of new lands, new and changing fauna and flora, political upheavals, and changes in the life of a developing nation and its people, concepts which inherently imply scarcity. A book may also gain its importance from its association with the writer or the collector, as an indication of his interests and development and thus not necessarily be rare.

The relevance of special collections

If we look at the function of a parliament, that it is a country's central legislative institution of a democratic government it goes without saying that parliamentarians are expected to be informed on a wide range of subjects and should thus have a vast appetite for information. Parliamentarians not only need to be able to solve local problems, but also those of the nation and the world as a whole. Thus their success should depend on their ability to access and utilize the right information at the right time. In general the existence and level of utilization of a parliamentary library is thus closely related to the level of democracy achieved in a country according to Mostert (2004). Thus the more advanced the democratic principles in place, the greater the need for information and research by parliamentarians in order to perform efficiently and effectively. Yet in light of this it is found that libraries experience a problem of underutilization for various reasons (Mostert 2007:157).

We know that the kind of information sources available also plays a significant role in the services or products offered. Preservation of materials such as is found in travel accounts has value for historical, social and cultural research. So while South Africa continues to grapple with the issue of cultural identity and the dominant colonial Eurocentric mind-set, the Parliamentary Information Centre (PIC) houses several invaluable collections, such as the Sidney Mendelssohn collection and the William Jardine collection. The Mendelssohn Collection was bequeathed by Sir Sydney Mendelssohn who made his fortune on the diamond fields of Kimberley in the 1870's. The collection is one of Parliaments, and indeed the country's most valuable collections of books relating to Africa and includes about 300 original paintings and artworks, caricatures and some manuscripts. Mendelssohn's aim was to collect everything ever written about Southern Africa with the vision of developing this collection into a national library of Africana. And it is for this reason that the Mendelssohn collection is of great historical significance and interest. For before van Riebeeck set foot ashore not far from here (in 1652) there were several European travellers to our country who as e.g. the French explorer Le Vaillant, recorded and graphically illustrated our indigenous inhabitants, fauna and flora. Special collections have existed in parallel to normal

library collections to support preservation of the human record as instanced in original documents or in specific documents of importance. We need only look at UNESCO's Memory of the world programme and take for example the VOC (Dutch East India Company) which was the largest commercial enterprise in the world in its heyday. Its archives contain unique primary (source) information on the history of countries, including South Africa. Thus books contain valuable historical information, and these books may be used for the celebration of significant anniversaries such the centenary of WWI.

Historical and political studies cannot disregard the records of the past, if (and especially when) the history of the time is constantly reinterpreted. The manner in which we gain insight into the past is through historical research. Historical research is the process of systematically examining past events to give an account of what has happened in the past. But why do we conduct historical research?

- To uncover the unknown
- To answer questions
- To identify the relationship that the past has to the present
- To record and evaluate the accomplishments of individuals, agencies, or institutions, and
- To assist in understanding the culture in which we live.

Inherently thus historical research is done using old or rare books. They throw light on our social and cultural history or the mode of life in long-gone days. It also shows the reading matter in existence at a particular period of time and as well as the prominent people who were leaders of the time. Even though collections inevitably reflect what is judged to be historically important at that point in time, it is more specifically the way that these collections have been managed, profiled, promoted and researched that elucidates what is judged to be significant as history. Within the narrow conception of South African history, topically, chronologically and linguistically, history must be preserved no matter how repulsive it is. Items of value in the cultural growth of any country are of value to historians and as a source of information to many people. We need to respect cultural heritage as a sign of cultural identity and a source of sustainable development, preventing damage that could hinder its transmission to future generations. Respecting cultural heritage in turn is a basis for respecting cultural identity. According to Soudien(2013) the special collection is a reminder of where we find ourselves. It is in these collections, that the deep archive exists of the complexity of what has been in our country and continent and from which the imagination of what we may still become will arise. The challenge is to understand this material within its cultural context in finding relevant and appropriate information and to choose not to be trapped in history, but to turn it around, into something positive to support the decisions to be made and the actions to be taken.

Libraries as cultural heritage institutions perform the role of public custodian and provide the nation with access to its published legacy and promote access to information and a reading culture. Special collections are central to understanding the future. The newest

White paper on Arts, Culture and heritage (2013) states that the preservation, promotion and natural progression of arts, culture and heritage should no longer be seen merely as showing where we come from and how we express ourselves. Arts Culture and Heritage are integral to the social life of society and has inherent developmental and social transformative value. Other benefits include generating mutual respect amongst individuals; providing previously disadvantaged individuals with opportunities to achieve human dignity as well as social and material well-being and promoting peace, friendship, tolerance and national unity among cultural, religious and linguistic communities. Since special collections books often have do with ideas, information, and the understanding of the human spirit, active steps could also be taken to explore and identify the economic value and opportunity inherent in the cultural and creative industries. It can thus be concluded that books especially worth reading are those that record man's most significant ideas and actions. Rare book and special collections preserve these titles and others that for varying reasons are considered special and possibly humanity's conscience. Special collections can consequently be a source of pride, expertise, and excellence, and these qualities can motivate useful investments.

Within an academic library context, the primary justification for spending resources on special collections is its role in support of research and scholarship, and usually special collections can be tied specifically to an institution's academic programs. Thus the proper and useful kind of special collection for an academic institution is first and foremost a working resource for research, but this would also apply to other types of research libraries including parliamentary libraries. As an organization's uniqueness intersects with its purposes, it would create a niche that helps librarians make decisions about its collections and what areas to develop. Thus the value proposition for institutional investment in special collections is that such investment is worthy because it will enhance the distinctiveness of the institution. According to Ritchie (2002) heritage collections of state and national significance are not limited to the National Library and university libraries. Important collections reside in many of our government institution libraries, archives and museums. We must think in terms of the concept of 'national' heritage book collections. The parliamentary library as a memory institution, should engage actively with issues of nation-building, nationhood and collective history and identity.

Within the South African context the Legal Deposit Act of 1997 is specifically aimed at preserving South Africa's intellectual and cultural heritage. The Act is specific to provide for the preservation of the national documentary heritage through legal deposit of published documents and the Parliamentary Information Centre is one of the receiving libraries since 1950 (Mostert, 2004). Thus it can be inferred that to collect, record, preserve and make available the national documentary heritage should be one of the objectives of the PIC, but

to do so specifically within its user framework. The exception is for when it comes to access to government information where the PIC plays a leading role as the library of last resort. The other aims of promoting an awareness and appreciation of books, by fostering information literacy, and by facilitating access to the country's information resources remain the tasks of a national library infrastructure.

Recommendations

Over time research libraries, often driven by fiscal constraint, have needed to sharpen their collecting focus to establish substantial expertise and identity in limited, specialized subject areas. In rethinking collecting focuses for special collections, it is desirable to find areas of congruence between the ongoing institutional commitments and opportunities for regional, national, or international distinctiveness. Serving the former ensures the usefulness of special collections to the primary clientele from the home institution, whereas responding to the latter attracts visiting researchers and makes the library a centre for scholarship in its field. Awareness of the institutional collection policy and knowledge of regional resources and cooperative plans is also of use in this area. Such resources and cooperative plans can guide rare book collection development decisions by suggesting where current holdings can support new areas of development or where new areas of development may lead to costly duplication. In pursuing opportunities to be of value to the parent institution, while still fulfilling the mission to preserve and promote an interest in history, we must recast special collections to appeal to our unique user needs.

Secondly special collections need to focus on the acquisition of twentieth- and twenty-first-century materials, but again with specialization and distinctiveness based on geography, language, ethnicity, subject, or other collecting criteria. Byrd (2001) is of the opinion that actions need to be taken to promote access and use, and to re-examine and redefine collecting focus in conjunction with institutional priorities, and that this will go far toward repositioning special collections according.

In terms of making special collections accessible, digitization has a significant role to play. We must however also avoid the glut of information and the possible financial black hole of technology. Nevertheless we must also seize the public relations potential of placing digitized versions of attractive holdings on the web. We need to understand that digitized texts and images are only a new form of transmission that should be logical extensions of normal services with materials supporting the institution's research mission. As Zeidberg, (1993) also states the more complete the descriptions of our holdings, the clearer the understanding of our holdings, that subsequently defines the relationship of special collections to the general collection.

In summary thus, the value of special collections can be divided broadly into four main values, namely:

1. Informational value - this is the research value that is offered in relation to places, people, events, periods, projects or processes.
2. Administrative value - this is the functional usefulness of the resources to an organisation such as is found in records of activities.
3. Artifactual value – this is in the case of rare items or interesting objects where the value is derived from the nature of the material.
4. Associated value – this is where materials have a relationship to an eminent person, e.g. Nelson Mandela’s personal diary.

According to Auchstetter (1990) the institution that supports rare books with the necessary levels of funding has every right to expect a high degree of correlation between institutional goals and objectives and those of the rare book library. A properly established rare book library needs to publicize its resources to researchers and others. At the same time, each such library must strive to maintain conditions that will preserve its holdings physically and intellectually.

Conclusion

As institutions that organise cultural and intellectual records, parliamentary libraries are responsible for providing research and cultural opportunities that can transcend institutional and, increasingly, national boundaries. Our holdings constitute a treasury of knowledge from which to build new histories, write new stories and research South Africa's collective, intertwined past. For our country is moving on from its past and we have here the papers of important South Africans who have played a role in defining the character of this country. In conclusion thus the world needs to be deeply aware of where we find ourselves currently because we have here in the country right now, the intense coming together of puzzles about what it means to be human. History is open-ended. “Truth is never fully formed, it is always flexible” and each generation has to write its own history, “seeing how the dots from the past project into the future”.

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