THE INFORMATION LANDSCAPE: POLITICAL DEMOCRACY VERSUS EPISTEMIC GAMES WITH SPECIFIC REFERENCE TO SOUTH AFRICAN COMMUNITIES

S L Witbooi *

ABSTRACT

The South African government and professions are taking stock of the transformation of the last decade. Municipalities still face serious problems such as urban population growth, poverty, housing shortages, environmental and health problems. The professions are fighting battles of curriculum and practice reforms and experience Cinderella treatment from government. This article focuses on the information landscape in the public sector of South Africa from political democracy and epistemic games perspectives. The links between information and politics, education, the economy and development as epistemic games are investigated. The practical reality of the South African information landscape of public and school libraries are examined against the background of political democracy. This landscape is constantly changing and very uncertain due to the transformation of local government. The author argues for active on-going debate between the two opposing groups of democracy (elected government officials and the electorate) and epistemic games (academics, researchers and philosophers) to find joint, informed solutions to critical issues.

*Sally Witbooi lectures in the Department of Library and Information Science at the University of the Western Cape. This article is based on her keynote address presented at the national Communication and Information (CIC) conference held in Bloemfontein on 12 August 2004.

INTRODUCTION

South Africa is celebrating 10 years of democracy in 2004. As a fledgling democracy the country is taking stock of the fulfilment, or not, of election promises made in the first democratic elections of 1994. The new Constitution with its Bill of Rights lays the foundation for new expectations, for new services, for better services for all and new systems for better governance for building a better society. These new constitutional reforms have created a greater consciousness about the individual's rights among the members of the South African society.

As a new nation, South Africa is faced with challenges that are both local and global. At the local level, the country is building a democratic society from the devastation left behind in the wake of Apartheid. Simultaneously, South Africa has to find its niche in a globalised world economy that is knowledge-based.

It is commonplace in 2004 for the government and its departments as well as all professions, occupations and disciplines to reflect on the transformation and the progress made (if any) undertake state-of-the-art evaluation exercises and to celebrate achievements attained under this new democracy.

South African municipalities face great challenges that include urban population growth, widespread poverty, burgeoning informal housing, growth of informal economic activity, alongside basic environmental and health problems, as well as the challenges posed by the democratisation process, which have resulted in continuous transformation of local government since 1995. Yet, as cities increasingly become the nexus of economic and population growth, they do not deliver on the promise of a better quality of life to the extent that they could (Jogiat et al. 2003:1). Democracy has as yet delivered few from their poverty and misery.

Recent, and still upcoming local conference titles and themes include the words "democracy" or "for all". The Annual Cape Teachers Professional Association (CTPA) conference that was held from 5-8 July 2004 in Graaff-Reinet focused on "A real democracy: education for all?" Here the keynote speaker (Landsberg, 2004: [8]) concluded that South Africa is democratic, yet unequal and impoverished. He also instructed the attendees to consider Education, Health and Poverty to see the inequalities.

Another conference that was held in Cape Town from 5-6 August 2004 put the spotlight on the "Cost of a culture of reading". At this conference Library and Information Services were to be joined by the relevant Government Department (Arts and Culture) to scrutinise the various aspects of a culture of reading and the costs to cultivate and maintain such a culture. The costs of publications, taxation, literacy and publishing in the indigenous languages were to be examined and panel discussions held to find solutions to these current critical issues and problem areas. Due to the unavailability of the Minister of Arts and Culture, this conference had to be postponed.

The upcoming annual conference of the Library and Information Association of South Africa (LIASA) has as its theme "Libraries and democracy: the vital link". Judging from the provisional program, this profession will also look at its performance and progress over the past 10 years.

Developments on various professional fronts during the past decade and recent past, featured very prominently in articles in the media, are stark reminders of the uncertain nature of transformation and the uneasiness it brings. On the educational front, the educators had a long and, yet, still ongoing battle to come to grips with the various curriculum reforms such as Curriculum 2005, Outcomes Based Education (OBE) and Resource Based Education (RBE). Their counterparts in the higher education sector are hard at work to embrace the proposed changes in their landscape (mergers, incorporations and consolidations) as well the critical issue of Quality Assurance (QA).

The medical practitioners had their professional struggles with the Government on the curriculum and practical training, their ability and registration to dispense medicine. The ongoing opposing discourses on AIDS between the Minister of Health, medical practitioners and civil society organisations such as the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) bear testimony to their disagreements on HIV/AIDS, or, HIV and AIDS policies and the roll out of anti-AIDS drugs. The pharmacists believe that their livelihood is threatened by the new proposed pricing strategy of medicine and the dispensing thereof by doctors.

These are illustrations of political democracy versus epistemic games. In all these events the clear message is that all professions seem to think that their profession is the Cinderella of Government legislation and transformation. The disagreement on critical issues evolves around the questions: "Who knows the best?" "Who does the best?" and "What is best practice?"

AIM OF THE ARTICLE

This article does not deal with the democratisation process, societal attitudes towards democracy, electoral mobilisation or political participation. It focuses on the information landscape in the public sector in South Africa from the opposing groups' perspectives and their respective discourses as they presently stand in South Africa.

CLARIFICATION OF CONCEPTS

Political democracy

By political democracy is meant, in the most simple of terms, a system of governance by the consent of the governed, which involves all adults in casting a ballot every few years (Craig 1999:18). MacIver, as quoted by Jackson (1997:54), is of the opinion that "Democracy is not a way of governing ... but primarily a way of determining who shall govern, and, broadly, to what end".

This system has two groups, namely the electorate (voters) and the elected (government officials). Their discourses are: demands for basic services and goods, and, legislation and equitable provision of services and goods, respectively. The view of Julius Nyerere,

in Jackson (1997:54), view is that "Democratic reforms are naturally well-suited to African conditions. For me, the characteristics of democracy are: the freedom of the individual, including freedom to criticize the government, and the opportunity to change it without worrying about being murdered".

Epistemic games

Epistemic games (derived from the epistemic model that views research as the search for truth - Mouton 1996:17-18), refer to those debates among academics, philosophers and others who make a living from talking about knowing and knowledge (Craig, 1999:18), i.e. theories, research and livelihood debates. In this specific context, epistemic games refer to talking about knowing and knowledge about information provision and services among information professionals, such as librarians.

Craig (1999) is of the opinion that mixing political democracy and epistemic games are counterproductive for these two discourses engage the lives of those involved in them in very different ways. The flow of ideas in the two spheres is what is central in the mixing, for example in epistemic games ideas flow from university talk to educational initiatives and in democracy ideas flow from the streets to the university.

The credentials of the originator of the debate in democracy and his/her control over epistemic games seem to be Craig's concern. In contrast, the researcher believes that these groups should talk to each other, listen actively to each other, educate each other and find informed solutions together.

Information

No universally acceptable definition for the concept of information exists (Boon 1992: 64, Dick 2002, Karelse & Nassimbeni 1997). The definition of information is determined by its context. Several conceptions and definitions are applied across a range of academic disciplines, and used loosely in everyday conversations. It has interdisciplinary appeal, as there are several points of entry to the study of information. Many of these disciplines apply different meanings of information in their own domains.

Information is inseparable from all human activities and labour. Every human need has a related information need, e.g. hunger and the information need on the availability of food and food outlets and the nutritional value of food as well as the cost of food.

There has not been any age in history that information was not considered valuable. Even in the Agrarian Age, when it was a case of the survival of the fittest, information was needed on which plants were edible and which were poisonous.

Information as defined by Blom (1991: 252), can be any input that can be processed intellectually for the development of meaning. Pansegrouw (1984: 117) sees information as "true judgements, sometimes verifiable as being in accordance with facts and sometimes accepted in context with other judgements".

The omnipresence of information today is evitable in concepts such as Information Age, Information Society, Information systems, Information Technology (IT) and Information and Communication Technology (ICT), and Information highway.

The information landscape in the public sector includes all professionals, individuals, users, agencies and organisations involved in the production, accessioning, processing, capturing, dissemination, transmission, and utilisation of information. This includes the free press, public service broadcasting, public museums, art galleries and libraries.

THE INFORMATION LANDSCAPE

Information dominates the contemporary scene, both globally and locally. It permeates all levels of society and is transmitted by numerous agencies through a wide range of channels and media. Consumer awareness of information provision and alternative forms of information services is on the increase. Library users have become consumers of information.

The sociology of information (Dick 2002: 69-80, Karelse & Nassimbeni 1997) provides a framework to understand the link between information, consciousness and ideology (politics); information, education, the economy and development.

Information and politics

Use of information in politics

Information can be used for political gain or abuse or to reinforce dominant power relations. The deliberate distribution of false information is known as *disinformation* and the unintended dissemination of false information, *misinformation* (Dick 2002: 52). Disinformation is not a new phenomenon and is often used in war and military situations for secrecy and security. Nowadays it is utilised in large proportions in the form of propaganda and the shaping of public opinion, especially by the media.

Information access is a basic necessity for democracy. Members of the legislature cannot fulfill their duties successfully without a constant flow of relevant data, information and knowledge (Boon 1987).

The politics of information

The free (unrestricted as opposed to gratis) flow of information is what information professionals are guarding in their attempts to protect the rights of the user to access of information, the freedom of choice and freedom to read. It has been demonstrated that, in general, information flows more freely in an academic and research environment than in industrial and government organisations (Smith 1997:15).

Certain information is instrumental to the exercising of basic human rights, therefore people should have the right of access to this information. The information resources of the country should be deployed to support democracy.

Information and education

It is conventional wisdom that assimilation of information leads to knowledge. Education, per definition, deals with the transmission of knowledge. True education is distinguished from propaganda. Literacy and information literacy are critical issues in ensuring the successful acquisition of knowledge by learners and students.

Education and intellectual development includes formal, informal, continuing and specialised education for adults.

Information and the economy

The information society is characterised as a society whose economy has reached the stage of an information economy or nowadays, that of a knowledge economy. In a knowledge-based or information economy "knowledge professionals" or "Modern Information Professionals (MIPs)" are the major components of the workforce - people who process, disseminate and use information.

Information is seen as an economic resource and has been labeled the fifth production factor alongside the other factors such as raw material, labour, capital and entrepreneurship (Blom 1991:251; Swanepoel & Boon 1989).

Information plays a role in activities such as decision-making, planning, problem solving, creativity, innovation and new product development (Blom 1991:251; Boon 1992). These are important activities in any business organisation that wants to get the competitive edge over its rivals. Provision of the right information at the right time in the right form is therefore considered to be a critical success factor for an organisation to succeed.

Information helps producers to determine which goods and services to produce; how much should be produced and how it should be produced.

An important debate in the economical sphere is that of the pricing strategy of information as a product or commodity. Typical questions asked are: Which information products can be priced; How does one determine prices for particular information products and services, and: Who should pay for these information products and services?

Information and development

Development is sometimes seen as synonymous with modernisation and transformation. Development can be defined from divergent perspectives, such as academic, political, ideological, personal, social and economic perspectives. Development may be typified as "making the earth a fit place to live in " (Boon 1992:64) with the emphasis on the harmonising of cultures and traditions of developing communities.

Development revolves around people: individuals and communities. It is imperative that these people must be involved in development. Julius Nyerere (1974:159) uttered the following wise words " People cannot be developed. A man develops himself by what he does: he develops himself by making his own decisions, by increasing his knowledge and ability, and by full participation in the life of the community he lives in". This is equally valid today for women, children and the youth.

THE LIBRARY LANDSCAPE IN SOUTH AFRICA

Public libraries form a key component of public information services. Libraries as societal institutions have always been subject to change.

Critical issues for libraries

Governance

Public libraries are in dire straits between national, provincial and local structures. Library services seem to lack the political muscle to lobby effectively at the highest level. The continuous transformation of local government structures since 1995 has exacerbated the rift over who should take responsibility for public libraries.

The provincial library services used to provide materials as well as professional and infrastructural support, while the individual local authority or municipality was responsible for the library building and recruitment and employment of staff. Ongoing debates between the province and the local authorities center around who should fund what aspect of libraries. The regrouping of libraries has implications for governance, staffing, operational hours, and computer systems, to name a few.

Curriculum reforms such as Outcomes Based Education (OBE) and Resourced Based Education (RBE) are learner-centered and require learners to undertake independent study for projects and portfolios. However, South African schools lack the facilities (learning and information resources) assumed for these reforms (Hart 1999:169).

The school library situation is well documented (Olën, 1993:35). A small percentage of schools have effective school libraries while public libraries have to take on more responsibility for the educational needs of learners (Witbooi 2001: 5, 60-64).

Funding

Libraries are feeling economic pressures to justify their existence to local authorities and to prove their value to the community they serve (Tise 2000: 57). Government support is no longer sufficient to fund library services and library budgets are limited and diminishing. Government economic policies have led to harsh staff cutbacks in the public sector, where most librarians are employed. Erasmus (2004:2) reports that a critical shortage of staff is experienced across the Cape Metropole Libraries after a moratorium has been placed on the filling of posts. Promises to fill 50 posts are just that, and the process has been stalled.

Domestic demands (articulated needs) for urgent basic services (housing, water, sanitation and electricity) and physical infrastructure (roads) by millions of disadvantaged South Africans are on the increase. Libraries are taking a back seat. As "information talk" becomes more and more critical to shape policies that affect the everyday lives of ordinary people, librarians and MIPs are becoming more and more peripheral in the picture (Dick 1996:134). They are not being invited to partake in the construction of information infrastructures that are essentially changing the delivery of library and information services, as well as the formulation of policies likely to apply to the new cyberspace.

Changing client needs

The world in which we live and work is constantly changing. Information professionals have to keep track with developments and the critical issues in society. A provincial library service is not well qualified to assess and respond to a local community's exact information needs. Working and living in a particular library area is no guarantee that

Library and Information Service (LIS) professionals know exactly what their users require from their services. Goodwill, commitment and energy cannot compensate for ignorance of what is needed and how it can most appropriately be provided.

Cost of publications

The pricing of publications is a contentious issue that generates an enormous amount of ill-feeling and public debate. The general perception is one of exorbitant prices. Dissatisfaction with regards to pricing is voiced across the spectrum of book buyers from customers of bookshops to academics and libraries.

The price differences of local books (normally higher) versus that of foreign publishers is currently a topic of hot debate. The differences are sometimes considerable. McNaught and Bowden (1994:20-21) ascribe customer complaints to the fact that many imported books carry pound/dollar prices on their jackets. Quick calculations of exchange rates lead to feelings of "being ripped-off" by the bookshops.

The taxation that forms part of the pricing of books is a bone of contention and appeals have been launched to get books exempted from VAT. Acquisition librarians support overseas library suppliers for their lower prices, efficiency of service (it is faster to obtain a book from overseas) and the greater number of support services (McNaught & Bowden 1994: 21). In the poor economic climate that currently exists in South Africa, most libraries are faced with rising costs of library materials, especially subscription of foreign journals. Libraries are expensive and are becoming more expensive. The competition is cheap: the whole world of the World Wide Web (WWW) is just a local phone call away.

Publications in indigenous languages

Complaints about the range of books available in libraries and bookstores are often expressed (Witbooi 1995:22). The availability of Anglo-American, Eurocentric and imported books outweighs that of locally produced material with an African focus and in the indigenous languages. Fredericks and Mvunelo (2003:134) state that there is a paucity of books in the indigenous languages in most African countries. Official, as well as literary works, are predominantly published in foreign languages and the languages of their former colonisers.

The lack of local and appropriate material is attributed to the fact that the market is small, that locally produced material are published informally and hard to trace and that the price is high.

Literacy and illiteracy

Landsberg (2004:9) estimates that South Africa has 12 million functionally illiterates. This social problem needs to be addressed as it hampers the socio-economic development of the individual, the building of a reading culture, the development of a learned society and the realisation of the African Renaissance.

Public librarians have to start operating libraries in business-like fashion:

- Adopt the new language of business of accountability, financial acumen, promotion and advocacy.

- Be aware of new challenges in terms of competitors in the information matrix such as Internet cafes.

- Open the doors to new customers and their information needs not served previously.

- Side by side with the need to improve access, is the need to improve the appropriateness and relevance of library collections. Research into the information needs of the community and engaging with the community, are the routes to take in delivering information services.

- Empower users through innovative services such as Information Literacy, Family Literacy and Internet Services to become informed citizens able to participate meaningfully in democracy.

- Form partnerships with local community organisations, private sector allies and local government structures to undertake joint community development projects. The problems we face are too complex to do it on our own. We need policy and dialogue forums where communities and Library and Information Service (LIS) professionals can jointly help to influence policy. Government has shown that it has severe capacity constraints and that partnerships are needed to address problems.

- Work with the local publishing industry to build a strong industry as it forms part of the whole ethos of promoting books, reading and literacy and nurturing a culture of reading for the future. Both public libraries and publishers play an important role in the distribution of knowledge.

CONCLUSION

The social context within which library and information services currently function is being affected by recent constitutional changes. The legacies of past policies remain and are likely to persist in the medium term.

Education and Health are getting the greatest slice of the budget and associated support sectors in the public sector such as libraries are not included or overlooked. Outsourcing and privatisation of services are underway and the trend is that services worthy of local government support, are those determined by economic viability and delivery capacity. The lesson is that support accrues to those who sustain their customers. Libraries will have to be relevant to users' needs and contribute to the users' power.

Information will continue to occupy the minds of academics, philosophers, politicians, entrepreneurs, professionals and the public for some time to come. Epistemic games should become more than just games. Research outputs should be communicated to the communities from whom the research data were collected. Communities are suffering from research fatigue and are demanding that the research results should be applied to

make a difference to the lives of ordinary citizens. Research for research's sake to enrich the curriculum vitaes of academics that bears no relevance to the problems of life and with no concomitant change should cease. These research findings should form the dynamics for building a better society.

If all consumers of information will come to realise the value and place of information in their daily lives, then it follows that an informed citizenry will be the result. The realisation of rights can only come through public participation in processes of monitoring human rights and in decision-making processes in government and policy-making institutions.

It is my desire that the political democracy (the electorate and the elected) and the participants of epistemic games will continue the journey to equality and further freedom through open, honest, informed and joint debates.

REFERENCES

Blom, A. 1991. Information: a critical success factor for the organization of tomorrow. *South African Journal of Library and Information Science.* 59(4): 251-255.

Boon, J.A. 1987. Inligting, 'n ontbeerlike hulpbron vir lede van die wetgewende gesag. *South African Journal of Library and Information Science.* 55(2): 106-111.

Boon, J.A. 1992. Information and development: Towards an understanding of the relationship. *South African Journal of Library and Information Science.* 60(2): 63-74.

Craig, A.P. 1999, Knowledge and democracy. *South African Journal of Higher Education.* 13(1): 18-30.

Dick, A.L. 1996. Prospects for public information services in the New South Africa: Two scenarios. *South African Journal of Library an Information Science.* 64(3): 134-139.

Dick, A.L. 2002 *The philosophy, politics and economics of information.* Pretoria: UNISA.

Erasmus, Esme, 2004 Plan met biblioteke lê doodstil. *Tygerburger.* 15 Julie: 2.

Fredericks, G.H. & Mvunelo, Z. 2003. Publication of books in indigenous South African languages and their availability and use in public libraries. *South African Journal of Libraries and Information Science.* 69(2): 133-139.

Hart, G. 1999. Ready for the information society? a study of Cape Town's children's librarians. *The New Review of Children's Literature and Librarianship.* 5 :169-188.

Jackson, G.S. 1997. *Outside insights: Quotations for contemporary South Africa.* Cape Town: Human & Rousseau.

Jogiat, R. et al. 2003. *Partnerships for basic infrastructure maintenance and environmental management in Msunduzi: A model top replicate.* Unpublished paper delivered at Municipal Engineers Conference (2003).

Karelse, C-M. & Nassimbeni, M.C. 1997. Some aspects of the sociology of information: A framework for analysis of information in the provision in the resource center sector of *South Africa. South African Journal of library and Information Science.* 65(1): 31-39.

Landsberg, C. 2004. South Africa 1994 - 2004: *Democratic, yet unequal and impoverished?* Unpublished paper. (CTPA Annual Conference : 2004 July 5 - 8: Graaff-Reinet).

Mc Naught, S. & Bowden, J. 1994. Bookselling in South Africa: Comments from a bookseller's perspective. *Innovation.* No. 8, June:16-23.

Mouton, J. 1996. *Understanding social research.* Pretoria: Van Schaik Academic.

Nyerere, J. 1974. *Man and development.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Olën, S. I. 1993. Utilization and perceptions of the school media center. *South African Journal of Library and Information Science.* 61(1): 35-42.

Pansegrouw, J.G. 1984. Die objektiewe bestaan van inligting. *South African Journal of Library and Information Science.* 52(4): 113-117.

Smith, J.G. 1997. Effect of the work environment on the communication of information in science. *South African Journal of Library and Information Science.* 65(1): 13-25.

Swanepoel, A.J. & Boon, J.A. 1989. Inligting as ekonomiese hulpbron: Enkele navorsingstemas. *South African Journal of Library and Information Science.* 57(3): 229-239.

Tise, E. 2000. The role of libraries in socio-economic development and the need for information literacy. *Meta-info Bulletin.* 9(2): 55-61.

Witbooi, S.L. 2001. The educational role of the public library: Kuils River as case study. M. Bibl. thesis, University of the Western Cape.

Witbooi, S.L. 1995. Neo-literates as information users: Problem or challenge? *South African Journal of Library and Information Science* 63(1): 19-23.