National library in the 21st century – dinosaur or dynamo

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This article explores the future of national libraries in a time when rapid developments in information and communication technologies, far-reaching political and social changes in many countries, and financial constraints give rise to questions about their survival. Important current trends are identified on the basis of a number of authoritative literature reviews and the author's own experience. These trends are dealt with under the headings: Legislation, Management, Finance, Buildings, Information technology, Functions, and Clients, products and services. In the light of the planned amalgamation of South Africa's two national libraries, the South African Library and the State Library, to form the National Library of South Africa (NLSA), South African perspectives on challenges and opportunities facing the national library are discussed, and strategic directions for the future positioning and role of the NLSA are proposed.

Die artikel verken die toekoms van nasionale biblioteke in 'n tydvak waarin daar as gevolg van snelle ontwikkeling in die inligtings- en kommunikasietegnologieë, verreikende politieke en maatskaplike veranderinge in baie lande, en finansiële beperkinge, vrae ontstaan oor die oorlewing van nasionale biblioteke. Op die basis van 'n aantal gesaghebbende literatuuroorsigte en die outeur se eie ervaring, word belangrike huidige tendense geïdentifiseer. Die tendense word behandel onder die opskrifte Wetgewing, Bestuur, Finansies, Geboue, Inligtingstegnologie, Funksies, en Kliënte, produkte en dienste. In die lig van die beplande samesmelting van Suid-Afrika se twee nasionale biblioteke, die Suid-Afrikaanse Biblioteek en die Staatsbiblioteek, om die Nasionale Biblioteek van Suid-Afrika (NBSA) te vorm, word Suid-Afrikaanse perspektiewe op uitdagings en geleenthede vir die nasionale biblioteek bespreek, en word daar strategiese rigtings vir die toekomstige posisionering en rol van die NBSA voorgestel.

A recent issue of the journal *Ariadne* carried an article by Maurice Line (1998), entitled 'What do national libraries do in the age of the Internet?' In it, he recalled that in 1989 he had written that

> 'there was nothing that national libraries did that could not be done in some other way or by some other body or bodies, and was not so done in one or another country. This is true of even the most basic library functions ... The big question was whether the most cost-effective way of performing national functions was by the national library'.

Almost ten years later, Line observed that:

> 'Since then many national libraries have grown weaker simply because governments have cut their funds: they have improved their efficiency, but that has not enabled them to maintain their former acquisitions programmes or services'.

In addition, factors other than declining funding are threatening the relevance and viability of national libraries. The Internet poses a threat to the national library's task of comprehensively collecting the national published output. New forms of publication proliferate on the World-Wide Web (WWW). Globalisation blurs the origins of these materials and casts doubts on the need for national bibliographies. Is it still necessary for national libraries to assemble collections that are representative of the world's output if required items can be supplied in the form of digitised text?

What, indeed, will national libraries do in the age of electronic publishing, digitised documents, and the World-Wide Web? What will national libraries do if their government funding continues to decline while the predatory private sector pounces on such profit-making products and services as the national libraries have been able to develop to supplement their income? And if national libraries in developed countries face such a bleak future, is there any future for national libraries in developing countries, and specifically in South Africa? Will national libraries go the way of the dinosaurs, or is there life in them yet?

This article does not propose to provide the definitive answer to these questions. Rather, it is intended to provide some international perspectives on these questions, before exploring the future of the national library in South Africa.

Current international trends in national libraries

The following overview of current international trends in national libraries is based on three main sources: the six most recent annual literature reviews of 'national libraries around the world' in *Alexandria* (De Beer & Hendrikz 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996; De Beer 1997, 1998), the anthology *National libraries 3*, by Maurice and Joyce Line (*National* 1995), and the discussions at the meetings of the Conference of Directors of National Libraries (CDNL) since 1992. Based on coverage in the above literature, the following major themes have been identified: Legislation, Management, Finance, Buildings, Information technology, Functions, and Clients, products and services. Since the intention is to provide a broad overview of trends, in this section specific topics are not referenced.

Legislation

National library legislation (that is legislation establishing and regulating a country's national library as distinct from national legislation on libraries) has received attention in a

number of developing countries and in some newly independent East European countries, where there have been radical changes in the political and social environment (Wainwright & Bátonyi 1996:24–25). In response to needs expressed at the IFLA/UNESCO Pre-session Seminar on the Role and Objectives of National Libraries in the New Information Environment, which was held in Moscow in August 1991, UNESCO last year published *Guidelines for legislation for national library services* (Lor 1997).

Legislation in respect of legal deposit is as crucial to national libraries as the national library's legislation itself. Currently the emphasis is extending the coverage of legal deposit legislation to audiovisual, electronic and broadcast media. A national library which collects only printed documents will be collecting a steadily decreasing proportion of the national published output. All three types of 'newer' media pose problems, but legal deposit of electronic media is the most problematic area. The problems relate firstly to the legislation itself – how to accurately define the publications to be deposited. Secondly, the problems relate to dealing with the media covered by the legislation: accessioning, cataloguing, storage, preservation, availability to users, copyright, and other aspects. Norway took the lead in enacting new legislation to extend legal deposit to the full range of media (Rugaas 1990). This served as a model for the new South African *Legal Deposit Act, 1997.*

Management

Management reviews and reorganisations have taken place in national libraries in various countries. Among the predisposing factors are political, social and economic changes in the country concerned, governmental reorganisation and rationalisation programmes, budgetary constraints, and an awareness within the library itself of the need to adapt with the changing times. Outside consultants have been involved in many of these exercises.

Many national libraries are in a process of rethinking their role and functions in the light of opportunities and threats presented by new information technology, political and social change, and economic constraints. This has led to formal strategic planning. Initially such planning focussed on 'hard' issues such as functional efficiency, products and services. The trend is now to take the 'softer' issues of organisational values and culture into account as well.

Finance

Financial constraints affect all national libraries. The situation of national libraries in developing countries is sometimes quite desperate. Even to a relatively well-funded western national library budget cuts can pose very real problems. Responses to financial constraints include reorganisations to rationalise activities, staff reductions, reduced opening hours, suspension or termination of certain products, services and functions, and the imposition of user fees of various sorts. User fees, especially those levied in respect of basic services,

can be an emotional issue. However, some degree of cost recovery is now an accepted principle, and a national library needs to have a clear policy on which level of cost recovery should apply to its products and services: should a product be fully subsidised or partly subsidised, should its full cost be recovered from clients, or should it be profit-making?

It is not easy to recover costs or make a profit on library services. In some countries the income generated by the national library does not accrue to the library. In other countries profitable products and services attract the attention of private sector companies which complain about unfair competition and demand that the activity be taken away from the national library and privatised.

Buildings

According to the literature consulted, national libraries in at least 23 countries have reported major building projects (entirely new buildings or substantial renovations and extensions) since 1990. The two best-known projects are those of the British Library and the Bibliothèque nationale de France. The new London premises of the British Library at St. Pancras, ceremonially opened in June 1998 by Queen Elizabeth, constitute the largest public building erected in Britain this century. All this building activity seems to give the lie to the notion that national libraries are obsolete and will be replaced by virtual electronic libraries – or does it? Some might counter that an institution only obtains a headquarter befitting its stature when it is already in decline.

Significantly, the new national library buildings have led to much rethinking of national library functions, clients and services. They have underlined the interrelatedness of physical space, function and information technology in a modern library.

Information technology

Information technology is a major and pervasive theme in the literature of national libraries. High speed computer processing of bibliographic and other data, online technology and network systems and optical storage technology, such as CD-ROM, are now taken for granted, at least in developed countries. The new factors that have impacted on national libraries in this decade are digitisation, electronic publishing and the Internet.

Electronic publications

Digital materials, whether they be text, images or sound, can be compactly stored, readily transmitted over computer networks, and conveniently consulted and manipulated by users. Broadly speaking there are two routes by which documents become available in digital form: either they are created using digital systems or they are converted from analogue (for example print) to digital form. The former route is that of electronic publishing; the latter is that of digitisation.

Electronic publishing can mean:

a. the use of electronic systems in publishing,

b. simultaneous publication of electronic and printed versions of the same documents, or

c. the publication of the electronic versions only.

Currently (a) and (b) are more common than (c). The latter appears to pose the most acute problem for national libraries, for if the library is not able to collect, record and preserve the electronic text, chances are that it will sooner or later be lost to posterity. Much has been written about the problems of collecting, recording, preserving and making available electronic materials, *inter alia* in the context of legal deposit of electronic materials referred to above.

Digitisation

Many digitisation projects by national libraries have been reported in the literature. What is the rationale for the massive digitisation projects, and for the hundreds of smaller projects, being undertaken by national libraries in various countries? The answer lies in the phrase 'preservation *and* access'. In the not too distant past, preservation and access were antithetical. To preserve the national documentary heritage, the librarian had to keep it away from users, repeated handling by whom would eventually destroy it. Access was inevitably provided at the expense of preservation. At this stage digitisation is by no means a secure means of long-term preservation, but the advantage of digitisation is that the digitised document serves as a high quality substitute for the original, so that the original is handled less.

More importantly, digitisation makes possible rapid and inexpensive access to the documents by anyone who has access to the Internet. This enables the national library to reach out to citizens throughout the country as well as to foreign users throughout the world. 'Preservation *and* access' means having one's cake *and* eating it. This opens up new perspectives for national libraries. Specifically, it makes possible a new synthesis: the national library as provider of national heritage content on the Internet can be at the same time a national cultural institution and an agency preparing the population for the coming information society by promoting information awareness and information literacy among the general population.

Internet

Mentioned casually in the early 1990s, by 1995–1996 the Internet had become a hot topic in the literature of national libraries. National libraries started by developing WWW pages to advertise themselves and promote their products and services. This beginning was soon followed by the provision of access to databases. Typically the national library's OPAC is made accessible via the Internet so that any interested person can consult it. National libraries are now moving beyond the provision of bibliographic data to Internet-based reference and information services and to the provision of document content.

Theoretically electronic publishing on the Internet poses a threat to libraries in that publishers can disseminate their products directly to Internet users without the need for intermediaries. This is still a remote prospect. Only a fraction of the world's output of scientific and scholarly documents is currently published electronically. Furthermore, it is premature to assume that end-users will be able or willing to forfeit the value added by the information organising activities of libraries.

National libraries in many countries are responding to the advent of electronic publishing, digitisation and the Internet by becoming involved in a great variety of pilot projects. In this manner they can gain experience and explore the possibilities the new information technology offers them to expand their activities and reach out virtually to clients who are unlikely ever to present themselves at the admissions desk of their national library. The key to survival in the Internet environment will be investment in the national library's information technology capacity. However, the investment must be accompanied by strategic planning that takes into account the expected convergence of acquisitions, bibliographic control, document supply and preservation functions.

Functions

Three functional areas receive a good deal of attention in the literature of national libraries: collections management, bibliographic control and preservation. Only some key issues can be touched on here.

Collections management

There continues to be a large number of articles describing the history, origins and size of the collections of individual national libraries, with emphasis on special collections and how they are organised, and on the treasures contained in them. Problems of particular types of material, including audiovisual and electronic materials, are addressed in several of these contributions.

An important thread in many of the discussions is the role of the national library in the management of the national book-stock in the context of declining financial resources and the need experienced by the country's other libraries to rationalise collection building policies. Seeing its collections in the context of a distributed national collection has implications for the national library's own collection building policy. A narrower focus is inevitable and is in evidence in various countries.

Bibliographic control

Bibliographic control continues to be seen as a core national library function and receives more attention than any other. Information technology has made possible significant advances in several areas, while posing new challenges in others (for example metadata and the bibliographic description of Internet-based documents). Possibly as a response to the growing complexity of the field, one notes an

increase in co-operative projects, especially in Europe, where the Telematics in Libraries Programme has supported a number of research and development projects which have put European national libraries at the forefront in this field (compare Ede 1996).

Preservation

There is extensive coverage of this topic in the literature of national libraries. In articles on individual national libraries, the state of collections is frequently mentioned and often the adverse effects of neglect, inappropriate treatment and storage, and various disasters that have befallen the collections over the years, are described. Among the major preservation themes dealt with in the literature are mass deacidification; decelerated ageing in special storage conditions; preservation of special categories of materials – especially long-term preservation of and access to digital resources; and co-operation, including co-operative projects to survey the state of collections and draw up registers of national resources.

Contrary to popular belief, modern information technology does not solve library preservation problems at the touch of a button. Archival quality microfilm is still the preferred preservation medium (compare Renoult 1996). At present, digitisation compounds the problem in that the preservation of digitised documents presents many new problems. It is clear that preservation of a nation's documentary heritage will long remain a huge and complex problem, and that national libraries have a key role to play in addressing it.

Clients, products and services

Who are the clients of the national library? There are signs that the rethinking of the nature and role of the national library has also led to some reflection on this topic. The development of scholarly electronic workstations implies that scholarly users remain an important client group, but the division of the new Bibliothèque nationale de France into two main reading rooms, one for scholars and one for the general public, is an indication that national libraries are taking a greater interest in their non-scholarly clients. There may also be some societal pressures for more liberal admissions policies, while national libraries are also feeling the pressure of governmental campaigns to improve quality of service delivery in the public sector.

It is disturbing to note that little has appeared in the recent literature of national libraries that is explicitly concerned with marketing or promotion, although the topic has been touched on in other contexts, for example, exhibitions and web sites. 'Public relations and marketing efforts of national libraries' has been on the agenda of the CDNL for several years, but apart from a reaffirmation of the importance of marketing, little that is tangible has emerged from the discussions so far.

Future of the national library in developed countries

The general picture which emerges from the literature is that national libraries are still very much concerned with the traditional activities relating to the collection and care of the national documentary heritage. But at the same time they are having to meet challenges in two main areas: in the 'softer' area of complex and often unpredictable political and socio-economic change perhaps the only certainty is that funding will contract. In the area of information technology the certainties are that both the pace of development and the cost of keeping at the cutting edge will continue to increase, and that new competitors will arise. Are national libraries succeeding in meeting these challenges?

Although in the late 1980s and early 1990s doubts were expressed about the continued need for national libraries, the tone of the literature consulted is mainly upbeat. In spite of budgetary constraints and threats of competition and irrelevance, there seems to be a good deal of energy and enthusiasm in national library circles. At present one might speak of a national library renaissance in many countries, at least in terms of relevance and visibility of the national library in the life of the nation.

One of the purveyors of this optimism is the Director of Denmark's Royal Library, Erland Kolding Nielsen (1997), who has responded to Line's questioning of the role of national libraries by referring to the large number of current national library building projects as evidence that countries are investing in their national libraries. He concluded that:

'the National Libraries are no longer in a state of crisis, but on the way to achieving new significance in many places, as a result of changed priorities and a reassessment of tasks as well as the assignment of new duties' (1997:18).

Nielsen suggested that in the recent past possibly too much emphasis had been placed on the national library as a research library. Instead, in Denmark it had been concluded that the national library was not merely an information source, but had to be something more. This means opening the national library's collections for increased access by the public, not only for scholarly use, but as a cultural *experience*. This new cultural concept of the national library requires that it should take a central place in the cultural life of the country. The national library has a cultural obligation to aim services at the people in general. Therefore the national library should be both an information centre and a cultural museum.

So, do national libraries have a future? If the spate of new buildings – and their scale – is anything to go by, we must record a vote of confidence in the future of national libraries. A somewhat more cautious note is struck by Wainwright and Bátonyi (1996:52):

'In a few years time, when we evaluate and analyse the operation of these massive libraries, when they are full of documents, terminals and users, will we be able to say that at the end of the 20th century they represent the realization of a new concept in the history of national libraries, with their electronic

databases incorporating the latest in modern technology, their services, and their openness to the public, or will they represent the last of the monumental structures of national cultural policy dreams?'

In this author's view, at least in the developed countries, national libraries will remain relevant and will survive. In the article cited at the beginning of this article, Line (1998:7) suggests that there is not much point in setting up conventional libraries in countries which do not yet have them, but he concedes that those national libraries that already exist, will survive, if only for reasons of national pride:

> 'National pride is not always a good thing; some terrible things have been done in its name. But national libraries are at worst harmless, and at best major contributions to civilisation: a good national library is a legitimate source of national pride'.

National library in South Africa

The literature consulted did not have much to say about national libraries in developing countries, and very little about the poorer developing countries. Most of the literature is contributed by national libraries in developed countries or middle to upper-ranking developing countries.

Current situation of South Africa's national libraries

For historical reasons South Africa currently has two national libraries, the South African Library, founded in 1818, in Cape Town, and the State Library, founded in 1887, in Pretoria. Both are statutory institutions in terms of the National Libraries Act, 1985 (Act no. 56 of 1985). Each is governed by a board appointed by the Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology. The two libraries theoretically enjoy a considerable degree of autonomy, but since they receive most of their funding from the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology (DACST), their freedom of action is in practice limited.

In recent years both national libraries have been subjected to severe budgetary constraints. They can barely afford to purchase books and journals. They receive South African publications under legal deposit and foreign materials in terms of certain international depository agreements. Apart from this, their acquisition of foreign publications has been reduced to a trickle. Many staff positions have been frozen and various projects have been mothballed or terminated. Most alarmingly, in a time of rapid developments in information technology and the information market-place, their enforced down-sizing has critically reduced their capacity for innovation and leadership.

Time of opportunities and threats

Ironically, this is happening in a time of unprecedented opportunities and threats. The following are some of the current phenomena, movements and trends which present opportunities for South Africa's national libraries:

– Renewed interest in South Africa's multilingual and multicultural heritage and the role of heritage in nation-building.
– Emphasis in government policy on the coming of the 'information society''', and an awareness of the need to invest in information and communications technology.
– Interest displayed by various government agencies interested in community information services.
– The advent of regional higher education library consortia.
– The 'National Virtual Library' initiative.
– The 'African Renaissance': surely a renaissance implies a role for libraries?
– A political climate favourable to change and transformation.
– Interest shown by foreign aid agencies and donors in library programmes in South Africa.
– New legal deposit legislation, which extends legal deposit to all media, including audio-visual, broadcast and electronic media, and which provides for the establishment of official publications depositories inspired by the system of federal documents depositories in the United States.
– New information technology (IT) which makes possible a synthesis of preservation and access.
– Realignments in the library and information market-place.

On the other hand, there are various current phenomena which could conceivably be considered as constituting threats to the national libraries:

– Difficult economic circumstances and the weak South African currency.
– A general trend to cut public spending.
– Stagnation in the conventional library market.
– The growing gap between information-rich and information-poor.
– Dilatory official decision making.
– Fragmentation of policy formulation and decision making in respect of library and information services.
– Decision makers seduced by information technology, neglecting information content and the mediation of information transfer to users.
– Decline of library and information services in many sectors and many parts of South Africa (compare Lor 1998) – these are the main clients of the national library.

The same phenomenon can present both a threat and an opportunity. The emergence of the consortia is one of them. For those unwilling or unable to seize the opportunities offered by consortia, the gap between information 'haves' and 'have-nots' will widen. Often a missed opportunity re-emerges as a threat. The challenge to the national libraries is to respond to the rapid changes taking place in their environment, in such a way that they will be visibly relevant to what is happening in it, without losing sight of their essential long-term responsibilities for the national documentary heritage.

Creation of the National Library of South Africa

In 1996 the Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Techno-logy appointed a Working Group on the National Libraries of South Africa to advise him on the future of the two national libraries. The most important recommendation of the Working Group is that the two national libraries be amal-gamated to form a dual site national library, to be known as the National Library of South Africa (NLSA). It is proposed that the new institution will be controlled by a single Board and headed by a single chief executive, who will be supported by a small headquarters staff. The NLSA will function on two sites, at the premises of the existing national libraries in Cape Town and Pretoria (Working Group on the National Libraries 1997).

The creation of the NLSA is not intended merely as a tidying up of existing institutions. Instead, it is intended to effect a transformation which will align the new institution with the goals of the new democracy. As part of this process, the functions of the two existing libraries will be rationalised to eliminate unnecessary duplication of activity. The func-tions will also be modernised, refocussed and, if resources permit, expanded to satisfy currently unsatisfied needs identi-fied by the Working Group. The Working Group has identi-fied a shared information technology infrastructure as an essential factor in the successful integration of the two existing institutions.

DACST has already drafted legislation to give effect to the proposed amalgamation. Clause 3 of the latest version of the National Library of South Africa Bill (W106–98) sets out the mission of the new institution:

The objects of the National Library are to contribute to socio-economic, cultural, educational, scientific and inno-vative development by collecting, recording, preserving and making available the national documentary heritage and promoting an awareness and appreciation thereof, by foster-ing information literacy, and by facilitating access to the world's information resources.

The functions of the National Library are set out in clause 4(1). This is an improvement on the statement of functions in the present Act and serves as an adequate statement of the functions of a modern national library. It is noteworthy that the Bill adds two functions that do not occur in the present Act:

f. to promote awareness and appreciation of the national published documentary heritage; and

g. to promote information awareness and information literacy.

The two newly formulated functions are significant to the future positioning of the NLSA.

The Bill has been submitted to Parliament. At the time of writing it seemed likely that it would be passed before the end of 1998 and that the new institution would be constituted in the course of the financial year 1999/2000, possibly being launched as part of the millennium celebrations.

Strategic directions for the National Library of South Africa

The creation of the National Library of South Africa makes possible a renaissance of the national library in South Africa. The opportunities presented to this new institution must be seized, but opportunistic actions will not yield long-term benefits. The NLSA must be faithful to its mission. Within the framework of its mission it must identify the strategic directions it should adopt to play a meaningful role in its rapidly changing environment. It must take into account the key developments in this environment, for example:

– The emergence of the tertiary consortia.
– The changing role of SABINET.
– The repercussions of these developments for the national systems for resource sharing and bibliographic control.
– Telkom's promise of widespread, affordable Internet access for all.
– The promise of widespread digitisation and electronic document supply.
– The advent of the National Virtual Library (whether in the form currently under discussion or in another guise).

Furthermore, in choosing its strategic directions, the NLSA must demonstrate its relevance to national developmental goals and to the priorities of its funding department, DACST. Three national and departmental priorities come to mind immediately:

– The need for nation-building and the role of national heritage institutions in this.
– The need to prepare the nation for the coming information society.
– The need to redress inequalities in access to resources.

In this context Nielsen's above-mentioned views on the cultural role of the national library are very relevant. In South Africa, it can be argued, the national library should serve specifically as an instrument for nation-building. It should be an agency promoting an appreciation of the country's varied cultures and traditions as well as its shared experience as a nation. However in the case of South Africa the present author would expand Nielsen's vision in seeking a synthesis of this cultural role with a second one: that of promoting in-formation awareness and information literacy among the broad population. A national library playing this dual role promotes the development of the information society by serving as a supplier of the information content that is to flow through the nation's promised telecommunication pipes and channels. Digitised documentary heritage materials dis-seminated through the telecommunication infrastructure are both message (information content) and medium (a means of raising awareness of the coming information society). The in-formation and telecommunication system too is both medium (as carrier of the heritage materials) and message (in that in-formation awareness is created and information skills are in-culcated).

In the light of the foregoing it is suggested that the following strategic directions should be considered for the NLSA:

a. The NLSA should promote nation-building by providing access to the national published documentary heritage which celebrates the cultural and linguistic diversity of our people while promoting an appreciation of our shared heritage and values. Few institutions have greater potential than the National Library to *hold up a mirror to the nation* to help the nation to better understand itself and its place in the world – where it comes from and where it is going.

b. The NLSA should *exploit the synergy of preservation and access* that is made possible by state-of-the-art information technology (IT): (i) As custodian of the national published documentary heritage the NLSA should employ IT to protect and preserve its collections. (ii) At the same time, the NLSA should exploit IT to provide access to the national heritage, for example by making digitised heritage materials available on the WWW and on CD-ROMs.

c. The NLSA should serve the people of South Africa by *providing a bridge from the past to the future*. In utilising modern information technology (IT) to provide access to the national published documentary heritage (the record of our past), it will at the same time be a key agency promoting the 21st Century information society in South Africa (looking forward to the future). This would be in line with the two new statutory functions referred to above as well as with the dual responsibilities and thrusts of DACST: arts and culture (heritage), and science and technology (information technology, information society, innovation).

d. The NLSA should *ensure equitable access to Southern African information resources* in a balanced national and regional system. This implies access by information-poor as well as information-rich individuals and institutions, in South Africa and other SADC countries. It also implies that the national library will further develop its role as a gateway through which clients of libraries serving less affluent communities and institutions can gain access to the resources of the more affluent (for example tertiary consortia). To do this, the NLSA must establish inter-operability between its IT systems and those of other players in the LIS sector, and develop services to reach out to the unserved and poorly served. It also suggests a realignment of the NLSA with libraries outside the tertiary education sector such as the provincial library services, the other legal deposit libraries, official publications depositories, the public and school library sectors. This does not mean breaking the existing relationships with the tertiary libraries, but rather exploiting these relationships to serve as a gateway to academic library resources.

Implications of the strategic directions

The above strategic directions would have far-reaching implications for the NLSA in terms of areas such as staffing, collections, information technology, and the rationalisation of activities carried out on the two sites. As part of the amalgamation process much thought would have to be given to the programmes and projects required by the strategic directions. This will have to be done in consultation with their clients and other interested parties.

However, assuming an environment in which an advanced information and communication infrastructure extends Internet connectivity to most if not all of our schools and libraries and in which interoperability is established between all major consortia and networks, constituting, in effect, a national virtual library, the following roles for the NLSA should be considered:

– Provider of content
– Creator of bibliographic databases
– Creator of Internet access tools
– Facilitator of document supply
– Centre for the storage and availability of little-used print materials
– Archive of electronic publications
– Co-ordinator of access to the distributed national collection
– National reference help-desk
– Leadership, training, research and development
– Outreach to SADC and other African countries

Access to information technology is a prerequisite for all that has been sketched. A fully integrated dual-campus national library is not feasible without a sophisticated information technology infrastructure. The NLSA requires a comprehensive strategy for the development of an information systems and technology capacity appropriate to its role as a modern national library. The strategy would not only have to create a shared working environment and promote the unification of two old-established institutions, it would also have to ensure connectivity to the national, regional and international library and information services environment, with particular reference to links with SABINET and other service providers, the other legal deposit libraries and official publications depositories (OPDs), the academic library consortia, and foreign document suppliers. It must take into account needs relating to the electronic delivery of digitised documents (for example using Ariel), electronic publishing, WWW-based services by the NLSA, prospects for the virtual library and the 'global digital library' and the participation of the NLSA in such projects, nationally and internationally. Clearly, a significant investment in IT is required to make a dynamic NLSA possible.

Conclusion

The imminent unification of the two national libraries to form the NLSA could not have come at a more crucial time. In a worst case scenario, if the NLSA were to lack the human and technological resources to play the national role suggested above, it would become increasingly marginalised and with it many libraries serving less affluent institutions and communities would be the poorer. However, if the opportunity for renewal and transformation is seized, an optimal scenario is

possible in which the new institution will be able to ensure equitable access to South African resources in a balanced national and regional system, thereby enhancing the capacity of all the players, great and small. To change the metaphor, such a national library will serve as a dynamo for national development in the 21st century.

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