Chapter 7

Use of Public Programming Strategies in Promoting Access to Documentary Heritage at Zimbabwe National Archives

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ABSTRACT

Archival institutions have a potential to transform the socioeconomic and political development of a people. It is therefore critical for them to be visible and accessible. To this effect, public programming emerges as a critical archival function performed by archivists to enhance the visibility and utilisation of archives. Through a grounded theory research approach, this study established that the National Archives of Zimbabwe (NAZ) performs a plethora of public programming activities to improve the visibility of the institution in the public domain. The potential of public programming activities to improve the utilisation of the archives at NAZ was found wanting as the institution lacked a planned schedule of outreach activities. This explains why visits to the research room were dwindling, hence the need for archivists to be proactive in reaching out to the people. The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate public programming as the cornerstone to achieving better recognition and subsequent use of documentary heritage.

INTRODUCTION

Access and use is the goal of all archival institutions. The fact that archives are managed in order to be used has created a greater interest in public programming (Ngulube, Ngoepe, Saurombe, & Chaterera, 2017, p. 74). The ability of an archival institution to provide access and use of its holdings gives it meaning and relevance to society. The availability of archives for use provides people with a platform to exercise their rights, thereby promoting accountability, transparency and good governance (Mnjama, DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-7429-3.ch007

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2008; Murambiwa & Ngulube, 2011). Government information is an important resource for the nature of a country’s society, the debates and decisions that influence its social and economic policies and the development of political priorities for the citizenry (Smart, 2011, p. 1). However, despite the certainty of archival institutions’ need to provide access to their collections, many national archives are still unable to grant access to public records and archives (Mazikana, 1999). This is because archivists tend to privilege preservation above access, making this a contentious issue (Hicks, 2005). To this effect, this chapter argues for the need by national archival institutions to increase the consumption of their products and services through various programmes and activities that will make known their collections to the public (Mason, 2011; Kamatula, 2011; Ngoepe & Ngulube, 2011; Onyancha, Mokwato, & Mnkeni-Saurombe, 2013; Mnkeni-Saurombe & Ngulube, 2016). As such, the objectives of this chapter are to

- Demonstrate public programming and outreach as drivers for improved access
- Find out which public programming activities the National Archives of Zimbabwe has employed to educate people about its existence, services, and documentary resources in their custody
- Establish how public perception influences people’s decisions to visit the archives
- Ascertain the use of digital technologies and the print media as public programming devices

Research Problem and Questions

Providing access to and use of the archives by members of the public is the chief reason for NAZ’s existence, yet this assignment has remained unfulfilled for a long time (Mazikana, 1999; Mutiti, 1999; Murambiwa & Ngulube, 2011). The utilisation of public archival material held at NAZ is relatively low. This is due to a lack of vibrant public programming endeavours, backlogs of unprocessed archives, reading room fees, opening hours, size of the reading rooms, and dysfunctional equipment (Murambiwa & Ngulube, 2011, p. 92). Chaterera (2015, p. 24) adds the inadequate use of Web 2.0 technologies to increase the awareness and subsequent access and use of the archives to the list of reasons for low public utilisation. While all the identified challenges are critical towards the improved utilisation of documentary heritage at NAZ, this chapter particularly focuses on public programming issues since the other matters have been dealt with and disseminated elsewhere. As such, this chapter primarily sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What public programming and outreach strategies has NAZ employed to reach out to society?
2. How often are outreach activities done?
3. Is there a prescribed schedule for outreach programmes?
4. Does NAZ have a budget specifically set aside for public programming activities?
5. Is there a specific section, unit or office that handles public programming issues?
6. What kind of audience does NAZ mainly target?
7. What is the public’s perception of NAZ?
   a. Are people aware of the existence of NAZ?
   b. Do they know what its functions are?
   c. Do members of the public regard NAZ as an information resource centre?
8. Does NAZ use the print media and digital technologies to enhance its visibility?