Users' perceptions of services at the National Archives and Records Service of South Africa (NARSSA)

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Abstract

The National Archives and Records Service of South Africa is the central archival repository in the Republic of South Africa. Currently, the services offered by the Archives are underutilised and this is evident from the dwindling number of users that come to do research at the Archives. For the purpose of this article, the researchers investigated the reasons behind the decrease in users and, in order to ensure that the archival services remain relevant, proposed possible interventions aimed at improving the use of the Archives. A qualitative research method and case study research design were applied. Six experienced users were chosen using purposive sampling. The investigation revealed a list of factors that could be deterrents to visitors to the Archives and suggested possible solutions that could assist in improving the services offered. Overall, the study recommends a need to review strategies on the recruitment and selection of staff, staff retention, conservation and marketing in order to remain relevant in the Information Age.

Introduction and background

Archives can be described as a gift from one generation to another (Nesmith 2002: 27). However, research reveals that not many people are consulting archives as sources of information and that the number of archival users is dwindling in the East and Southern African Branch of the International Council of Archives (ESARBICA) region, which includes the National Archives and Records Service of South Africa (NARSSA) (Saurombe and Ngulube 2016). This is a serious concern because an information service justifies its existence through use. It stands to reason that a seldom-used or disused information service is not needed and should, therefore, cease to exist. Saurombe and Ngulube (2016) attribute the decrease in usage to the inability of archival institutions to clearly identify their users' needs and to respond to those needs in a manner that is satisfactory and helpful to the users. Saurombe and Ngulube (2016) further recommend that there is a need for a shift from the rigid archivists' mentality of being more concerned with preservation and conservation to a focus on facilitating access and use.

The NARSSA (together with the National Film, Video and Sound Archives) is mandated to take custody of public records, arrange and describe them, preserve them and make them available to members of the public (Republic of South Africa 1996). These records not only help society to address economic, social and political matters but also contribute to the national heritage of the country. Together with the national and provincial archival services and the audio-visual collections at the National Film, Video and Sound Archives, South Africa's archival heritage spreads from the diaries of Jan van Riebeeck (housed at the Western Cape Archives) to oral history projects with communities in and around South Africa's national game parks. The NARSSA is a state-owned institution that provides free access to historical records of a personal, administrative and legal value to society (National Archives of South Africa website 2019). The NARSSA relies on state funding to operate and justifies its existence through user statistics which demonstrate its value in society by indicating the demand for the services offered. According to the NARSSA Annual Reports (2016, 2017 and 2018) user statistics, as reflected in Table 1 below, have declined year-on-year and there is an urgent need to explore the reasons why the situation is so dire and to identify possible solutions that could be considered to turn the situation around.

Table 1: Number of researchers visiting the NARSSA reading room to conduct research

Years	Number of researchers visiting the NARSSA reading room
2015	3969
2016	3573
2017	3333

(National Archives 2016, 2017 and 2018)

Whilst Saurombe and Ngulube (2016) in their research have focussed on the perspective of the archivists, this study focussed specifically on the experiences encountered by users of the public archival institution. It was hoped that the findings would enable the NARSSA (and, by extension, the provincial archives) to better understand its users' needs, improve its shortcomings and attract more users which, in turn, would help the institution justify its continued existence and ensure its services remain relevant in the 21st century.

Problem statement

The NARSSA has a mandate to preserve South Africa's national heritage experience and to make it available for use by the public (National Archives of South Africa website 2019). In order to achieve this mandate, the archivists need to be equipped to identify and predict instances where archival information can make a difference and proceed to provide access to such information. By doing so, the archivists can ensure that they act not only as keepers and finders of information but also as collaborators (McAvena 2017: 51). The country's public archival institutions find themselves struggling to justify and motivate for the budgets they need to function adequately and the decline in archival users is a serious cause for concern (Saurombe and Ngulube 2016). The aim of this study was to identify the main reasons for the decline in users of the NARSSA and to propose a strategy to assist the institution in attracting more users to utilise the services offered.

Objectives of the study

The study sought to explore the perceptions that users have of the services that are rendered by the NARSSA. Four objectives were identified to underpin the study and these were as follows:

- To explore the perceptions and attitudes of users of the Archives.
- To determine the experiences that influence users' perceptions and attitudes.
- To assess the impact of the services provided on users.
- To identify the possible interventions that could improve users' satisfaction with the services provided.

Purpose of the study

Rhee (2015) suggests that the underutilisation of archival services could be a result of poor service being given to archival users and that this may emanate from the way archivists are orientated. Rhee (2015) contends that archivists have, for a long-time, been trained to focus on the preservation of unique materials. This often results in archivists neglecting the aspect of user service, which leads to a poor overall experience of the archives from the users' perspectives. In light of the challenging economic climate and the decline in user statistics, the national and provincial archival institutions could find themselves struggling to justify their very existence. The purpose of this study was to identify ways that public archivists could prioritise their users as is done by libraries (Rhee 2015: 31). It was hoped that the study would encourage the NARSSA to consider improving its services so as to attract lifelong users and to prolong its existence as a vital oasis of information in an enlightened society.

Extensive research has been conducted into challenges facing the national and provincial archival services by scholars such as Saurombe and Ngulube (2016), Schellnack-Kelly (2016) and Ngoepe (2017). However, little research has been done from the perspectives of archival users. The intention of this study was to address this gap.

In the study, users were the researchers who frequent the reading room to consult physical records and access, online, the website and database of the NARSSA.

Literature review

Rhee (2015) contends that archival institutions and libraries tend to differ in terms of their attitudes towards their users. Rhee (2015) goes on to suggest that archival institutions would do well to be more embracing of users in the way that their library colleagues do. According to Rhee (2015), users of archival institutions are of the opinion that archivists are often preoccupied with the preservation of precious collections and they have little regard for them, the users. This results in users feeling neglected and not valued. Rhee (2015)

further contends that the adverse impact of archival institutions' inability to embrace users may lead to archival institutions losing users. McAvena (2017) identified the challenges that archival users encountered and which need to be addressed. She (McAvena 2017) contended that users, in particular novice users, feel frustrated with the archival systems which are not user-friendly. They resent having to continually request expert advice when using the archival services. More specifically in terms of this study, Ngoepe (2017) highlights other issues of serious concern that negatively shape the experiences of users of the NARSSA. The issues identified by Ngoepe (2017) range from the lack of skills, gaps in archival collections, lack of transformation in reaching out to communities that know very little about the archives, and resource constraints. These are all stumbling blocks that affect service delivery by the NARSSA.

Research approach

Creswell (2013: 43-44) defined qualitative research as "a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. Qualitative research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible." Creswell (2013) further postulates that qualitative research involves the use of field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings and memos to the self. The most important elements of this type of research are that the researcher should study events and institutions in their natural settings and attempt to interpret and make sense of them. Qualitative research aims to gain understanding of a social phenomenon that involves human subjects. This research involved gathering insights from human subjects, namely the archival users, and occurred in a natural setting where the participants experienced the issue or problem under study. The setting was the reading room of the NARSSA. A qualitative approach was followed as the researchers aimed to develop an understanding of human lived experience and did so by relying on first-person accounts obtained through interviews (Gentles, Charles, Ploeg and McKibbon 2015: 1773). Another key characteristic of qualitative research is that it requires that the researcher/s be involved by collecting data through examining documents, observing behaviour and interviewing participants.

Research design

The research design selected by the researchers was the case study. This was motivated by the fact that a real-life, contemporary bound system was explored over a period of time through the use of detailed and in-depth data collection tools (Creswell 2013: 98). A case study can be a group of people. In terms of this study, the group of people comprised archival users (researchers) located in the reading room of the NARSSA.

The hypothesis for the study was that the number of archival users is dwindling due to the failure of the archivists to adequately satisfy users' needs.

Population sampling

The study used a   combination of convenience sampling and purposive sampling.   Purposive sampling is deliberate sampling that is based on the gathering of qualitative data and is focussed on the exploration and interpretation of experiences and perceptions and, as such, is recommended for case studies like this one (Matthews and Ross 2010: 128). Homogenous sampling is an approach of purposive sampling whereby participants all belong to the same group or have the same characteristics, as was the case with the participants in this study. The participants were drawn from users who visited the reading room of the NARSSA to do research utilising archival materials. Regular and experienced users who were acquainted with the reading room were targeted as it was anticipated that they would be able to provide rich and meaningful insights to the questions posed as opposed to new users who visit the archives less frequently. Six users (or researchers) who met the criteria were identified and subsequently participated in the study.

Data collection method

The data collection method was chosen on the premise that it must be effective in seeking and documenting participants' perspectives, feelings, opinions, attitudes and beliefs about the service they receive when visiting the reading room or consulting the online database and website. Thus, as directed by Saldana (2011), in-depth interviewing was employed as the data collection method. In line with in-depth interviewing open questions were used allowing the participants to speak freely from their own perspectives and to use their own frame of mind and meaning when expressing themselves (Edwards and Holland 2013: 30).

Interviews were conducted on a one-on-one basis with each participant until a point of data saturation was reached. As reiterated by Kumar (2011), the interviews were stopped once the interviews did not bring up any new information. As noted above, the interviews were held in a place where the participants experienced the phenomenon under study, namely, the reading room of the NARSSA. According to Creswell (2014), this approach avoids bringing research participants into contrived situations and ensures that the interviews can be conducted in a relaxed and familiar environment.

Use was also made of the reading room suggestions box in order to gauge the experiences of the users. The suggestions box was regarded as a good tool, as it provided archival users with opportunities to provide both positive and negative comments regarding the service they received.

Finally, the interviews were digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed for data analysis purposes. In addition, notes were taken during the interviews.

Research findings

The research findings have been divided into four overarching themes. These themes are the perceptions and attitudes of users; everyday experiences; impact on users; and interventions.

The first theme, the perceptions and attitudes of users, provided the participants with the opportunity to express their honest opinions with regards to the service that they received from the NARSSA.   The participants were of the view that the services rendered to them in the reading room were somewhat sub-standard. Opinion was that the current standard of service rendered to them fared badly compared to that of a decade ago when most of them started coming to the reading room. Participants also perceived that the reading room staff were not adequately competent. In their opinion, the root cause of this problem lay in the high turnover of staff. The participants felt that there was insufficient time for staff to acquaint themselves with the archival collections as well as to develop the ability to resolve complex enquiries, without relying heavily on more experienced staff.

The participants expressed their concern with the frequent recurrence of missing files. They bemoaned having to request records that they had recently accessed, only to be told that the files had gone missing from the shelves, possibly misplaced somewhere in the strong room. One user lamented, "It is disconcerting when I think that the work to trace missing and misplaced records may lose momentum prematurely, especially when one notices that the knowledgeable staff seem poised to retire soon."

In spite of the negative concerns that were raised, several participants expressed their appreciation of how friendly, light-spirited and polite the reading room staff were. During interviews, it was also evident that the users had an understanding attitude in that they recognised that staff were doing their best under difficult circumstances. In addition, the participants were amazed that the institution managed to keep its collections in such pristine condition and were

appreciative of the fact that the Archives was easy to access, as opposed to other government departments which were characterised by red tape.

In the second theme, everyday experiences, the participants were asked to relate their everyday experiences when utilising the reading room. The aim of this was to add context to the discussion as well as provide a front-row view to incidents that have shaped their perceptions and attitudes. The participants thus related incidents that led them to develop negative attitudes towards the services provided by the reading room staff. One participant referred to a well-known and respected professor who had come to do research in the reading room. He was made to wait an hour and a half for archives to be delivered to his table. The professor eventually lost his patience and had a "rant" in full view of staff and other users. A second participant stated that she preferred to send requests the day before in order for the archives to be retrieved prior to arrival. Despite doing this, the participant complained that there had been many instances of her arriving at the reading room only to find that the e-mail had not been attended to – again resulting in a long wait long for the archives to be retrieved. Other participants were extremely concerned that there were archives in the various strong rooms that had not been documented and placed in inventories for access. Many of these undocumented archives relate to issues such as land use and traditional leadership. The participants emphasised the importance of these archives in light of addressing contemporary issues such as land and traditional leadership disputes. A third participant related the experience of having a request for cartographic material denied on the basis of the material's fragile condition and that the map collection was out of bounds to users. This was despite the user being informed that the maps had been sent to a conservation laboratory for repairs in 1997. Another participant complained that the paper-based inventories were not up-to-date. It is evident that these inventories are incomplete and the shelves on which they are arranged are always in disarray. A further complaint was that much of the archives available, as well as the respective finding aids, were only available in Afrikaans. The Archive's collections are as a consequence not easily accessible for users unfamiliar with South Africa's many languages.

The third theme assessed what the impact on users of the Archives would be should services no longer be provided. Saurombe and Ngulube (2016: 30) provided an indication of the elements in society that could be affected when access to archival records to address economic, social and political matters is denied. The NARSSA holds unique archival collections of a cultural, social and religious nature. For example, the Archives has in its holdings one of two authentic copies of the Freedom Charter that has recently been added to the National Estate Register. It would be a tragic loss if such valuable artefacts could no longer be cared for and accessed as a result of the Archives no longer

being operational. It is thus imperative that this eventuality is avoided at all costs. Furthermore, a substantial portion of the collections at the NARSSA comprises archives of a personal nature. These consist of civil, criminal and late estate archives that are used by genealogists to compile family trees and find long-lost family. Many of the users that visit the reading room are researchers commissioned to do work on behalf of other people and organisations. The closure of the reading room would leave them out of work thereby losing their livelihoods. In any democracy, citizens have the right to firmly exercise their rights. The passing and implementation of acts such as the Promotion of Access to Information Act, no. 2 of 2000 (Republic of South Africa 2000), shows just how important this issue is in South Africa. The risk of the reading room being dysfunctional and possibly having its services discontinued would thus infringe on people's constitutional right of having access to information. The information contained in the NARSSA helps people to establish their citizenship, claim property and inherit estates as well as undo past injustices.

The final theme concerned the interventions identified by the participants that should be considered to alleviate the plight of the reading room and help address the low numbers of users visiting the institutions. The interventions were proposed by the participants when being interviewed about the experiences they had encountered. The participants highlighted the critical issue of staff retention, especially in the lower ranks such as the reading room staff. They indicated that they would like to see the reading room staff stay at the institution for at least ten years or more. This would allow the staff adequate time to fully acquaint themselves with the contents and operations of the Archives and help to make a meaningful contribution to their work. One of the participants was of the opinion that instead of focussing on staff retention, the NARSSA should focus on the retention of knowledge. It was suggested by the participant that this could be done during debriefing sessions with experienced staff. The drafting of a thesaurus on the archival collections, the compilation of staff training guides and other knowledge sharing and retention tools were interventions raised by the participants that could also be considered. In this regard participants complained about the standard of the finding aids, which hampered their abilities to find correct references to archives held within the institution. They emphasised that the paper-based inventories were largely incomplete, outdated and that some had gone missing. The online finding aids (NAAIRS and AtoM) were considered as being not user-friendly. As pointed to above, most participants were not familiar with Afrikaans and would like to have the descriptions of the archivalia duplicated in English so that they could assess what the contents of the material may be. Thus, some collections cannot be accessed without the assistance of a linguist and few of the archival staff are

knowledgeable about the languages in which the records exist. Participants also indicated that the archival staff need to give more attention to the conservation of the records. This pertains to the brittle, torn as well as fading pages of some of the records in the valuable collections. The participants were aware of the budget constraints under which the NARSSA was operating and suggested that the institution should look at accessing funds and other resources through public-private partnerships. Participants were also of the opinion that efforts should be made to allow many collections to be made available online. Numerous archival institutions around the world enable researchers to access archival material from their personal computers. The NARSSA has many wonderful archival collections that would receive more attention if they were made available electronically. In addition, there are archival institutions that have active social media pages through which they inform interested persons about collections that are in their custody as well as projects that are being undertaken. Such initiatives should be considered by the NARSSA (and its provincial counterparts) as this would increase the number of users visiting and consulting the various archival collections.

Conclusion and recommendations

The findings and discussion above paint a picture of an institution that is currently plagued by many issues. The NARSSA has to remain functional as its demise will result in the destruction of the country's memory. As pointed to in the introductory paragraph to this article, Saurombe and Ngulube (2016) identified the dwindling number of archival researchers using archival institutions in the ESARBICA region as a serious cause for concern. Judging by the perceptions and attitudes that have been revealed by the users (researchers) who participated in this study, the threat will persist and the NARSSA may become a disused building. However, one of the participants did provide a more positive perspective on the situation at the institution stating that the Archives will forever be in use because there will always be a need for information, especially as we move deeper into the Information Age.

Several recommendations are proposed for the NARSSA to consider. The institution needs to investigate, design and implement a strong knowledge management strategy. Its marketing and outreach strategies need to be overhauled. A strong focus should be on attracting academia because these are the users that do intensive research and are likely to visit the reading room more often. A further recommendation is that the recruitment of staff should be revised. Archivists that work in the reading room should have a comprehensive background in history, as this would be invaluable when assisting users with their enquiries. A recommendation emerging from the participants was that in order to facilitate access, all archival collections that are stored in the strong

rooms should be captured in the finding aids. These finding aids would also assist to dispel the myth that the NARSSA is deliberately hiding records from users and would thereby improve trust and respect amongst the different stakeholders. Archival staff should also have a broad understanding of more South African languages so that they can assist users with the large volume of collections that are not in English. Improved language skills would go a long way in opening up more collections and attracting more users. As suggested by the participants, the NARSSA should consider establishing public-private partnerships as a solution to supporting the many projects that need to be undertaken. It must be noted that the Archives is currently considering this option to source funds for the new building that is required to address the space constraints that have resulted from government departments transferring their records to the archival holdings.

More efforts need to be made to open up the archival collections to current and new users of the archives. In particular, the digitisation of the archival collections needs to be prioritised. For example, the oral history projects that have been undertaken by the National Film, Video and Sound Archives are to be commended as they capture narratives from communities that were side-lined by the colonial and apartheid dispensations. However, these collections are only accessible on the premises of the institution and none are electronically available. These collections are the voices of communities and individuals that should be part of the country's archival heritage and making them available in digital format will do much to increase access and use. More thus needs to be done to promote the accumulation and preservation of archival collections and, crucially, to ensure that the information they contain can be accessed by current and future users. Ericson (1990: 114-115) contended that if archives are appraised, arranged, described and conserved and no one comes to use the archives, then archivists will have wasted their time. Although security and conservation measures are necessary to ensure the well-being of historical records, these measures are done to ensure that these collections are utilised by members of the public. Users (researchers) are the life-blood of public archival services and their needs must be responded to.

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