

The Serials Collection as a Reflection of Social and Political Change

Dianne Leonge Man,

Assistant University Librarian, University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa

During the past ten years South Africa has experienced tremendous social and political change, ranging from changes in constitution and leadership, the declaration of a state of emergency, unrest, forced removals, sanctions and boycotts to the release of Nelson Mandela, the unbanning of Black political organisations and the scrapping of apartheid laws.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss how social and political change have affected serials collections in South Africa. It is not my aim to attack or defend South Africa's policies, but rather to outline how serial collections have been affected by five factors:

- 1. The system of government.
- 2. Censorship.
- 3. Sanctions and boycotts.
- 4. Trade unions.
- 5. The "new" South Africa.

There have been many changes during the past decade, and the politicians' buzzwords have changed from "apartheid", "separate development" and "segregation" to "reform", "power sharing" and "negotiations".

System Of Government

South Africa has been outcast of the world because of its policy of white minority rule and its discriminatory race laws.

Political changes started in 1978 when P.W.Botha became prime minister and, later, state president. He wanted other races to be involved in the parliamentary process and, in 1984, formed the tricameral (or three-chamber) parliament. This comprised the House of Assembly for Whites, the House of Representatives for Coloureds and the House of Delegates for Indians. The fatal flaw was the omission of the Black majority from the parliamentary process.

With the release of Nelson Mandela from prison and the unbanning of Black political parties such as the African National Congress, (ANC), the Pan Africanist Congress, (PAC), and the South African Communist Party, talks are being held on the inclusion of Blacks in the decision-making process.

We hope that in the not too distant future agreement will be reached on a new constitution.

A government publication collection mirrors the system of government at any particular time, so the bigger and more complex the system, the more publications it will produce, especially in serial form.

With three houses of parliament, there are three sets of serials such as minutes of proceedings, order papers, question papers, debates and departmental annual reports. Some departments even have the same name, eg. there is a department of Education and Culture in each House. It is a cataloguing nightmare.

In addition to four provinces, South Africa has been divided into ten Black states or "homelands", four of which are independent and six self-governing. Imagine trying to deal with eleven government printing departments! Each Black state produces its own complete set of government publications such as gazettes, debates, departmental annual reports, etc. in English, Afrikaans and the vernacular or tribal language.

For sheer volume of publications, duplication of effort and cost, South Africa's government system must take a lot of beating. A more streamlined government will mean a more manageable government publications collection.

Censorship

South Africa is a country that has in the past been devastated by censorship, which operated through a vast network of laws that regulated the content of information, either by outright banning or by inhibiting or restricting what may be published.⁽¹⁾ Freedom of expression is curtailed.

The heydays were during the 1960's and 1970s when anything remotely contentious was banned. The social sciences such as politics, sociology, anthropology, economics, religion and, of course, African studies, were hard hit.⁽²⁾

Prior to 1990, two specific laws regulated censorship in South Africa:-

- 1. *Publications Act of 1974*, which empowered a Publications Control Board to ban material under the headings of obscenity, blasphemy, group rights, race relations and state security.

- 2. *The Internal Security Act of 1982*, which restricted the works of banned and listed persons, even after their deaths, banned organisations as well as titles which were deemed to further the aims of communism.⁽³⁾

Control was exercised in two ways:

- a. Restricted access - material may be possessed but not circulated or displayed. The librarians kept the material under lock and key and controlled access.
- b. Possession prohibited - permission had to be obtained from the Directorate of Publications or the Minister for Law and Order, depending on the law.

Censorship is therefore a government tool that has been used for decades to suppress anti-apartheid viewpoints, and librarians have been drawn into the process by having to act as gatekeepers. They have come under heavy attack: are they victims of the system or are they state agents?⁽⁴⁾ It must be remembered, however, that there were heavy penalties for transgressions.

As if these laws were not sufficient, further restrictions were imposed in 1986 under the nationwide State of Emergency, including prior censorship, suspension of publication and clamps on information gathering.⁽⁵⁾

Serials in particular have suffered under these restrictive mechanisms. A serial by its nature is easy to restrict because it can be suspended or banned before publication, and newspapers are particularly vulnerable. Journals are treated in two ways: a complete ban because the parent organisation is banned, or selective banning whereby certain issues only are banned.

The Minister can suspend a serial for up to three months after completing a series of warnings. Of eleven serials that had received warnings in the past 3 - 4 years, five were suspended for periods ranging from one to three months.⁽⁶⁾ An example is *News Nation*, which was suspended for three months in 1988.

What has happened since February 1990 when organisations like the ANC, PAC and the South African Communist Party were unbanned? As far as the University of the Witwatersrand Library was concerned:

- 1. The locked cupboards housing the banned publications have been emptied by more than half, and the items are available on the open shelves.
- 2. Individual titles have become unbanned, but can only be described as "old-fashioned" or "quaint", and of little interest to users now.
- 3. Some titles that have been transferred to the open shelves have proved to be so popular that they have been placed under lock and key *again* - because of losses.

- 4. The banned lists in the government gazette no longer need to be scrutinised so carefully for new bannings but rather for unbannings. New bannings consist almost entirely of pornography.

- 5. Ministerial permission no longer needs to be applied for for "possession prohibited" material, which is now handled by the librarian.

Although our Library has bought some banned material before 1990 by special permission, there are large gaps that need to be filled in because users are clamouring for these publications for their novelty value, and researchers are waiting to catch up on research which they have had to forego because they refused to grovel and apply for permission from the minister.

Sanctions And Boycotts

If censorship is the withholding of information within South Africa, then sanctions is the flip side of the coin as information is withheld from outside South Africa. The effect is the same as far as access to information and collection development are concerned. It is no wonder that there has been an exodus of academic staff to posts overseas.

To understand the effects of the sanctions and boycotts campaign, I should like to use the University of the Witwatersrand (called Wits for short) as a case study.

Whenever there has been footage of student clashes with the police on the television, most likely you are looking at Wits, which has approximately 20,000 students spread over 10 faculties. As an English speaking university, Wits had a long and proud history of being in the forefront of the anti-apartheid movement and had been subjected to continual harassment by government and police.⁽⁷⁾

We first experienced the impact of South Africa's increasing isolation from the rest of the world around 1986 when institutions from Scandinavia started cancelling long-standing exchange agreements. We were deeply shocked, and our pleas that Wits should be treated differently fell on deaf ears. Many of our letters were not even acknowledged.

We then found ourselves in the middle of an academic boycott. Overseas conference papers were rejected and overseas academics shunned us. Our academic staff also found it difficult to attend conferences and to have papers published in international journals. The barring of South Africans and Namibians from the 1986 World Archaeological Congress at Southampton caused widespread unhappiness amongst academics worldwide.⁽⁸⁾

As a liberal institution which proclaims its opposition to racism and racial discrimination on its letterhead, Wits had a moral dilemma - should it support the anti-apartheid movement via sanctions or should it uphold academic freedom and the free flow of information?⁽⁹⁾

In 1987 the government proposed a reduction in state subsidies of some of the English-speaking universities if they failed to curtail student protest. This was only dropped after three universities took the matter to the Supreme Court.⁽¹⁰⁾ If the universities could go to this length to protect their autonomy and academic freedom, they naturally found it difficult to accept interference and boycotts from abroad.

Then came the embargo on Indian and Danish publications, followed by some suppliers and publishers. The passing of the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act in the USA in 1986 prompted other organisations to extend economic sanctions by promoting a cultural boycott.⁽¹¹⁾

Some publishers quietly still support the boycott, and do not respond to orders and claims, with serious disruption to our serials collection.

Interestingly enough, the moral dilemmas posed by the sanctions and boycotts campaign have been extensively discussed in the journal literature, notably the *Africana Libraries Newsletter*,⁽¹²⁾ *The Library Association Record*,⁽¹³⁾ *Nature*⁽¹⁴⁾ and *Quintessence International*.⁽¹⁵⁾ The debate is ongoing, especially amongst librarians of the American Library Association and IFLA. They urge that the boycott continue "until apartheid is completely dismantled".⁽¹⁶⁾ How they define this I do not know, but in the meantime our serials collection suffers.

It is quite amusing that a publisher like University Microfilms International does not supply us with their theses, but they still send their blurbs very regularly!

We at Wits sincerely hope that widespread international recognition is not too far away.

Trade Unions

Prior to 1979, Black trade unions struggled to survive in the face of hostility from the State and employers.⁽¹⁷⁾

The relevant Act was amended in 1979 to include Black workers, and since then there has been a rapid growth of both registered and unregistered trade unions.

Factors which have forced the government and employers to negotiate with workers include:

1. Foreign pressure.
2. Changes in the economy which made Black labour indispensable.
3. Pressure from the workers themselves.

In the 1980s their most powerful weapon has been the refusal to work, and this has brought about new rights and better social conditions. Work stoppages in the form of strikes and stay-aways have become common.⁽¹⁸⁾

Rights won in the factories have been extended to rights in the townships, and trade unions have joined up with community groups to fight for social rights.⁽¹⁹⁾

Serial publications are a very suitable medium for the trade unions' role of communication and education, eg. they produce leaflets, bulletins, newsletters and journals. These publications vary from big and bold to small and cheap, but contain valuable insights into worker concerns and aspirations. They also reject the process of social and political change.

An example is *Iswilethu*, the mouthpiece of CUSA, the Council of Trade Unions of South Africa, which provides a platform for workers' creative writing and carries articles on labour history, unions elsewhere in the world and general political issues.⁽²⁰⁾

Collection development is difficult because issues do not arrive or are not sent regularly, and gaps are difficult to fill in as some trade union offices have in the past been raided by police or bombed by right-wing factions.

The "New" South Africa and Some Current Publications

When F.W. de Klerk became State President in 1989, he called for a "new" South Africa based on equality before the law.

1990 was a watershed year, with the release of Nelson Mandela, the unbanning of political organisations and the commencement of talks between Black leaders and the government on the inclusion of Blacks in the decision-making process,

So far in 1991 we have seen the phasing out of discriminatory legislation and the gradual opening of white state schools to Black pupils.

Much as the serials format is ideal for the trade unions, so is it too for sociologists, historians and other social scientists who wish to record current events in the fast-changing scene in South Africa.

A serials publication is ideal for documenting the "new" South Africa because it allow for:

- Speed of publication while events are still fresh.
- The content to be short and to the point, eg. case histories, anecdotes, description of events and statistics.
- Economical publication costs.
- Quick dissemination to a wide audience.

These characteristics are particularly important for "popular" history research where the

experiences of the man in the street are recorded for posterity, eg. the Transvaal Rural Action Committee is one of several groups monitoring the problems of Blacks in rural areas. Publications ranging from the left wing to the right wing have sprung up to take advantage of this new freedom of expression. These may have been banned only a few years ago. What is needed is the documentation of events and experiences during the 1960s and 1970s while the people can still recall them, so that we do not lose this large slice of history.

Some Interesting New Publications

Historians are not political commentators, and seek comfort in writing about past events where they have the benefit of hindsight. Who then will stick his neck out about current events? An interesting new publication which skirts this problem is entitled *History in the Making* by the South African History Archive, which seeks to provide researchers with original documents to chart the unfolding of history. Speeches, minutes, discussion documents, interviews, posters, etc. are reproduced to reflect the process of change.⁽²¹⁾ It is a must for every African Studies collection.

During the past ten years there have been many detentions without trial, and parents of detainees formed the "Detainees Parents Support Committee". When this committee was registered in 1988, along with around twenty-four other organisations, out of its ashes arose the "Human Rights Commission". It focuses specifically on repression and its effects on freedom of speech and political rights, and publishes Fact papers, *Special reports* and *Area repression reports* to monitor the ongoing unrest. These publications contain valuable statistics.

As far as environmental issues are concerned, the Black political parties previously felt that these issues could not be given serious consideration while they were struggling for survival under apartheid. The question of land, apartheid and human rights was seen to be interlinked.

The Black political parties have now issued environmental policies for a post-apartheid South Africa. The environment is regarded as a people's concern⁽²²⁾, because in the words of a rural resident, "we want to leave a legacy for our children, not just crumbs". *New Ground* was started in September 1990 and looks at the environment from the Black point of view. It also contains articles on health and land issues.⁽²³⁾

Not all publications about the changing scene are new. Existing publications such as *Work in progress*, *Sash* and *Southern African review* continue to be vital, and banned issues are slowly being unbanned.

What is interesting is that funds for anti-apartheid and community-based research, which were previously well supported by overseas foundations and companies, have been drying up under the "new" South Africa. Researchers feel that this is because South Africa has lost its novelty value and other research areas have become more topical, eg. Eastern Europe and the Middle East.

Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to show how serials collections in South Africa have been affected by five factors, ie. the system of government, censorship, sanctions and boycotts, trade unions and the "new" South Africa.

They are both internal and external forces that a serials librarian has to cope with, and controlling the serials collection is difficult.

South Africa is a fertile area to study as it has action, movement and change. Even before Nelson Mandela's release and the beginning of the current phase of negotiations, a commentator said:

"Keeping a track record of all currently published research on South Africa has become a near impossible exercise. Never before has a liberation struggle and the general context in which it is taking place been so widely studied and documented. The industry has become prosperous both in academic and financial terms".⁽²⁴⁾



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