

Chapter 3

Archival Access and Public Programming

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses archival access, archival programming, and archival advocacy and the manner in which these programmes are conducted within archival institutions, particularly in Africa. The chapter begins by defining the terms access, archival programming, archival advocacy, and outreach programmes and provides the parameters within which such programmes and activities are executed. The chapter reveals that in many archival institutions, public programming is either lacking or does not receive adequate attention from senior management resulting in low utilization of archival materials. The chapter suggests various ways through which African archival institutions may publicize their holdings in order to reach out to potential users and manuscript donors.

INTRODUCTION

Archives and manuscript collections when well preserved play a pivotal role in the preservation of corporate memory as well as in the transmission of culture, building of national identity and in providing valuable sources of information on a variety of issues. The primary goal of preservation is to prolong the life of documentary heritage and to ensure the long term accessibility of such collections by government agencies, institutions, business organizations and the public at large. However, preserving the collections without making them accessible is of no value. According to Ketelaar (1992, p. 5) “archives - well preserved and accessible to the people - are as essential in a free democracy as government of the people, by the people, for the people. Because archives are not only tools of the government, not only sources for historical research, access to public archives gives the people the possibility to exercise their rights and to control their governments, its successes, its failures.” Walne (1988) defines access as “the availability of records or archives for consultation as a result of legal authorization and the existence of finding aids”. McCausland (1993, p. 273) defined access to include “the terms and conditions of availability of records or information maintained by archives for examination and consultation by

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researchers.” Reference service, which is another term commonly used in relation to access to records is the general name given to the facilities and services that “enable researchers to use the archives and its records once access to them is approved” (McCausland, 1993, p.273). As can be seen from the above definitions, access to records and archives is usually determined by laws, policies and procedures that are established by governments. Such laws usually regulate closure periods, rights of access to public records, ensure the protection of privacy rights of its citizens from intrusion by researchers and other information seekers and in some cases it provide protection to copyright holders. Blaise and David (1993, p.107) argued that “the essential utility and value of information housed in archives is expressed through research use”. Maidabino (2010) argued that:

the accessibility and use of records of human knowledge, their preservation and passages or communication among successive generations no doubt constitute the greatest single treasure of the human heritage.

Further, it cannot be overstated that access to information especially government held information constitutes a basic human right. The right of access to information was stated in the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights “Declaration on Freedom of Expression adopted by African States in 2002 when they wrote saying:

1. Public bodies hold information not for themselves but as custodians of the public good and everyone has a right to access this information, subject only to clearly defined rules established by law.
2. The right to information shall be guaranteed by law in accordance with the following principles:
 - a. Everyone has the right to access information held by public bodies;
 - b. Everyone has the right to access information held by private bodies which is necessary for the exercise or protection of any right;
 - c. Any refusal to disclose information shall be subject to appeal to an independent body and/or the courts;
 - d. Public bodies shall be required, even in the absence of a request, actively to publish important information of significant public interest;
 - e. No one shall be subject to any sanction for releasing in good faith information on wrongdoing, or that which would disclose a serious threat to health, safety or the environment save where the imposition of sanctions serves a legitimate interest and is necessary in a democratic society; and
 - f. Secrecy laws shall be amended as necessary to comply with freedom of information principles.
3. Everyone has the right to access and update or otherwise correct their personal information, whether it is held by public or by private bodies.” (African Commission on Human and Peoples Rights, 2002)

While the need to access information is necessary, this need must be balanced against the need to protect the privacy of others mentioned in the archives. Walne (1988) defined privacy as “the right to be secure from unauthorized disclosure of information contained in records/archives relating to personal or private matters.”

To a very large extent access and utilization of archives by the public is dependent on the facilities provided by the archival institutions, the manner in which archives have been organised, the access policies formulated by the governing institution and the amount of publicity given to the archives holdings

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