

**Abstract for NAI Workshop on Documentation Initiatives on the Liberation Struggles in Southern Africa, to be held 26 – 27 November, 2009, Pretoria, South Africa**

William Minter, Editor, AfricaFocus Bulletin

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Increasing Diversity of Sources and Expanding Access: Opportunities for and Obstacles to Effective Use of Digital Technologies

1. Putting digital gaps in perspective

In evaluating the impact of new technologies and electronic communication, it is essential to see them not in isolation but in relation to other preexisting structural inequalities. All of these inequalities, at multiple levels, will of course be reflected in the digital environment. These range from international inequalities between rich and poor regions and countries to inequalities between countries that are neighbors and divisions within countries by geography, race, class, and institutional status.

In terms of access to information resources and opportunities to create and distribute knowledge, the “paper gaps” or gaps of access to other physical information resources—audio recordings, films, objects stored in museums—are even more difficult to overcome than digital gaps. Access to such objects requires traveling to where they are available or transporting them to and housing them in multiple locations. The costs of such efforts are much larger than addressing the gaps of digital access. This is the baseline of inequality of access to knowledge resources against which digital gaps should be measured.

(2) What is different about digital knowledge sharing?

From the point of view of economics, the fundamental difference between knowledge preserved on a piece of paper or another physical object and knowledge preserved digitally is that the cost of making another digital copy and delivering it to someone else tends to go down, and in fact approaches zero. As Yochai Benkler has stressed in his book *The Wealth of Networks*, that tends to drive the price down, since the market price of a product tends to be linked to the “marginal” cost of producing another one. If the basic means of production and distribution (a computer and an internet connection) are widely enough available, everyone above the minimum threshold for access also has the capacity not only to access but also to produce public knowledge.

(3) Since the end of the period of Southern African liberation history culminating in the South African democratic election of 1994, there have been a significant number of projects dedicated to preserving elements of that history and making them available to scholars, students, and the wider public. The results are significant, but every project has faced significant obstacles, both in terms of preserving oral

and written records and in making those records more widely available. The purpose of this paper is to identify some of the major obstacles experienced by a range of projects, and to present a summary overview of the significant gaps that remain, both in terms of the content included and the wider availability of the results.

(4) It is inevitable, and a constant challenge for historians, that there will be multiple biases determining what records (written or oral) are preserved, and what records that exist are most widely available for multiple practical reasons. Obstacles are not distributed randomly, whether in the availability of the records to start with (for example, whether participants in the history have been interviewed before their death) or in terms of their availability either in physical or digital formats. In terms of projects focused on scanning written documents, for example, experience has shown that the physical scanning is only a small part of the steps necessary to make the materials available; almost all projects have underestimated the cost of other steps, such as optical character recognition, preparation of metadata, intellectual property rights, and strategic use of both web and other media for distribution, as well as the challenge of sustainable financing. Projects focused on research, in turn, have not yet taken full advantage of the opportunities for digital distribution to lower the cost of reaching a much wider set of readers, relying primarily instead on the increasingly expensive book publication.

The point can be illustrated with examples from a number of existing projects. At this stage it does not seem possible to identify "best practices," but it may be possible to identify lessons learned that may be valuable for both ongoing and new projects.

(5) The variety of obstacles experienced, in addition to the differing scope of the range of projects to date, has led to an extremely uneven distribution of content that is available to date. Illustrate by a short survey of projects, and a couple of examples of gaps. For example, sources on South Africa are far more diverse and extensive than those on any of the other countries in the Southern African region. In terms of international involvement, sources on the Nordic countries, the United States, United Kingdom, and the Netherlands are more available than on other regions and countries, including African countries outside the Southern African region, the Soviet Union, and Cuba.