RELOOKING ACCESS AND REFERENCE SERVICES OFFERED BY THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF ZIMBABWE'S RESEARCH AND PUBLIC ARCHIVES SECTION

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ABSTRACT

National archival institutions world-wide are legally mandated to make archival materials in their custody available to researchers through the provision of access and reference services. Often, the access and reference services offered by some archival institutions, such as the National Archives of Zimbabwe (NAZ) are insufficient to meet increasing user needs and demands as well as changes in technology. Employing a qualitative research approach and a survey research

design, where the data was collected using interviews and document reviews, the study examined the access and reference services offered by NAZ. The study revealed that NAZ was largely using outdated access and reference services, while some reference archivists lacked knowledge of archival collections and access skills. Thus, the study recommends that NAZ should update its staff skills, and revamp its access and reference services to bring them in line with the latest trends in technology and changing user needs and demands.

Keywords: access, access policy, National Archives of Zimbabwe, reference services, users

1. INTRODUCTION

There have been numerous calls for archivists to re-orient their access and reference functions from the simple provision of information to a process of knowledge, as reference services have changed because users now utilise archival services on the Internet. Yakel (2001) holds that the context of access and reference services has expanded due to the use of information communications technologies (ICTs) as well as the democratisation of channels of accessing information in Zimbabwe. Therefore, archivists must rethink their role of providing services to a whole range of users, as some would never step into the archival institution, but their computers, letters and telephone calls act as their proxies. Yakel (2001) further argues that contemporary reference archivists must learn new ways of helping users to access the contents of archival collections by developing new services in line with changing technology and user needs.

2. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Access to archival materials at the National Archives of Zimbabwe (NAZ) is offered by the Research and Public Archives Unit. This is one of the four units of NAZ, alongside the Records Management Services, Library and Technical Sections. In order to access the archives, researchers need to meet certain conditions, such as age, nationality and payment of user fees, yet restriction of access to public information is a violation of citizens' rights in Zimbabwe.

Ngulube (2002) and McKemmish, Reed and Piggott (2005) assert that challenges on access to archival documents by the public dates back to the ancient Greek Metroon, when archives were the privy of kings and rulers only. The authors further assert that the rationale that the archives were for the privileged class only changed with the dawn of the French Revolution in 1789, after which the archives were declared open to the public. Facilitating access and use of archival materials is fundamental to all archival functions, such as acquisition, accessioning, appraisal, arrangement, description and preservation (Ngulube, Sibanda and Makoni 2013).

All these functions are undertaken to facilitate access to the information contained in the archives for present and future generations. Ngulube (2002) also underscores the need for archivists to aggressively promote access to their holdings if they are to remain relevant in a changing archival landscape. Moyo (2001), Evans (2007) and Murambiwa and Ngulube (2011) hold that archivists are bound to fail to make archival documents accessible if the materials are not processed as a result of accumulated backlogs; if the equipment to access archives is obsolete; if finding aids do not exist; if there is no legal authority to access information; if physical access to archives is difficult; and if there are systematic barriers to accessing information contained in the archives.

It was in the interest of access that the International Council on Archives adopted the Universal Declaration on Archives at the Annual General Meeting in Oslo in 2010 to address the need for archives to be made accessible to everyone in need of them, but with respect to the pertinent laws and the rights of individuals, creators, owners and users. Hunter (1997) asserts that access to information is essential in a modern society. He argues that reference services depend to a large degree on good record-keeping by government agencies. Kilasi, Maseko and Abankwah (2011) point out that national archival institutions have a legal obligation to provide access to their collections and that the significance of an archival establishment is best measured by the services it provides to its clientele. It is against this background that the researchers noticed that the access and reference services offered by NAZ were insufficient to meet the increasing demands of its users, as more often users complained of not obtaining the required information to meet their needs. Being the custodian of the national, historical and documentary heritage, NAZ has an obligation to make sure that the material in its custody is accessed by researchers and members of the public.

3.   PROBLEM STATEMENT

The existing access and reference services at NAZ are outdated and out of sync with the latest user needs and developments in modern archival and technological standards. Many scholars, such as Moyo (2001), Murambiwa and Ngulube (2011) and Ngulube (2002) hold that access to information is a democratic right of every citizen and that acquisition and preservation of archival material without provision of access to them is a futile exercise. Provision of access to archives by the public is well enunciated in NAZ's Strategic Plan of 2005, the Mission Statement, the Archives Act of 1986 as well as the New Constitution of Zimbabwe. This places on the NAZ the burden of provision of access to archives as well as the removal of bottlenecks to provision of access. In addition, the right to information places on the archival institution the need to provide up-to-date and well spelt-out reference

services that truly enhance users' access to archival material, a requirement on which NAZ is reneging.

4.   OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study sought:

- To outline the reference services offered by NAZ and assess how they are provided.
- To examine the provision of access to archival documents at NAZ.
- To evaluate the impact of restrictions on access to archival documents.
- To determine the extent to which ICTs facilitate reference services and access to archival documents.

4.1. Research questions

- What reference services are offered by the Research Section of NAZ and how are they provided?
- How does NAZ provide access to archival documents?
- What is the impact of restrictions on access to archival documents?
- How does the use of ICTs facilitate reference services and access to archival documents?

4.2. Significance of the study

The study is important in that it enables NAZ to fulfil one of its mandates, namely, that of providing access to documentation in whatever format. Provision of adequate reference services helps to empower the researcher and at the same time it improves rapport between the researcher and archivist and eventually enhancing researchers' access to information. The study will help NAZ to act according to societal expectations as well as to remain relevant to its mandate and thus justify its existence and continued public funding and support.

5.   LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews the extant literature on access and reference services in the world in general. Latest archival standards on the two aspects are explored. In this regard, the literature review helps to place the study into perspective and at the same time bring forth the limitations that NAZ faces in the context of contemporary archival standards.

5.1. Access to archival material

Access has been defined differently by various scholars. According to Moyo (2001), access is the ability to use archives for consultation and research in the realms of the country's legislation. Hunter (1997) defines access as the authority to obtain information from or perform research using archival materials. In Zimbabwe, access to information is a democratic right. However, access is not 100 per cent guaranteed as there are impediments to accessing archival material like age, citizenship, user fees and closure period.

Using archives compromises their preservation. However, as Moyo (2001) notes, preservation without access is useless. Preservation in this context contributes to the physical wellbeing of the archival documents during use and exhibition. In this regard, archivists at NAZ are faced with a dilemma as they are mandated to make the documents available according to the conditions laid down by the National Archives of Zimbabwe Act of 1986, while they are also mandated to preserve them from dangers which include wear and tear. Hence, archivists need to strike a balance between the need for preservation of archives and providing access to the same.

At NAZ, there are rules for access and use of archival materials. Access is restricted to citizens of Zimbabwe who are at least 18 years old and it is denied to those below 18 years. It is important to note that students below the age of 18 are only allowed in the public gallery on guided tours and not to the Research and Public Archives Section where archival material can be accessed. All non-citizens are only admitted if they produce research permits from the Research Council of Zimbabwe or if they produce temporary employment permits.

Considering that all documents and books at NAZ are intended for permanent preservation, excessive handling of such documents and books inevitably causes wear and tear (Moyo 2001; Ngulube 2001). In order to minimise wear and tear, the institution puts in place rules of access, such as: no inkbottles; no food nor drink to be taken into the reading room; ensure that hands are not dirty, greasy or sweaty as they leave marks on the documents; only pencils are allowed as ballpoint inks cause a danger of documents being permanently marked or stained; do not write on or deface the documents – only write on pieces of paper with a pencil and do not moisten fingers when flipping over pages (Hunter 1997).

5.2. Access restrictions

Although access has been viewed as a democratic right of every citizen and has been universally accepted in all democratic societies, the concept of privacy implies that there are spheres of personal matters and spheres of public matters and that the archivist and society should protect both. According to Ngulube (2001), personal matters include medical records (including psychiatric information), sexual information regarding birth and legitimacy and any embarrassing facts about individuals. He

further holds that public matters include protection of defence, public safety, public order, and economic interest of the country, public morality and public health. In this regard, access restrictions are imposed to protect both personal and public matters and are also imposed to protect the reputations, rights and freedom of other persons and their private lives (Moyo 2001). Ngulube (2001) further outlines that access restrictions are also imposed as a result of the physical condition of documents. For example, fragile and torn documents cannot be used by researchers as this may further worsen their condition.

5.3. Reference services

Reference services encompass a range of activities an archivist undertakes to assist researchers in using archival materials. According to the NAZ Service Charter (2014), some of these activities include: answering telephone enquiries; responding to letters and emails; and to physically assisting researchers on materials they want to use. According to Hunter (1997), an effective research visit to an archival institution involves three steps, which include: entrance interview; reference room activities; and exit interview. An entrance interview is a key part of archival reference services as it gives both the archivist and the researcher a chance to communicate their expectations, needs and limitations (Hunter 1997). It can save time and frustration for the archivist and the researcher. Hunter (1997) opines that an entrance interview involves confirming the researcher's identity; determining the researcher's needs; explaining the institution's rules and regulations; explaining use of finding aids; and outlining user fees. Reference activities involve the actual inspection of archives. The exit interview involves the researcher returning the reading material as well as probing further research to the related material.

5.4. Common finding aids used in archival institutions

Pearce-Moses (2005) asserts that the commonest finding aids include catalogues, indexes and guides to public archives. Finding aids are the signposts or access points to information in an archival repository as they locate where certain information is kept. According to Thibodeau (1988), the archival principles of provenance and original order are rooted in a desire to ensure that archival records will be accessible to researchers. Finding aids are the descriptive media, published and unpublished to establish administrative and intellectual control over archival holdings. Hunter (1997) argues that finding aids provide administrative control in a number of ways, including: giving the location of the collection on the repository's shelves; identifying the source or provenance of the collections; and outlining the general contents of collections so that archivists can provide reference services from the moment the collection reaches the archival repository.

5.5. ICTs and provision of access to information

According to Kamatula (2010), ICTs refer to devices like computers, hardware, software, satellite system, radio, television and cell phones which are used to create, send, receive or share information. In the age of electronic records, national archival institutions rely heavily on ICTs in acquiring, preserving and providing access to documents. In providing reference services, archival institutions can make use of telephones, the Internet and facsimiles to attend to users' enquiries. At the same time, electronic records or electronic archives can be made accessible to users via the Internet in the same way as many universities' libraries are providing users access to their institutional repositories (IRs).

6.   RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study made use of the survey research design where the data was collected using semi-structured interviews and documents review. The population of the study comprised of 27 regular users of archives for a period of six months between July and December 2014 as well as all 20 archivists of NAZ. While it was the desire of researchers to interview all 27 regular users, only 15 were conveniently accessed. This made a sample size of 56 per cent. According to Babbie and Mouton (1998), a response rate of 50 per cent in survey research is considered adequate to bring forth valid and reliable research results. While convenience sampling was used with respect to users, purposive sampling was used in the case of NAZ archivists. While there were 20 archivists at the institution, only eight archivists who worked in the Research and Public Archives section were purposively selected for the study. This follows from the fact that it is the Research and Public Archives section which offers access to researchers. Archivists in the records, technical and library sections were left out of the study as a result. Documents review was also used to collect data. This comprised of the visitors' register, reference register, access rules register and the control desk register. The data was analysed qualitatively using thematic analysis as themes were created around each of the five research questions posed earlier on in the study.

7.   FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The study findings are presented in line with the research questions posed above.

7.1. Reference services at NAZ

According to one informant, NAZ offers the following reference services:

● answering telephone enquiries;
● responding to letters and electronic mail from users and prospective users;

- physically assisting researchers before, during and after accessing archival material;
- availing catalogues and guides to public archives to researchers.

These services are collectively offered by the Control Desk archivist, the office orderly and the receptionist. The norm was that users are served at the reception where they pay user fees and leave their bags and caps. From the reception, users proceed to the control desk, about 20 metres away, where they complete an inquiry form, indicating among other things, their area of research interest and address. The control desk archivist interviews and later directs the user to reference tools, such as catalogues and other access points. When users find what they want, they complete a request form and proceed to the reading room from where they are later supplied with the requested archival material by the office orderly. Users are allowed a maximum of four requests at a go. There was a general feeling among eight users (53.3%) that the reference service process was rather long. Three users (20%) claimed that there was nothing wrong with the long process while 4 users (26.7%) were undecided.

The study also interrogated the use of finding aids. This included use of catalogues, indexes and guides to public archives. There were contrasting views about the finding aids used by NAZ. Table 1 captures the views of NAZ archivists with regard to the use of current finding aids at the institution.

Table 1:   NAZ archivists' position with regard to current finding aids (*n* = 8)

Response	Frequency	%	Reason
Comfortable with current finding aids	3	37.5	Work is progressing well with such aids
Not comfortable with current finding aids	5	62.5	2 – Finding aids should be updated
			3 – There is need for electronic finding aids
Total	**8**	**100**	

Three NAZ archivists (37.5%) were comfortable with the access and reference services currently offered, while five (62.5%) felt more should be done. The three archivists in favour of current finding aids argued that work in the Research and Public Archives section was operating smoothly whilst using the current finding aids and therefore there was no need to raise alarm. Of the five archivists who were not comfortable with the current finding aids, two were in favour of constantly updating finding aids, while three felt that there was a need to introduce electronic finding aids which could be used by both users and the archivists.

Almost similar results were obtained from users. Whilst five NAZ archivists (62.5%) were not comfortable with the current finding aids, 12 users (80%) were also not comfortable with the current finding aids. Only three users (20%) felt there was nothing wrong with the current finding aids being used. Table 2 captures users' responses more succinctly.

Table 2:   Users' position with regard to current NAZ finding aids (*n* = 15)

Response	Frequency	%	Reason
Comfortable with current finding aids	3	20	Have been able to access material using such aids
Not comfortable with current finding aids	12	80	4 – There is need to update finding aids
			8 – There is need for electronic finding aids
Total	**15**	**100**	

Concern was also raised by five users (33%) that sometimes users had better knowledge about NAZ collections and how to access them than some reference archivists. This bordered on lack of experience and lack of continuous staff development on the part of NAZ staff. Six users (40%) commended NAZ staff's knowledge about their archival collections and access skills, while four (27%) were undecided.

7.2. Provision of access at NAZ

Both archivists and users contributed to the access debate. Restriction of access to archives was addressed from two angles, that is, restriction as voluntarily-imposed and restriction as involuntary on the part of NAZ. Out of eight archivists who participated in the study, five (62.5%) claimed that restrictions to access were largely voluntarily-imposed while three claimed they were largely involuntary. Among the voluntarily-imposed restrictions were age, user fees, citizenship, copying restrictions, donor agreements and the 25-year closure period. Backlogs in transfer and processing of records of archival importance inevitably resulted in involuntary restriction to access. Three archivists (37.5%) held that the institution sometimes failed to provide access to users because of backlogs, which they regarded to as a result of circumstances beyond their control. The three archivists stated that transfer of archival material from the Records Section to the Research and Public Archives Section was sometimes delayed by the Records Section because of appraisal and processing backlogs. At the same time, transferred material was sometimes not processed in time by the Research and Public Archives Section because of space challenges. Thus, at times, new archives were processed as and when space for their accommodation was created or found within the repositories.

Users were asked to comment about how they felt about the access to archives at NAZ. Nine users (60%) were unhappy about access to archives at NAZ while six users (40%) were happy with the access provisions in place. The nine users who were unhappy about access to archives cited the following as their concerns:

- Four users (44.4%) cited that the closure period of 25 years was too long and had compromised research efforts in the country.
- Three users (33.3%) cited non-availability of records due for public inspection, but still not availed for public inspection.
- One user (11.1%) was unhappy about age and fees restrictions which he claimed infringed upon the rights of citizens.
- One user (11.1%) held that reference services were inadequate and sometimes resulted in users failing to access archival material.

Nevertheless, six users (40%) were happy about access to NAZ. They indicated that they had had an access to archives rate of 99 per cent and thus absolved the NAZ's access policy. These users were also happy about the time taken to retrieve requested documents which they indicated ranged between 5 and 15 minutes. According to the Control Desk Register, some users failed to access the material they needed because the material was not accessioned and that it was still closed for public inspection.

7.3. Impact of restrictions on access to archival documents

Users gave divergent views about the impact of restrictions on access to archival documents. These views are displayed in Table 3.

Table 3:   Impact of restrictions on access to archival documents (*n* = 15)

Impact	Frequency	%
Decreasing importance of the institution as a research centre	4	27
Researchers failing to carry out viable and authentic research	6	40
The institution seen as a violator of human rights and ethical norms	2	13
Restrictions breed corruption as users resort to uncouth access means	3	20
Total	**15**	**100**

Four users (27%) pointed out that both voluntary and involuntary restrictions of access to archival documents resulted in the decreasing importance of NAZ as a research institution. This placed researchers between a rock and a hard place as they were denied of archival material which is unique and one of its own kind as

sometimes the material is not found anywhere else. Six users (40%) indicated that restrictions on access sometimes denied them of the chance to carry out viable and authentic research. Basing their argument on age and user fee restrictions, two users (13%) indicated that restrictions on access to archival documents violated users' rights of access to information as enshrined in the New Constitution of Zimbabwe. In addition, they saw NAZ as an unethical institution which was discriminatory as it denied access to some potential users, for example, some Advanced Level (Grade 12) students who could be discriminated on the basis of age and payment of user fees. Lastly, restrictions of access to archival material resulted in breeding corruption. This was expressed by three users (20%) who argued that sometimes access restrictions due to the closure period or delayed processing could fuel corruption as some users bribed archivists to access closed material. One archivist argued that although such cases had not been reported in the history of NAZ, there were chances that some users could resort to corruption to access the material they dearly want.

7.4. ICTs in access and reference services

One informant indicated that due to advances in ICTs, it was rare to find users or prospective users making enquiries through letters. Many enquiries were now done via the telephone and electronic mail. It was the responsibility of the Chief Archivist of the Research and Public Archives Section, or whoever was assigned by her to respond to users' enquiries. Nevertheless, some telephone calls were picked and responded to by the receptionist if he or she was conversant with the issue at hand. However, NAZ lagged behind with regards to electronic finding aids. One informant expressed that NAZ was supposed to copy from the National Archives and Records Service of South Africa which largely used electronic finding aids.

One informant expressed that more still needed to be done to make use of ICTs in providing access to archival documents. All eight archivists in the study expressed that access to archival material in the Research and Public Archives Section was completely manual. Exceptions were seen in the Technical Section where user could make use of oral history audio-tapes and audio-visual material.

8.   DISCUSSION

Both manual and electronic means were used in offering reference services at NAZ. However, it was notable that manual letter reference services were almost a thing of the past. This was especially because the service was slow. As indicated by the NAZ Mission Statement, the institution was obliged to respond to letter enquiries within 12 days. Most electronic enquiries were thus made telephonically. E-mail enquiries were also becoming popular as NAZ has an e-mail address. However, client self-service on the Internet was minimal. As Chaterera (2012) observes, there was poor

maintenance of the NAZ website and this resulted in minimal use by researchers. The issue that the reference service at NAZ took rather long shows that the institution prized security of records While scholars like Chaterera (2012) see long manual services as a waste of time and resources, scholars like Stielow (1988) hold that archival institutions needed to uphold security of archival documents because they were unique documents which were not replaceable.

Provision of access at NAZ was guided by the National Archives Act (1986) as well as the provisions of the national constitution. However, a number of restrictions to access were noted. Most of the voluntarily-imposed restrictions like age and user fees were motivated by preservation concerns in line with Moyo's (2001) assertion that excessive use of archival material leads to wear, tear and damage of records. However, a balance was supposed to be struck between preservation concerns and the need to provide access as Murambiwa and Ngulube (2011) point out that access to archives in Sub-Saharan Africa is rather sparse and limited, a situation they deemed unhealthy and retrogressive. Ngulube (2002) also holds that collection and preservation of archival material without provision of access to such is a futile exercise. The 25-year closure period seemed to negate access to information laws, for example, the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act of 2001. If Parer's (2001) observation that many countries have different closure periods ranging between 20 and 50 years is something to go by, then there is nothing unusual about Zimbabwe's 25-year closure period. In the same vein, as observed by Ngulube (2002), the closure period is necessary as it protects personal privacy and promotes national defence, public order and public safety. Thus, while citizens have a right to access public information, their right was at the same time not supposed to infringe on the rights of others as well as those of the nation. It was also noted that at times, NAZ failed to provide access to archives because of backlogs. As noted by Chigodora and Muchefa (2015), backlog challenges are topical issues in archives across the globe. They also noted that NAZ had a current processing backlog of 29 000 cubic feet. This is an unfortunate position that needs urgent redress if archival institutions have to truly serve the mandates for which they were created.

The impact of failure to provide access was addressed from the position of users and that of the archival institution. Chigodora and Muchefa (2015) claim that lapses in provision of access disadvantage researchers and at the same time taint the image of NAZ as a research institution. Loss of confidence in archival institutions also resulted in less and less researchers visiting archival institutions to conduct research. According to Lihoma (2015), such a situation leads to under-utilisation of archival services. Lihoma and Gondwe (2015) give the example of Malawi which had a 70 per cent under-utilisation of records and archives as not many people visited the National Archives of Malawi. Segaetsho and Mosweu (2015) cited access restriction as the leading cause of collection abuse by archives staff who acted in connivance with users in Botswana. Lihoma and Gondwe (2015) hold that there was an 88

per cent prevalence of unauthorised and irresponsible disclosure of information in Malawi, which was caused by many factors, among them being access restrictions.

Lastly, it was noted that NAZ lagged behind in harnessing use of ICTs to facilitate access and reference services. This was despite the fact that scholars like Yakel (2001) hold that the context of access and reference services has expanded and changed due to the rise of ICTs. The use of ICTs has greatly expanded among developing nations following their adoption of electronic government. According to Mutula (2013), electronic government is the use of ICTs to enable governments to better reach out their clients in delivering service. While Zimbabwe adopted electronic government in 2011, Nkala, Ngulube and Mangena (2012) note that NAZ was not electronic records ready as of 2012. This resulted in the archival institution using simple ICTs, such as the telephone, facsimile and e-mail, and is still to introduce electronic finding aids and electronic access to archives. This rendered access and reference service as largely manual, an approach commented upon by Nkwe (2012) as largely a nightmare, characterised by a lot of paper work, long queues, bureaucracy, cramped spaces and a lot of frustration.

9.   CONCLUSION

NAZ uses both manual and electronic reference services. However, electronic reference services are largely provided through use of the telephone. Access restrictions at NAZ include age, user fees, closure period, processing backlogs and donor restrictions. The first two restrictions are justified in terms of preserving and protecting the rights of individuals. However, backlogs in processing and the long closure period are difficult to justify. Restrictions of access to archives disadvantage the researching public and also tarnish the image of the archival institution. Unless and until NAZ wholly resorts to use of ICTs, its access and reference services will remain a subject of criticism and scrutiny.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS

● NAZ needs to automate its reference service beyond the use of the telephone. As such, it needs to constantly update its website for its clients to make use of the Internet self-service facility.

● The reference service should be made as short as possible. In the interest of time, the reference service should be offered at one location and/or, preferably, by a single officer.

● Reference archivists should be more knowledgeable than users about archival collections and how to access them.

- NAZ should strive to become e-records ready. Thereafter, it should automate its access services in line with latest trends in developed and some developing economies.

- Restrictions of access to archives should be minimised and should remain justifiable both at law and on moral grounds.

- Finally, the study recommends that future researchers should investigate how the use of ICTs can be used to improve access and reference services in archival institutions in Sub-Saharan Africa.

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