

A FRAMEWORK FOR THE ACCESS AND USE OF THE PUBLIC DOCUMENTARY HERITAGE AT THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF ZIMBABWE

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Forget Chaterera
PhD Candidate, University of South Africa
E-mail 47703261@mylife.unisa.ac.za

Patrick Ngulube (PhD)
Professor-University of South Africa
E-mail ngulup@unisa.ac.za

Antonio Rodrigues (PhD)
Senior lecturer, University of South Africa
E-mail TRodriqu@unisa.ac.za

The accessibility and usability of public archives have for a long time been a struggle that national archival institutions are battling to achieve, yet the raison d'être for public archives is to make their holdings accessible and usable. Using a grounded theory research approach framed within the constructivism ontology and the interpretivism epistemological research paradigm, this study employed the observation technique, interviews and content analysis to collect the empirical evidence that was needed to develop a framework for access and use of the documentary heritage in the custody of the National Archives of Zimbabwe (NAZ). The major emerging issues affecting access to, and use of archives at NAZ were directly and indirectly related to the archival concepts and practices of processing, public programming, reference services, the use of digital technologies as well as several other technical issues affecting the sections and units that make up NAZ.

Key terms: Access, Use, Documentary Heritage, Public Archives, Framework, Archival Concepts

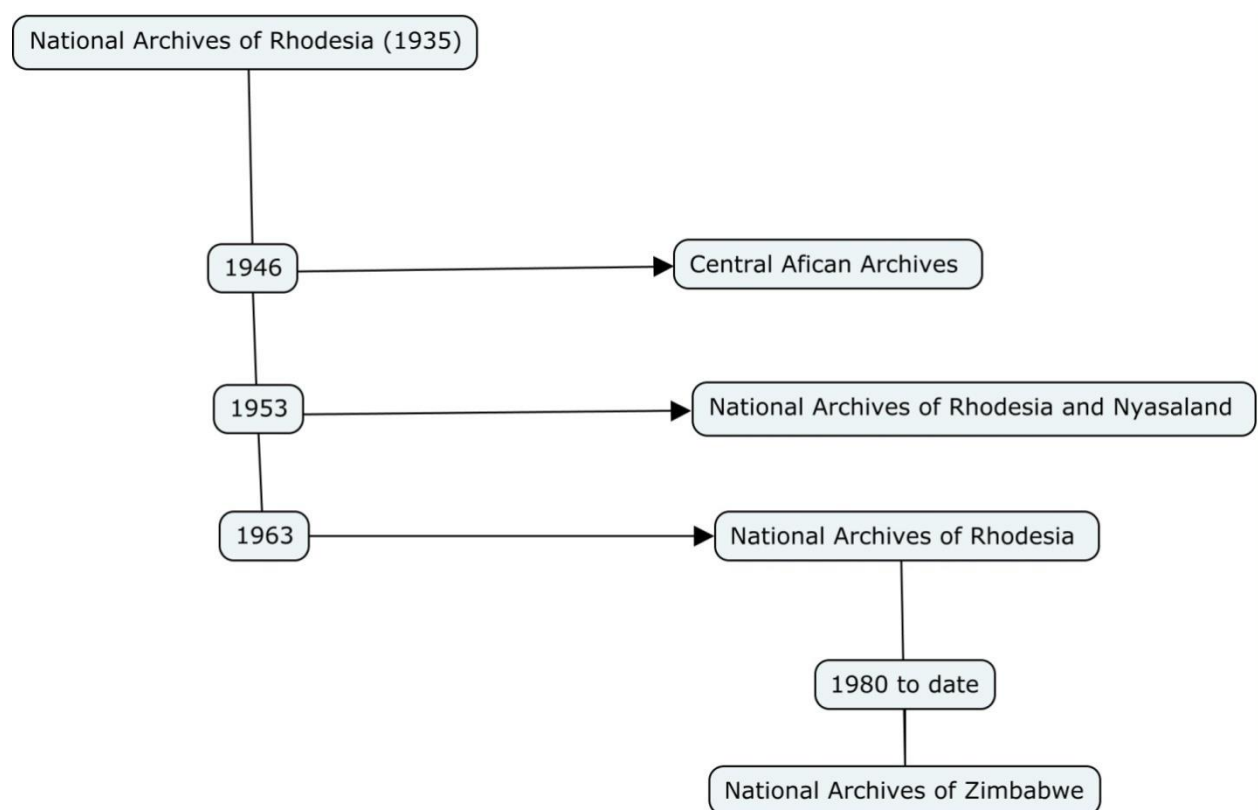
Introduction and background

National archival institutions have a critical obligation of making available their archival holdings to the public. Failure to meet this obligation renders an archival institution irrelevant and meaningless to society. Jimerson (2003:13) indicates that “the purpose of selecting, acquiring, and preserving manuscripts and archives is to make them available for use.” In that regard, the current study emphasizes the need by archival institutions to justify their existence by ensuring that public archival materials are readily available and accessible to

the populace. The availability of public archival material not only serves to justify the existence of national archival institutions but also promotes democracy, transparency and accountability in a nation. Ngoepe and Ngulube (2011:5) argue that archives serve no purpose unless they are used. Research on access and use of public archival material conducted in Africa revealed that public archival institutions are underutilised and they need to adopt more aggressive strategies for them to become known, accessible and used by the people (Mnjama 2008; Murambiwa&Ngulube 2011; Ngoepe&Ngulube; 2011; Smart 2011).

Context and historical setting of the study

NAZ has its roots in the coming of the colonial administration of the British South Africa Company (BSAC) in the 1890s which saw the country moving from oral record keeping to formal record keeping (Tough 2009; Tough & Lihoma 2012; Murambiwa, Ngulube, Masuku&Sigauke; Matangira 2014; 2016). Figure 1 sums the historical development of NAZ



(Chaterera 2016:120)

Figure 1: Historical development of NAZ

Today, NAZ is made up of seven sections namely:

1. Public Archives and Research

2. Records Services
3. Film and Sound Archives
 - i. Audiovisual Unit
 - ii. Oral History Unit
 - iii. Reprography
 - iv. Conservation
4. Library
5. Human Resources Management
6. Finance and Administration
7. Information Communication Technology (ICT)

(NAZ 2016).

While the research mainly focused on the public archives and research section, the study also deemed it essential to include the above identified sections as they share a common goal of making NAZ a leading repository of public knowledge in service of the society.

Research problem

Providing access and use of the archives to members of the public is the chief reason for NAZ's existence, yet this assignment has for a long time remained partially fulfilled (Mazikana 1999; Mutiti 1999; Murambiwa&Ngulube 2011). The accessibility and use of public archival material held at NAZ is a challenge because of backlogs of unprocessed archives, reading room fees, opening hours, size of the reading rooms, dysfunctional equipment (Murambiwa&Ngulube 2011:92). Adding on to the challenges are the stringencies found in the freedom of information and privacy laws as well as the deficiencies in the rules and regulations governing the management of archival material in Zimbabwe (Dube 2011).

An overview to access and use of archives

There is remarkable advocacy from extant literature on the need for archival institutions to make themselves more relevant and worth of existing by ensuring that access to their collection is promoted (Coles 1988; Greene 2007; Cook 2010; Daniels & Ombudsman 2010; Bacon 2014). It is however worrying to note that some archival institutions are struggling to make available their collection for use (Mazikana 1999; Mutiti 1999; Murambiwa&Ngulube 2011). It is imperative to note that every archival function that includes but not limited to processing, appraisal, preservation, conservation, arrangement and description,

reprography, public programming, microfilming are essential in making the documentary heritage available to the people (Haritz 2001). As such, access can be regarded as the nucleus of an archival institution. All the other archival functions are oriented to ensure the availability of archival holdings (Loewen 2008). To that effect, McClauseland (2007) argues that the reason for keeping archives is for them to be used. The archives indeed need to be used as they contribute to the advancement of the society (Loewen 2008) and give people an opportunity to exercise their rights while promoting accountability, transparency and good governance (Ngulube 2006; Mnjama 2008; Murambiwa&Ngulube 2011; Smart 2011;Matangira& Lowry 2013; Thurston 2015)

Methodology and study population

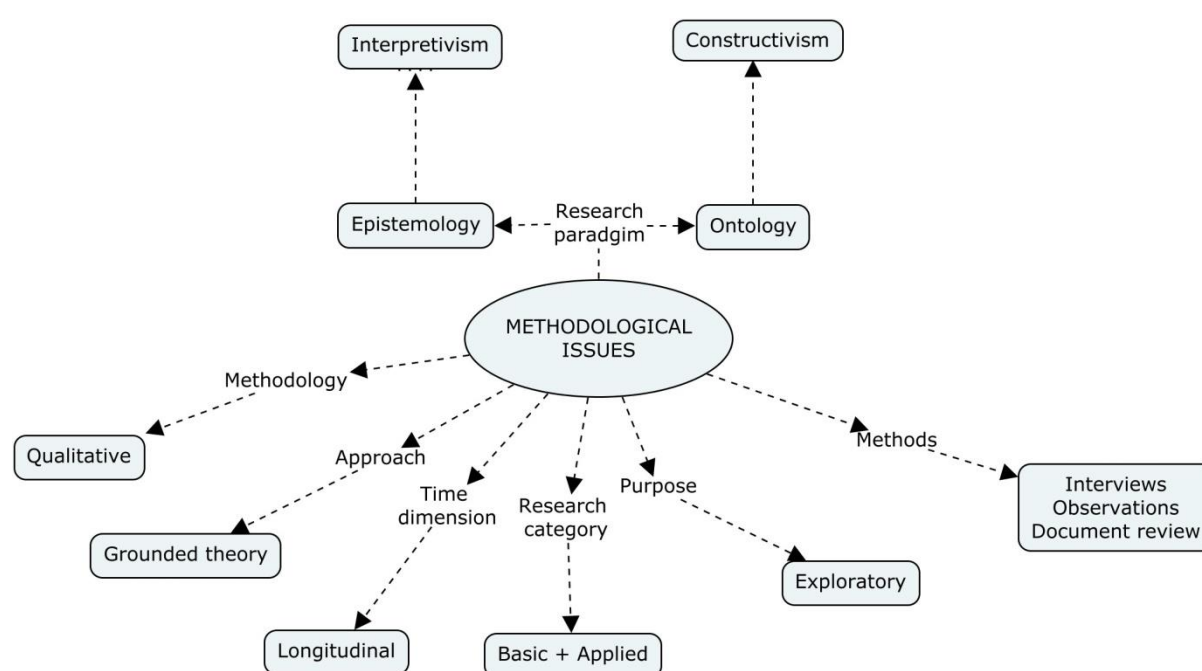


Table 1: Study population

Section/Department/Unit of the participant(s)	Participants and their designation	Number of participants
Public Archives and Research	2 Archivists and the Deputy Director of the Public Archives and Research Section)	3
Records Services	2 Records Management Officers and the Deputy Director Records Services	3
Audio-visual Unit	2 Archivists	2
Oral History Unit	1 Oral historian	1
Reprography	1 Illustrations officer	1
Conservation	1 Conservator	1
Information Communication Technology (ICT)	1 ICT specialist	1

The Editor National Archives of Zimbabwe	1
The Director National Archives of Zimbabwe	1
Archives users (visitors who were found at NAZ during the period of research	15
Members of the general public were conveniently selected from the registrar general's birth certificate offices in Harare (This particular place was targeted because it receives people from all the corners of the country).	25
Total number of participants	54

Findings and discussion

Access policies, guides and procedures

An access policy is a critical document that should ideally communicate the laws, regulations, orders, judicial decisions, internal rules and donor agreements that affect access and use of archives (Peterson, Choy, Domarkas, Moura& Shapley 2014). The study found that NAZ did not have a written access policy. The lack of an access policy is a serious blockade that has hindered NAZ from attaining full access. Moyo (2012) lamented the absence of a clear cut access policy at NAZ indicating that the absence of the document has been detrimental to archival access. There is no clear cut access policy to guide the archivist on the provisions of access to the archives. The provision of access to the archival material largely depends on the archivist's experience, skills and capabilities as an individual. The absence of a written and published access policy at NAZ makes it difficult for members of the public to understand the institution and to know some specific aspects of and conditions regarding access to the archives. The absence of an access policy at NAZ implies that the people's understanding of which materials are accessible and or inaccessible to is limited. Members of the public are also denied knowledge on exceptions to general restrictions such as when a person may be granted special access to records about themselves or which they have created. An access policy primarily sets out the basis on which access decisions are made. Its absence at NAZ suggests that the institution's consistency in its application of access and use of archival materials is compromised.

Access and use of documentary heritage at NAZ by the people

The current study established that NAZ is relatively experiencing a downward trend in its visitor-ship statistics. A look at the research room visitor-ship statistics depicted in Figure 2

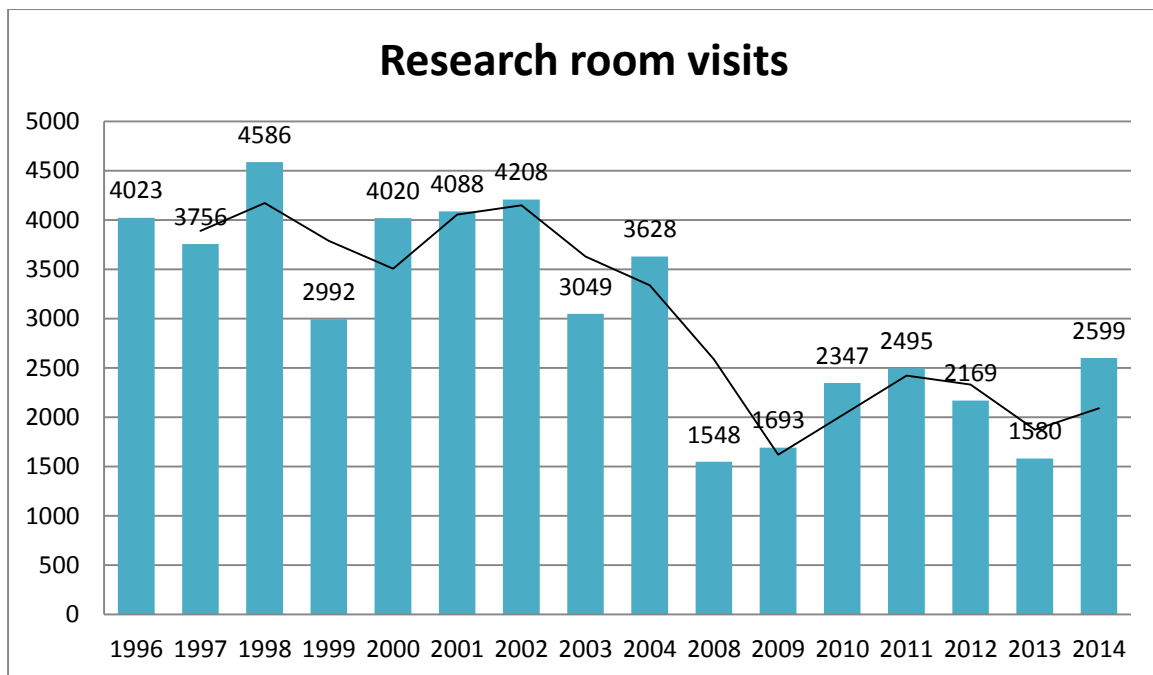


Figure 2: Research room visits

shows that the highest numbers of visits were recorded between the years 1996 to 2004. A similar pattern was detected on exhibition gallery visits where considerable numbers were last received between the years 1996 and 2000.

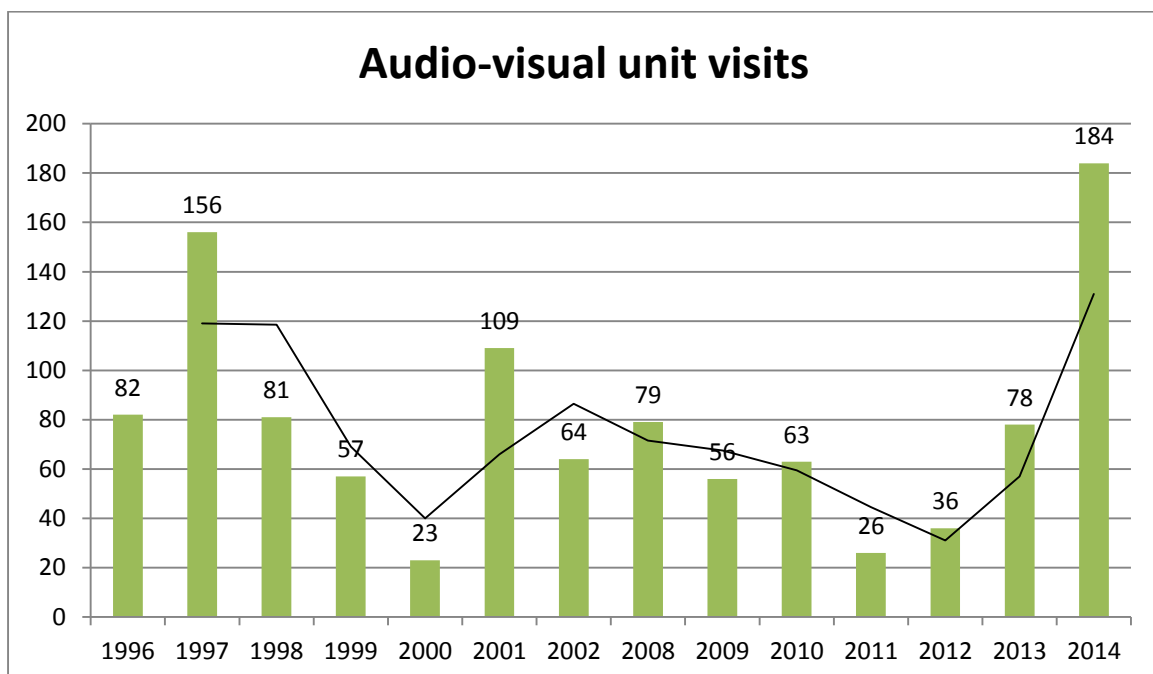


Figure 3: Audio-visual unit visits

A drastic decline in guided tours was also observed from an average of 2055 between the years 1996 to 2004 to an average of 39 between 2009 and 2014. The number of off-site

enquiries also dropped from an average of 120 between the years 1996 and 2002 to an average of 50 between the years 2003 and 2010.

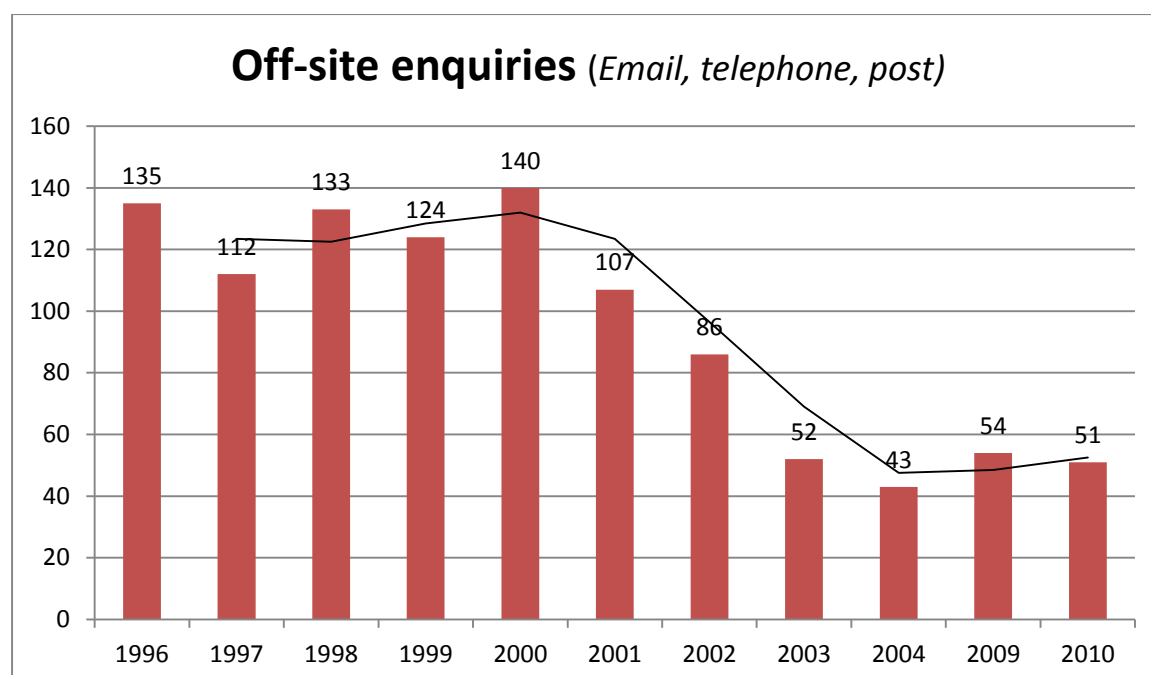


Figure 4: Off-site enquiries

The low utilisation of archives is not only peculiar to Zimbabwe as Kamatula,Saurombe&Mosweu (2013) indicated that the underutilisation of archives has been a burden for ESARBICA. This is probably why NAZ chose the theme ‘archives, uses, abuses and underutilisation’ when it hosted the xxiii biennial ESARBICA conference in 2015 (Saurombe&Ngulube 2016b).

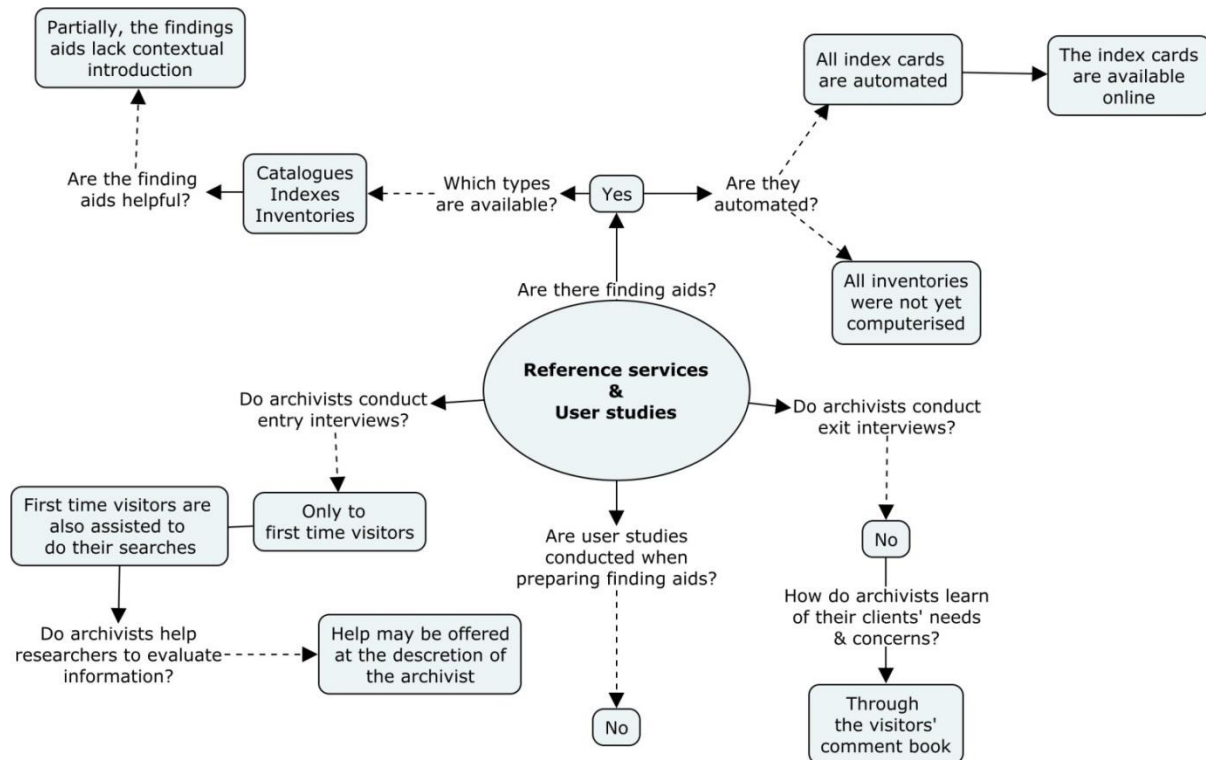
The continued decrease in the number of visits to NAZ is a serious cause for concern as it threatens the institution’s existence and relevance to the society. The perceived struggle by NAZ to attract relatively large visitor-ship places the institution in a precarious position that may eventually make it difficult to justify its need for continued financial support from a government that is reportedly hard hit by financial shortages and operating on a shoe string budget. In the same vein, Ngulube (1999) argued that the underutilisation of an archival institution affects the long term survival of the archives in terms of funding. Dwindling numbers in archival visitor-ship is a recurring challenge that has been detected in the public archives of the member states of ESARBICA namely Zimbabwe, Malawi, South Africa, Kenya, Mozambique, Swaziland, Lesotho, Botswana, Angola, Zambia, Tanzania and Namibia (Kamatula 2011; Ngoepe&Ngulube 2011; Ngulube, Sibanda&Makoni 2013; Saurombe&Ngulube 2016a).

Processing

The current study found that the amount of unprocessed archives at NAZ is growing at an alarming rate. In 2011, it was reported that there were 11, 000 cubic feet of unprocessed records at NAZ (Murambiwa&Ngulube 2011). The current study established that the volume of unprocessed archives had escalated to 35, 000 cubic feet by December 2016. This implies that the volume of unprocessed archives is increasing at an average of 4, 800 cubic feet per year. As such, if no action is taken to rescue the status quo it means that in the next five years NAZ might be having an approximate of 59,000 cubic feet of unprocessed archives.

The continued increase in the volume of unprocessed archives at NAZ confirms the concern that was expressed by Prom (2010) who indicated that processing is at the heart of what archivists do yet it has been given little attention and less priority. The huge volume of unprocessed archives at NAZ negatively affects the bibliographic access to records as attested by Ngulube (2006). The many efforts by NAZ to enhance access and use of archival materials in its custody are being thwarted and compromised by the large volumes of unprocessed archives that disturbingly continue to grow.

Archival reference services and user studies



The current study found that NAZ has the fundamental finding aids to assist researchers identify the materials needed for their research inquiries. Furthermore, all the index cards in

the public archives and research section are computerised and available online. The presence of finding aids and retrieval tools at NAZ positively implies that bibliographic access to the archival collection is at least guaranteed. As noted by Mazikana (1999), access to public records can only be assured where finding aids are in place.

The full potential and benefits of the finding aids at NAZ is however negatively affected by the lack of user studies in producing the retrieval tools. The finding aids at NAZ do not provide the narrative portions that describe the background of a collection such as how and when it was formed. The finding aids are also silent on how the archival material was acquired and how the archival staff has arranged the materials in the collection. In this light, the archivists at NAZ are exposed to allegations of undertaking their descriptive work with a limited understanding on how researchers find and use archival materials. The utility of the finding aids at NAZ is therefore questionable as Cox (2008) warned that finding aids developed without adequate user studies may not stand the test of time.

The current study established that NAZ does not conduct proper user studies and therefore risk losing its existing clientele while compromising its ability to lure new archives users. Lack of user studies by NAZ implies that the institution neither has a good understanding of its current users nor its potential clientele (Yeo 2005). Furthermore, the dangers of not conducting user studies are that the archives will become invisible in the communities that they meant to serve (Saurombe&Ngulube 2016a) and it becomes difficult for archivists to justify the budgets required to run their institution (Reid 2010).

Besides completing the research enquiry forms and the visitors' register, NAZ does not do any other entry interview to gain knowledge on the researcher's needs and expectations. Similarly, with the exception of the visitors' comment book no other efforts are in place to perform exit interviews so as to obtain the views and comments of researchers. Overall, the current study established that NAZ is falling short on user studies, hence denying itself a health ground on which archivists are enabled to make decisions concerning access and use of archives. The lack of user studies also implies that the ability by NAZ to come up with archives products and services that adequately serve the people is severely compromised. Such a scenario naturally discourages potential patrons from visiting the archives as people tend to seek services that are embrative of their needs and expectations (Evans 2007). The reluctance by an archival institution to conduct user studies suggests that the institution might be prioritizing record keeping at the expense of facilitating access to archival records (Ceeney 2008; Ngulube&Tafor 2006; Battley& Wright 2012; Kim, Kang, Kim & Kim 2014).

Preservation and access

NAZ takes both reactionary (conservation) and proactive (preservation) approaches in ensuring its archival collection is in good condition. Some of the proactive approach includes the availability of reading room rules that are primarily meant to protect archival records from damage by researchers. The reading room rules are a preservative mechanism meant to keep the archival materials in a good condition, hence making them usable by members of the public.

NAZ has a conservation unit that is relatively active in cleaning, mending, binding and de-acidifying archival materials. The amount of conservation activities has significantly dropped from an average of 12 584 items between the years 1995 and 2002 to an average of 1 902 items between the years 2003 and 2014. The on-going preservation and conservation activities (however low as they may be) are an indication that the institution is determined to fulfil its mandate of preserving and making available archival materials. In that regard, it is worth reiterating that archival materials that are not in good condition cannot be made available for use to researchers, hence all preservation and conservation endeavours can be perceived as efforts to enhance access and use of archives.

The public perception NAZ

While a considerable number of people proved to at least know of the existence of NAZ, there are many people who are not even aware of NAZ's existence (See section 5.3 for the statistics). Some thought NAZ is a central government office that keeps unwanted government records while others confused it with a museum. What was mostly disturbing in the findings was that the few people that had indicated knowledge on the existence of NAZ were not clear on the institution's functionalities. Further disturbing was the finding that most of the respondents had not visited the archives except for school trips that were done during their school days.

The findings on the public perception towards NAZ show that the institution is relatively invisible to the wider society. This is probably due to the fact that NAZ's outreach and public programming activities are for most of the time limited to the same crowd. It could also be a result of the institution's reluctance to employ wider reaching tools such as the print media, radio and television. The results of the current study pertaining to the public perception of NAZ support the argument by Blais and Enns (1990) who observed that archivists seem to be hesitant and uncomfortable with the image and visibility issue. As such, archivists tend to deliberately give a blind eye to increasing their visibility in the public domain and resort to what they regard as the core archival functions, thus acquisition, appraisal, arrangement and description.

The lack of knowledge amongst members of the public on the existence of NAZ affects the level of access and usage of the institution's holdings. As argued by Sulej (2014) there are a lot of people who are not using the archives because they either do not know about its existence or they have a misconstrued thinking about the institution and its services. Echoing similar sentiments is Jimerson (2003) who advanced the argument that there are a lot of people who are not aware that some of the information they seek is available at an archival institution. Mason (2011), Ngoepe and Ngulube (2011) and Saurombe and Ngulube (2016b) consolidates the argument by highlighting that only a small percentage of people know that archives are public information resource centres. Consequently, very few people frequent the archives in search of information, hence negatively affecting the access and use levels of archival holdings.

The findings of the current study regarding the public perception of NAZ sadly confirms the observation by Sulej (2014) who indicated that national archival institutions are often perceived by many people as foreign bodies isolated from the populace. Similarly, Haritz (2001) as well as Ngoepe and Ngulube (2011) observed that public archival institutions seem not to enjoy prominence in the public domain as most people confuse archives with museums and even think of archives as old buildings full of ancient dusty boxes.

Physical access and other restrictions to accessing and using the archives

Figures 5, 6 and 7 depict the only three available access routes from the car park to the main building that houses the public archives and the exhibition gallery and other offices.



Figure 51: The closest access route to the main building from the parking area



Figure 62: The second closest access route from the parking area to the main archives building



Figure 73: The third access route from the parking area to the main archives building

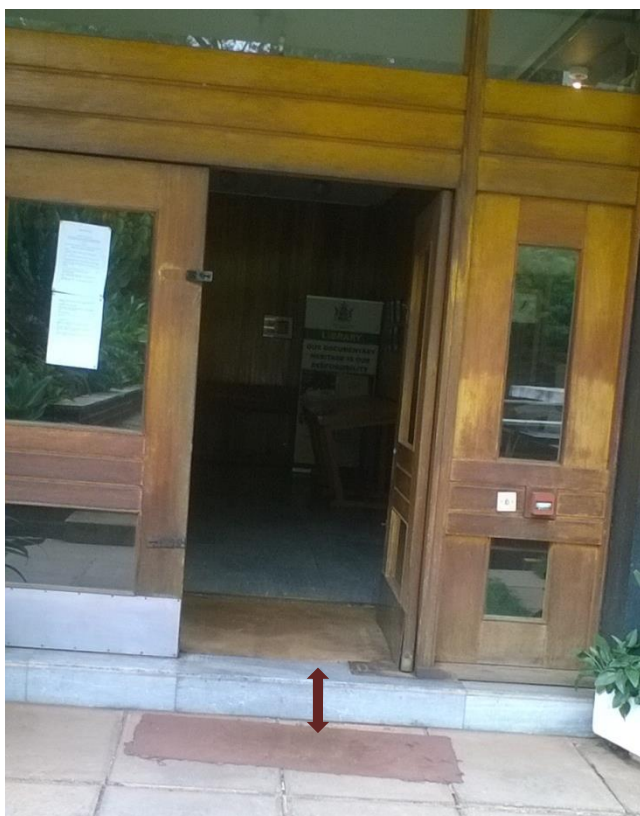


Figure 8: Entrance to the main archives building

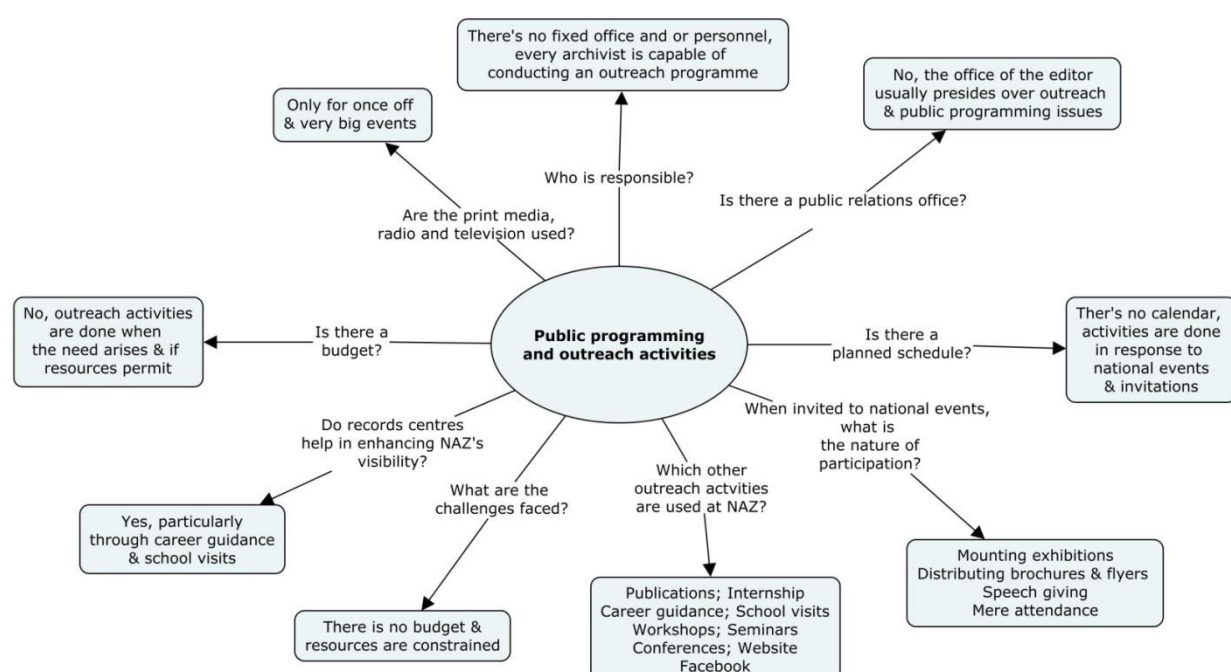


Figure 94: Entrance to the reading room (Right) and entrance to the exhibition gallery (Left)

NAZ had neither facilities to assist the physically challenged nor laid down procedures for responding to disability needs. Such a situation exposes NAZ to litigation of violating the rights of a particular group in society to accessing and using public information. The provision of facilities to cater for the physically challenged is required by law. The Zimbabwe Disabled Persons Act of 1992 Chapter 8 Section 1 Items (a) and (b) stipulate that no disabled person shall on the ground of his ability be denied admission into any premises to which members of the public are ordinarily admitted to. The provision of any service or amenity ordinarily provided to members of the public must also be provided to persons with physical challenges. In support of the law, Murambiwa and Ngulube (2011) as well as Kilasi, Maseko and Abankwah (2011) opined that national archival institutions are obliged to cater for people with physical challenges.

Other findings regarding physical access to Zimbabwe's documentary heritage indicated that people in need of consulting the archival collection relating to Matabeleland region should visit the national archives in Bulawayo while those who wish to consult the archival collection relating to the rest of the country should visit the national archives in Harare. In light of this finding, it is indisputable that geographical barrier is one of the major factors hindering access and the subsequent use of the archives in Zimbabwe. Limiting access and use of archives to physically visiting Harare or Bulawayo implies an extra cost towards accessing the archives. To that effect, a study that was done by Murambiwa and Ngulube (2011) on access and use of archives in Zimbabwe suggested that the archives should be taken to the people by decentralising public archives to the regions and provinces.

Public programming



Although the current study found that NAZ does not have a permanent or fixed office, department or team that deals with outreach activities, it was a positive establishment to find that the institution carries outreach activities particularly through the office of the editor in conjunction with the IT department.

The results of the study indicated that NAZ practitioners are confident that they have the required knowledge and skills to do public programming. Although public programming was reported as not so frequent an activity, it is crucial to highlight the confidence in NAZ archivists that they possess the fundamental skills to do public programming implies that the programmes are effectively done on the few occasions which they are done. As argued by Saurombe and Ngulube (2016b), the knowledge and skills of archivists in public programming is essential in making sure that the quality of programmes provided is not compromised.

The ways that have been used by NAZ to enhance its visibility and the subsequent use of its holdings include participating in national and historical events, publications, broadcasts, the internship programme, permanent and temporary exhibitions, carrier guidance, college and school visits. Brochures and flyers are also available. It was further established that NAZ archivists not only participate in local and international conferences, but have also organised and hosted conferences, workshops and seminars. Further efforts were reported from the audio visual unit that has managed to launch a mobile archives campaign. The existence of outreach activities at NAZ implies and that members of the public have an increased chance of learning about the existence of NAZ and its services. The probability of NAZ boosting its access and use levels is therefore relatively high. This is so because outreach programmes provide a unique opportunity to improve the awareness and use of archival holdings (Ngoepe&Ngulube 2011) and they are an essential means for increasing the utilization of archival materials (Kamatula 2011). If properly done, the end result of outreach and public programming strategies is improved access and use of the archival holdings.

It is however disturbing to note that NAZ has neither a budget for public programming nor a planned schedule for outreach activities. The activities are done as and when the need arises and if the resources are available. The responses obtained by the current study show that the participation by NAZ is usually in response to national and provincial gatherings that would be happening in the country. While this is obviously a commendable effort, the danger of concentrating on particular events is that NAZ will be reaching out to nearly the same crowd all the time. Thus they will be preaching to the already converted, hence denying themselves a chance to reach out to a new audience. In relation to this finding, Kamatula (2011) indicated that public programming activities are only concentrated in particular areas

leaving the wider community unaware of the archival services. To that effect Chaterera (2016) challenges archival institutions to widen their targets by not limiting their outreach activities to the same audience all the time and seek to reach a new clientele. Sharing the same sentiments is Bacon (2014) who asserted that national archival institutions need to connect with a diversity of people. The same argument was echoed by Blais and Enns (1990) who argued that national archival institutions need to increase their visibility and accessibility by reaching out beyond specialized groups such as historians and genealogists.

The use of print media and digital technologies in promoting access and use of archives

The use of digital technologies, the internet and print media in national archival institutions presents a unique opportunity for archival institutions to make visible their existence, products and services, hence increasing the access and use levels of their holdings. In relation to this matter, the current study established that NAZ has a relatively functioning website that offers an online database, quick reference services and links to the various sections of the institution. Essentially, the information that is available on NAZ's website enables researchers to prepare for their physical visit to NAZ. The availability of a website at NAZ implies that the institution has one of the excellent means by which an archival institution can provide information about its products, services, repositories and collections (Jimerson 2003). This increases the opportunity of boosting the access and use levels at NAZ.

Of importance to note is that while NAZ's website offers virtual finding aids, the actual archival collection is not digitalised and therefore not available online. Archives users have to physically visit NAZ if they wish to consult the archival collection. The current study established that NAZ has a Facebook page and it also has a Skype account.

It was a positive result to establish that NAZ is on Facebook and it actually has a page and not a group. Unlike a group, a page is authoritative, authentic and represents a real organisation as it may only be created by an official representation of the institution (Chaterera 2015). Nevertheless, it is not adequate for an institution to merely create a Facebook page and fail to engage the audience and make continual updates. In that respect, the current study found that NAZ is putting remarkable efforts in regularly updating its page. The results of the study also indicate that NAZ has considerably publicized its Facebook page. This is evidenced by the relatively high number of likes and followers on the page. As indicated in the previous chapter, as at 12 April 2017 NAZ Facebook page had 660 likes and 648 followers. This was a sharp increase compared to 192 likes that were observed on 15 June 2014 (Chaterera 2015). A random calculation of the figures implies that

the number of NAZ Facebook followers is growing at an average of 156 people per year ($660 - 142/3 = 156$). If the trend continues at the same rate, NAZ can boast of 1 440 followers by 2022 ($156 \times 5 + 660 = 1\,440$). The presence of NAZ on the social media network and its ability to attract a large following presents a unique opportunity for the institution to dramatically improve access, use and user satisfaction.

The use of the print media, national radio and television by archivists has been attested to hold the potential to increase the public awareness and subsequent use of the archives. In that regard, the current study established that NAZ only uses news releases, radio and the television when there is a big event. It was emphasised that NAZ does not usually use these platforms because they require money and using them would also appear as if the institution is now into commercial marketing. The sentiments gathered in this study were that there is no need to market the archives as archives by their sheer importance market themselves. Such findings reflect reluctance by NAZ to employ the print media and broadcasting services. This means that the institution is limiting its potential to enhance the level of access to the archives.

Conclusion and proposed framework

Work in progress...