# Online presence of public archival institutions of South Africa

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – In the wake of the fourth industrial revolution, where most information is accessible online, archives should be visible online for them to fulfil their legislated mandate and facilitate access to information resources. The Covid-19 pandemic has further underscored the importance of online platforms in making archives accessible without the public having to visit archival institutions physically. The purpose of this study is to examine the extent to which public archival institutions of South Africa are visible online with the view to deepen their understanding of how archives promote themselves online.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The study employed content analysis to establish the online content of public archival institutions in South Africa. A google search was conducted using the names of the archival institutions as search terms. The top results obtained after the search were recorded for further analysis.

**Findings** – The findings suggest that public archival institutions in South Africa have limited online presence. Only the National Archives of South Africa had an active website with collections that are accessible online. Some provincial archives had websites hosted by their parent bodies while others had no websites at all. Only the Limpopo and Eastern Cape provincial archives had their Facebook pages in the top results. There were no signs of other social media sites in the top results.

**Originality/value** – The study concludes that public archival institutions are not visible online. All provincial archives need to have websites where they can be accessed. The use of social media platforms needs to be prioritised. In this fourth industrial revolution age, people communicate and interact online. Public archival institutions should therefore make it their primary mandate to take the archives to where the people are currently meeting.

**Keywords** South Africa, Social media platforms, Online platforms, Online archives, Public archival institutions, Public programming

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction and background to the study

In the wake of the fourth industrial revolution, where most information is accessible online, archives should be visible online for them to fulfil their legislative mandate and facilitate access to information resources. Information technology and the internet have transformed many aspects of human lives and they are a huge part of today's culture. As a result, archivists and records managers should be responsive to the environment brought about by the fourth industrial revolution in which they find themselves. Prisecaru (2016) highlights that the fourth industrial revolution is mainly based on internet and green energies. The internet being about allowing easy access to information and easy trade for goods and services while green energies centre around clean energies and the cognisance of the energy impact on the environment. The increasing online transactions and availability of information online speak directly to information professionals including archivists. Mukwevho and Ngoepe (2018) argue that part of the mandate of public archives repositories in South Africa is to take archives to the people. Access to records and archives is a very important aspect to society and there is a need for the general public to be made aware of the treasures the archival institutions are storing on behalf of society (Kamatula, 2011). Cook (1990) warns that archives are not a private playground for professionals, but they are a sacred public trust for preserving society's memories that must be widely shared. Archives belong to the people, and they need to be taken out of hiding and be made available to ordinary people.

The sharing can be done through public programming. Public programming can be explained as all activities undertaken by archival institutions to promote access and use

of their archival holdings. Ngulube and Saurombe (2016) describe public programming as a function performed by archivists to create awareness of their archives. From the review of literature, public programming initiatives may include exhibitions, outreach activities (visits to schools, colleges etc.), public presentations, workshops, publication and distribution of brochures, flyers, press releases, newsletters, mass media advertisements and features, public displays, archives open days and archives weeks, curricular exercises, telemarketing, and use of the internet among others (Mnjama, 2009; Kamatula, 2011; Saurombe and Ngulube, 2016).

The importance of public programming can never be over emphasised. Njobvu *et al.* (2012), and Saurombe and Ngulube (2016) recorded that archival institutions in most African countries are experiencing low user turnout. Mnjama (2009, p. 8) stresses that "if most of us were forced to justify our existence through the numbers of scholars we served, we would be out of business". Governments are under pressure to maximise resources and archives must justify their existence by creating awareness and attracting increased usage of their holdings in this age of great competition where every government function must be justified.

Lacking in the literature are the nuts and bolts of how public programming is done online by archival institutions in South Africa. Saurombe (2019) investigated how public archives in East and Southern Africa can create awareness through social media. The findings suggested that social media platforms were not a preferred option in outreach strategies in East and Southern Africa, even though they were generally recognised as useful means to reach online information seekers. Liew *et al.* (2015) argue that social media use in archives engages new communities of users, provides powerful tools for advocacy and outreach, and democratises the institutional management of cultural memory.

Mukwevho and Ngoepe (2018) also agree that to increase the visibility of documentary heritage housed in archives repositories in South Africa and other parts of sub-Saharan Africa, social media tools can be used. Mosweu (2019) also investigated the use of social media platforms for increased access and visibility by the Botswana National Archives and Records Services (BNARS). The study revealed that while BNARS was visible to users and potential users online, the legal and policy framework was found to be lacking. This current study therefore aims to examine the extent to which public archival institutions of South Africa are visible online including on social media, with the view to deepening their understanding of how archives can promote themselves online. The specific objectives to this study include:

- Assess the status of public archival institutions' websites in South Africa.
- Assess the coverage of public archival institutions on social media sites.
- Establish the type of public programming information available online.
- Determine the coverage of public archival institutions in key search engines.

## Contextual setting

The South African public archival repositories consist of the National Archives and Records Services as well as the following nine Provincial Archival Repositories (Republic of South Africa 1996):

- Eastern Cape Provincial Archives.
- Free State Provincial Archives.
- Gauteng Provincial Archives.
- KwaZulu-Natal Provincial Archives.
- Limpopo Provincial Archives Service.
- Mpumalanga Provincial Archives Service.
- Northern Cape Provincial Archives Service.
- North-West Provincial Archives and Records Services.
- Western Cape Provincial Archives and Records Services.

Public archival repositories are expected to promote access and use of their archival holdings through public programming initiatives.

## Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine the extent to which public archival institutions of South Africa are visible online with the view to deepening their understanding of how archives promote themselves online.

## Problem statement

The fourth industrial revolution has revolutionised how people access information globally. Archival institutions as the providers of archival records in different countries are directly affected by the status quo. Access to these archives provides citizens with valuable information about what archival institutions hold and encourages them to know about their cultures and heritage. It is expected that these institutions adapt to the changing environments for the benefit of users. However, in South Africa, public archival repositories are struggling to reach out to users (Saurombe, 2016; Manganyi, 2021). Saurombe (2016) and Manganyi (2021), regard public programming activities and outreaches as important tools for communicating archives to citizens and organisations. However, Mukwevho (2017) observed that public programming initiatives currently in place are not effective enough, as such initiatives are not having the desired effect because public archives in South Africa are still faced with visibility and accessibility challenges. Mnjama (2009) stresses that if archival institutions in most African countries were forced to justify their existence through the numbers of clients they serviced, most would be out of business. Therefore, this study aims to examine online presence of public programming information in the public archival institutions of South Africa.

## Brief literature review

The nature and type of archival users have been changing over the years. The traditional archival repository's priority was more on preservation and mainly limited to institutional resources (Rhee, 2015). Furthermore, reference archivists have traditionally played a critical role in mediating between users and the materials they wish to use (McCausland, 2011). In recent times we find archives that are born digital, while others are digitised. The biggest portion of the world's population are engaging digitally. McCausland (2011) further highlights that archival institutions are transitioning towards online access by

placing finding aids online to provide access. In South Africa, Schellnack-Kelly (2017), highlights that digital collections are only available to visitors who visit the memory institutions. Having said that, the literature review suggests that users start their information searches by consulting online search engines such as Google instead of visiting memory information institutions (Green 2006, Harley 2007, Schellnack-Kelly 2017). Users ideally prefer digital content in virtual space where they can easily access and interact. The 21st century brought the age of social media and Web 2.0, characterised by user participation and collaboration in online spaces through technologies such as social media. Social media tools provide an opportunity for people and organisations to connect using cellular phones. Rahman *et al.* (2020) argue that integrating social media and other RSS tools may be a good alternative for archival institutions to communicate with users and deliver archival services for promoting archival knowledge. Saurombe (2016) highlights blogs, mashups, photo sharing sites, podcasts and downloadable videos, really simple

syndication (RSS), news readers and social media sites as common technologies that can be used for online public programming. Public archival repositories in South Africa are not widely known institutions (Ngoepe and Ngulube, 2011; Saurombe, 2019), as a result, the interest in and use of archival repositories are minimal.

## Methods and materials

The study employed content analysis to establish the online presence of the National Archives and Records Services as well as that of the nine provincial archive repositories in South Africa. Searches were conducted using the top search engines that are used mainly in Africa. According to StatCounter (2022), Google, Bing, Portal search, Yahoo and Ananzi were the top five search engines with the highest search engine market share. Google was the overwhelming favourite with over 95% of the search engine market share, followed by Bing at 2.86%, Portal search at 0.44%, Yahoo at 0.35% and Ananzi closing the top 5 with 0.24% of the search engine market share. Google and Bing were therefore selected as the key search engines from which searches were conducted as they collectively held over 98% of the search engine market share in Africa. A search was conducted using the names of the archival institutions as search terms on the top 5 search engines highlighted above. Furthermore, different social media sites were visited to establish whether public archival repositories have social media accounts. Data was collected between March and July 2022. The search results were saved on Microsoft Excel for further analysis.

## Results and discussions

This section presents the results of the study according to the set objectives.

**Table 1** Status of public archival institutions

| Name | Web address |
|---|---|
| **National Archives of South Africa** | www.nationalarchives.gov.za/ |
| **Limpopo provincial archives** | No website |
| **Gauteng provincial archives** | No website |
| **KZN provincial archives** | www.kzndac.gov.za/ |
| **Free state provincial archives** | www.sacr.fs.gov.za/ |
| **North West archives** | www.nwpg.gov.za/ |
| **Northern Cape provincial archives and records services** | No website |
| **Western Cape provincial archive service** | www.westerncape.gov.za/ |
| **Mpumalanga provincial archives** | No website |
| **Eastern Cape provincial archives** | No website |
| **Source:** Author's work | |

**Table 2** Public archival institutions' social media sites

| Name | Facebook | Twitter | Instagram | YouTube | Other |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **National Archives and Records Service of South Africa** | *None* | *None* | *None* | *None* | *None* |
| **Limpopo provincial archives and records services** | https://m.facebook.com/profile.php?id=343561589187144&__tn__=C-R | *None* | *None* | *None* | *None* |
| **Gauteng provincial archives and records services** | *None* | *None* | *None* | *None* | *None* |
| **KwaZulu-Natal provincial archives and records service** | *None* | *None* | *None* | *None* | *None* |
| **Free State provincial archives** | *None* | *None* | *None* | *None* | *None* |
| **North West archives** | *None* | *None* | *None* | *None* | *None* |
| **Northern Cape provincial archives and records services** | *None* | *None* | *None* | *None* | *None* |
| **Western Cape provincial archives service** | *None* | *None* | *None* | *None* | *None* |
| **Mpumalanga provincial archives service** | *None* | *None* | *None* | *None* | *None* |
| **Eastern Cape provincial archives** | https://web.facebook.com/The-Eastern-Cape-Provincial-Archives-and-Records-Service-216742572130662/photos/ | *None* | *None* | *None* | *None* |
| **Source:** Author's work | | | | | |

# Status of public archival institutions' websites in South Africa

Archival institutions worldwide make use of websites to make their information available online (Theimer, 2011). In South Africa, provincial archives function as sub-directorates of provincial departments (Archival Platform 2015), and it is expected that their websites will be hosted by their mother-body. The results of the study as presented in Table 1 show that NARSSA, KwaZulu-Natal provincial archives, Free state provincial archives, Northwest provincial archives as well as

Western Cape provincial archives were the only ones with an active link to their site while there was no website for the other four provinces.

# Coverage of public archival institutions on social media sites

Mukwevho (2017) highlights that public archival institutions should look at social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube to increase the visibility of collections in their possession. Mabapa (2022) further suggests

**Figure 1** Social media coverage of public archival institutions
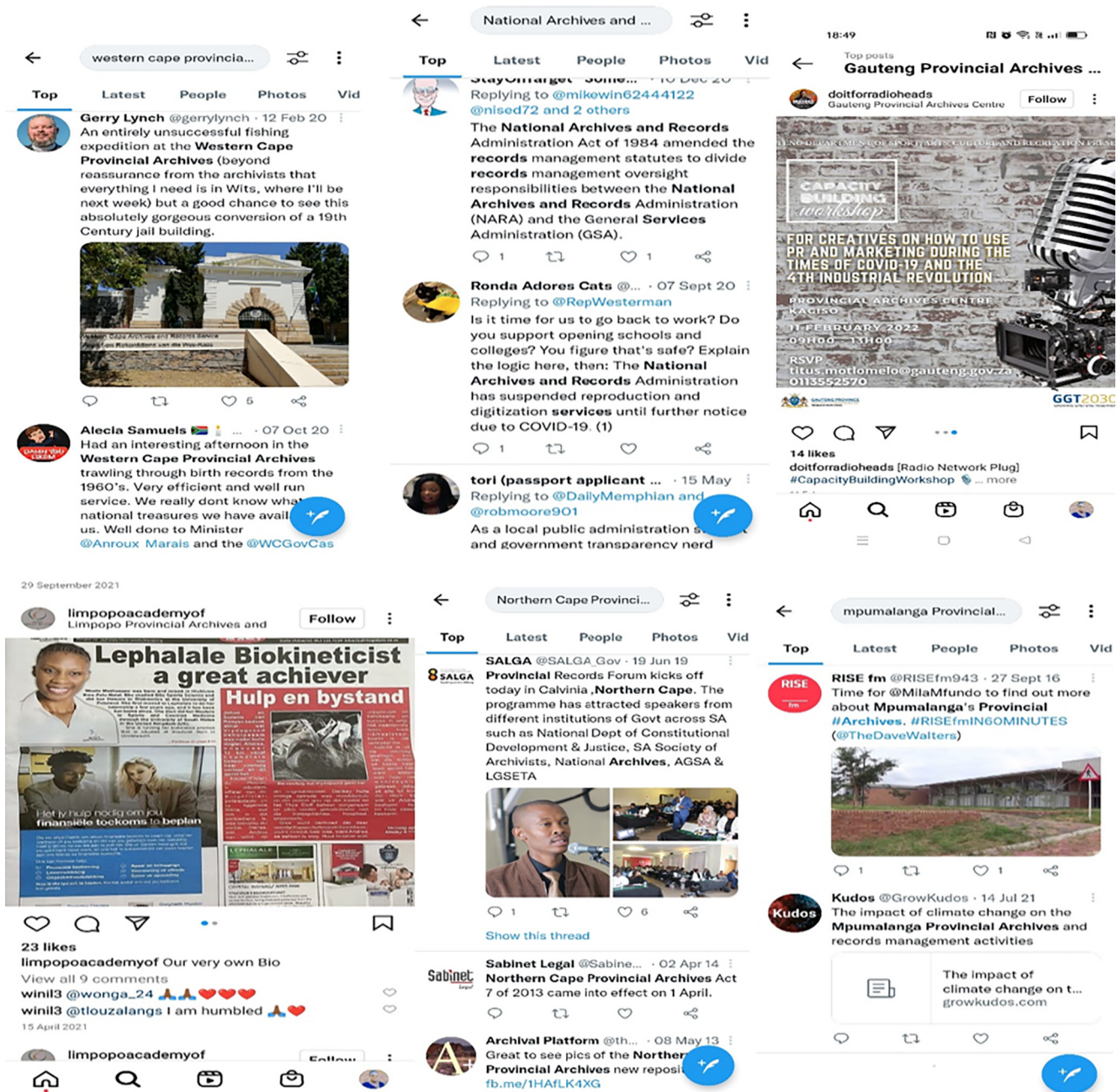
that NARSSA uses social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook to reach out to users. However, the results of the study suggest that most public library repositories are not using social media (see Table 2). It is, however, important to note that even though there are clear indications that public archival institutions do not have official social media sites, searching across different social media sites suggests that people are talking about public archival institutions despite their absence (see Figure 1).

## Public programming activities available online

Saurombe (2016) discusses various online resources that may be used for public programming in the archival institutions. The results of the study suggest that there was limited information that promoted archives online. Archival institutions mainly get coverage when there are events that are on the calendar, such as the archives awareness week. In addition to the events covered during the archives week, the Western Cape provincial archives have a guided tour that can be attractive to users. However, NARSSA had more coverage due to their active website and some of the public programming activities available when one conducts an online search; this includes friends of the archives, exhibitions as well as film and music festivals (see Table 3).

## Coverage of public archival institutions in key search engines

Google and Bing are the leading search engines that are used to search for information. Together they have a search engine market share of over 97%. The results of the study as presented in Table 4 suggest all public archival institutions had millions of hits when searched across key search engines; however, except for the NARSSA, the top results as displayed in Table 4 did not give the user anything tangible to use about the archives. In as

**Table 3** Public programming activities available online

| Name | Public programing activities available online |
|---|---|
| National Archives and Records Service of South Africa | *Archives Awareness Week, Friends of the archives, exhibitions, film, and music festivals* |
| Limpopo provincial archives and records services | *Archives Awareness Week* |
| Gauteng provincial archives and records services | *Archives Awareness Week* |
| KwaZulu-Natal provincial archives and records service | *Archives Awareness Week* |
| Free State provincial archives | *Archives Awareness Week* |
| North West archives | *Archives Awareness Week* |
| Northern Cape provincial archives and records services | *Archives Awareness Week* |
| Western Cape provincial archives service | *Archives Awareness Week; Guided Tour of the Western Cape Archives* |
| Mpumalanga provincial archives service | *Archives Awareness Week* |
| Eastern Cape provincial archives | *Archives Awareness Week* |

**Source:** Author's work

**Table 4** Coverage of public archival institutions in key search engines

| Institutions | Search engine | No. of hits |
|---|---|---|
| NARSSA | Bing | 1,340,000 |
| | Google | 28,100,000 |
| Gauteng | Bing | 286,000 |
| | Google | 718,000 |
| Limpopo | Bing | 272,000 |
| | Google | 195,000 |
| Free State | Bing | 7,120,000 |
| | Google | 9,650,000 |
| North West | Bing | 32,600,000 |
| | Google | 8,600,000 |
| Mpumalanga | Bing | 207,000 |
| | Google | 133,000 |
| Western Cape | Bing | 376,000 |
| | Google | 1,080,000 |
| Northern Cape | Bing | 115,000 |
| | Google | 1,330,000 |
| KwaZulu-Natal | Bing | 11,500,000 |
| | Google | 556,000 |
| Eastern Cape | Bing | 317,000 |
| | Google | 1,160,000 |

**Source:** Author's work

much as there are too many hits when end users search public archival institutions in key search engines, the results are mainly speeches by ministers, research articles about public archival institutions and little about what public archival institutions can provide to users.

## Conclusions and recommendations

The study concludes that the online presence of public archival institutions is very limited. However, this differs from one province to the other because operations in public archival institutions are not standard. As a result, not all public archival institutions have an active website. The national archives have an active website while some provincial archives are hosted by other departments such as arts and culture. When it comes to the use of social media for public programming, the study concludes that public archival repositories are not using social media. Having said that, a search across social media sites revealed that in as much as public archival institutions do not have their official social media accounts, the public continues to post about them on social media in their absence. The study findings also suggest that archival institutions mainly focused on calendar events such as archives awareness week for public programming; however, the Western Cape provincial archives additionally have a guided tour that can be attractive to online users.

The study therefore recommends that provincial archives should adopt what the national archives are doing and maintain an active website that is easily accessible to users. Furthermore, the use of social media platforms is highly recommended for public archival institutions because users are continuing with the discussions on different social media platforms without participation from them. In addition, more online public programming initiatives are recommended to ensure that public archival institutions are visible and present online.

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