

The value of information in South Africa's new democracy

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Introduction

In this paper, we trace the link between information and democracy through an analysis of the current approach of a new democratic government in South Africa which succeeded a government whose foundational philosophy was the denial of freedoms to the majority and the entrenchment of privilege for the white minority. In this analysis, we uncover continuities and discontinuities and account for the flux and policy drift with respect to the freedom of information manifest in the two regimes. We examine the famous quotation attributed to Thomas Jefferson that “Information is the currency of democracy” and explore the extent to which, in spite of its longevity, the claim is applicable today in contemporary South Africa. Thus we question what the consequences are when people are excluded from the possibility of enjoying the currency in a proclaimed democracy and also what the effects on democracy are of a debased currency, manifest, for example, in misinformation and over-regulation of access to information. We surface evidence of these paradoxes in our examination of the sort of democracy South Africans now enjoy and how information policies and practices impact on its full expression – not only through universal suffrage but also in active citizenry. We conclude by reflecting on how libraries promote deliberative democracy and can disrupt the dominance of entrenched knowledge systems that marginalise the local and indigenous.

The state's stranglehold on information in the pre-democratic state

The pre-democratic regime was marked by brutal oppression of people and the suppression and distortion of information which took effect in a network of legislation designed to assert and entrench the privilege of the white minority and to subjugate the black majority, while at the same promoting the fiction internally and externally that it upheld democracy. The main pieces of legislation (Legal veneer, 2013) relating to the theme of this paper are:

- Population Registration Act No. 30 of 1950 (1950) the fundamental piece of legislation that distributed privilege, and withheld basic rights according to “race”. From this cornerstone legislation arose a number of security and other laws which disempowered people and hindered the free flow of information, for example.
- The Bantu Education Act of 1953 whose philosophy was based on inferior educational provision for people other than white.

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