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**LIBERATION IN SOUTHERN AFRICA AND THE DIGITAL
IMAGING PROJECT OF SOUTH AFRICA: A HISTORIAN'S
PERSPECTIVE**

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This paper discusses the most important digitization project yet undertaken in South Africa, and the only truly national one. While I have been able to draw upon my own involvement in this project in writing this paper, what follows is a personal interpretation and is in no way to be regarded as representing the views of either DISA or Aluka.

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In 1997 the Mellon Foundation made known that it wished to consider funding a South African project to put material into electronic form. It should be a national project, and at the cutting-edge of digitization. At a meeting held at the University of the Witwatersrand, a committee of librarians, archivists and historians was elected to come up with a project proposal. As one of the historians on that committee, I then argued for a project on the freedom struggle in South Africa, a topic of obvious relevance to the country itself and to a wider scholarly community. We decided that we would propose the digitization of anti-apartheid journals from 1960, when the main resistance organizations, the African National Congress (ANC) and Pan-Africanist Congress, were banned and went underground, to 1990, the year of the

breakthrough to a negotiated settlement (the period was later extended to 1994, when Nelson Mandela was inaugurated as the first democratically elected president of South Africa). A scanning facility for the project was set up at the Campbell Collections at the University of Natal (as it then was; it is now the University of KwaZulu-Natal) in Durban, and as the project advanced remote capture sites were established at a number of other universities and institutions around the country. The aim was to digitize as complete a series as possible of some forty anti-apartheid journals, many of which had been produced underground or semi-legally, and therefore were often printed on poor paper and were not easy to locate. One of the aims of the project was to bring together scattered holdings, so that scholars could have ready access to as complete a set of the journals as possible via the website <http://disa.nu.ac.za>.

Digitization was to be undertaken to the highest standards, and a fully searchable database created. A long process of learning how to achieve this took place, during which the Digital Imaging Project (known by the acronym of DISA, the name of a rare flower to be found mainly on Table Mountain) helped train people from different centres in the technical aspects of digitization. By 2002, as this first phase of the DISA project was coming towards an end, DISA was encouraged to submit a new proposal to Mellon for a second phase.

The first phase had produced a coherent body of primary material, useful for scholars and undergraduate students, and deciding on which journals to digitize had been relatively easy. Copyright problems only presented themselves in a few cases, and after an initial attempt was made to obtain permission to digitize, the DISA project

went ahead and put up the journals on its website, by now being used increasingly both within the country and abroad. While there was a period of uncertainty while the second phase was getting going, DISA added some new journals from the 1950s and a newspaper, so that the first phase in the end produced some 70,000 pages of content.

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What was the second phase to be? The DISA governing committee decided that it should be related to the first, and also concern the freedom struggle in South Africa, but should involve new types of material. In this phase, other primary material would be digitized, whether from archives or interview material, and could be text, audio or even video. My own teaching of a third-year course on 'Liberation in Southern Africa' at the University of Cape Town, and my involvement in the 'Road to Democracy' Project of the South African Democracy Education Trust, which aimed to rewrite the history of the liberation struggle in South Africa, suggested that such a project would meet the criteria of relevance and importance that we had set. The South African negotiated settlement was often held up as a model of how to resolve conflict, and the unexpected 'miracle' that had been achieved in the early 1990s, tied to the iconic status of Nelson Mandela, meant that the way in which South Africa had achieved its liberation from apartheid and had moved to democracy was of world-wide significance. We now envisaged that we would not remain exclusively tied to material in South Africa itself, but would also digitize material relating to freedom struggles in neighbouring countries that were intimately connected with the South African one, especially the struggle that had taken place in Namibia to free that country from South African rule. A proposal to this effect went to Mellon, which received it favourably and made a second grant to DISA.

It took some time to appreciate the difficulties involved in finding suitable content for the second phase. For some of the technical people involved in the project, content took second place. Their main concern was not the digital content, but with coordinating a national effort to establish guidelines and best practice for digitization. DISA, they hoped, would become the body through which all other digital imaging projects in the country would relate, and DISA would set standards in digitization for the country as a whole. But what became increasingly clear was that in the second phase, more than the first, content was crucially important, and the selection of content would be the key to the success or failure of the project. This related directly to the issue of sustainability. The large set-up costs provided by Mellon could not possibly be recovered, but it was hoped that the DISA project would be sustained beyond the point at which Mellon funding ended, and for that, the content would have been of interest to a wide range of institutions able to pay to access it.

At this point, Mellon also funded a related, more ambitious project known as Aluka, the word appropriately being based on a Zulu word meaning 'to weave', for Aluka wished to bring together scholarly content from different parts of the world. The Aluka project had various African components, one on plants, another on heritage, and a third on freedom struggles in the southern Africa region, including South Africa. The potential for overlap with the DISA project caused much debate and contention before the relationship between the two became clear. DISA, it was agreed, would concentrate on South Africa and become, in effect, part of Aluka.

Aluka set up separate committees in other countries in the southern African region - Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe and Mozambique - and brought together the various committees in annual regional meetings, the first of which took place at Irene, outside Pretoria/Tshwane, in March 2004, and the second in Windhoek in March 2005. As the various freedom struggles were to some extent inter-connected, there was much scope for people from the different committees to work together, and for members of the committees in other countries to learn from the expertise that DISA had built up since it had come into existence. On the other hand, the regional structure helped defuse the idea the DISA, as a project based in South Africa itself, had hegemonic aspirations to take over as the driving-force behind digitization in the region as a whole. Allen Isaacman, a historian at the University of Minnesota and one of the leading scholars of Mozambique, became Aluka's adviser, and helped steer the project through the difficulties that such a regional project presented. The chairs of the various country committees were leading scholars or archivists of their respective countries, and they in turn brought experts together to decide on content and to deal with the technical issues involved in digitization. Aluka was quick to grasp the nettle of sustainability and made clear that it would charge those in the global north for access to its website, but those who provided it with material and those based in Africa itself would have free access. Aluka would digitize the same kind of material that DISA had proposed for phase 2 of its project. As some of this was from archives and repositories in different overseas countries, the digitization of such material would mean that previously dispersed material would be 'returned', at least in a virtual sense, to the country or origin or the one to which it related. [1]

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How, however, would the content be selected? When the DISA committee began to grapple with this, it only slowly realized the complexities involved. In the first phase of the DISA project, once a journal had been selected all its issues were then digitized. But who was to select material for the second phase, and on what basis?

The DISA governing committee decided to appoint a small content committee to take key decisions on selection. This committee then devised an elaborate architecture for the project, setting out the categories and sub-categories for which material was to be found, with approximate numbers of pages for each. This architecture was in itself to some extent controversial, for the significance of different categories was to some extent a matter of debate. It was decided to leave maximum flexibility, within the constraints of the number of pages that could be digitized. For while there was an almost limitless amount of material that could in theory be digitized, a finite number of pages could be digitized within the funds available (150,000 pages for phase 2 of the DISA project, perhaps 250,000 pages for phase 1 of the Aluka project).

How to go about finding the necessary material to fit these categories and sub-categories? It was initially suggested that the institutions holding the material could be approached and asked to identify key material, but it was unclear whether they would have the expertise to do this, or sufficient commitment to the project. It was decided, therefore, that specialists would be approached, scholars who would select suitable material and write, in a few introductory paragraphs, brief contextual essays to set the material into an appropriate context and refer users to other relevant material. It was recognized that some of those who might be able to select suitable material might not have the knowledge or ability to write suitable contextual

introductory essays, and that in such cases other specialists would write such essays. The key question then became how to identify such specialists, and how to encourage them to undertake the work.

To push this process ahead, the DISA governing committee decided in early 2005 to appoint a content manager, whose task it would be, with the content committee, to find scholars to do the work, and to keep track of their progress. The content manager would be recompensed on delivery of the work of the scholars, and scholars would be encouraged to participate in the project by a monetary payment (necessary in part because such work would not bring with it any credit on the national accreditation system for scholarly work). As this paper was written, it remained to be seen how willing scholars would be to give time to this project, and how coherent the material that would be digitized in the first year or so of the new project would prove to be, though in a digital project it is of course easy to fill gaps down the line.

Once content was chosen, there remained the possibility that it might not be usable because of copyright problems. And there were other unresolved issues. It seemed that political problems might prevent ready access to all ANC material, though Mellon was funding the organization of the ANC archives. In compiling content on the history of freedom struggles, where should one begin? Ideally, the content would begin prior to 1960, but using digital space for the early history of freedom struggles would mean taking it from the decades that were key to phase 2, as they had been to phase 1. Who should be included in the history of freedom struggles was also not always clear. In South Africa, the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) had viewed itself as part of the liberation movement, but after 1979 the main liberation organisation had

seen it as a collaborator with the apartheid regime. While the ANC spurned those who worked within the apartheid system as stooges of that system, some of those who did so argued that they did so to overthrow it. Should they then be included? How much space should be given to illustrating the nature of the repressive systems against which the freedom movements fought?

It was agreed that the project should not merely reproduce nationalist paradigms and grand narratives, and should, so far as possible, introduce a critical dimension that would allow for a range of actors and ideas to be represented. Nationalist narratives tended to exclude those who in the end did not achieve victory, and airbrush out of history those who fell by the wayside. This project, it was agreed, should reflect the histories of all those who fought for freedom and should problematise the freedom struggles, by including material on debates within them, and on different ideas and different concepts of the meaning of liberation. One problem, however, was that there were relatively few scholars able to write on such debates and issues, and even fewer who had actively done research in this field of relatively recent history.

There were, too, questions of co-ordination, for some libraries and organisations had their own websites on which they were already posting similar digital material. Among the most important of these were the archives of the University of Fort Hare (www.liberation.org.za/), South African History on-line (www.sahitory@online.co.za) and the ANC (www.anc.org.za). There were already websites for, say, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (www.doj.gov.za/trc/), and concerned with anti-apartheid organisations in the U.S. and elsewhere (www.africanactivist.msu.edu; www.ukzn.ac.za/aam2004; www.liberationafrica.se/).

Despite such problems, phase 2 of the DISA project is in 2005 making progress, and it is hoped that by sometime next year a sizeable archive will be available on-line, on both the DISA and the Aluka websites. If that goal is successfully achieved, it is possible that the Mellon Foundation or other donors will in the future continue funding this important digital initiative.

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[1] In the languages of northern Namibia, the word 'aluka' means 'to return' or 'to repatriate'. Aluka is in turn an initiative of Ithaka. On the relationship between Aluka and Ithaka see [http:// www.ithaka.org/aluka](http://www.ithaka.org/aluka).

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