

South Africa needs to digitise its heritage content

South African universities, public libraries and historical archives are sitting on treasure troves of valuable documents and manuscripts that have yet to be digitised. As a result, these historically significant documents are not easily available to historians and other academics for their research, and are also at risk of being lost in events like fires or civil unrest.



Source: www.pexels.com

That's the word from Robert Crowther, CEO of FCTEC, a specialist in digitisation and electronic content management solutions. He says that the threat to books, films, photographs and records in the University of Cape Town's (UCT) special collections during the Table Mountain fire earlier this year highlighted the importance of digitising heritage content for the sake of preservation.

"Because UCT had invested in digitisation before the fire, a wealth of irreplaceable content was preserved for future generations," says Crowther. "Yet the reality is that there are many historically significant documents in archives and libraries around the country that have yet to be digitised. Most institutions lack the budget and in-house expertise to digitise their records."

Crowther says that the benefits of digitisation of historical records and manuscripts go far beyond preserving the content in the event of a disaster like the fires in Cape Town. It also means the documents can be studied without the need to handle physical manuscripts, which will help extend their lifespan.

Digitisation makes information more accessible to researchers around the world, contributing to the generation of new knowledge and insights. "Many researchers from international universities are interested in records in South African archives," says Crowther. "Right now, they generally need to go to the institution to see the paper or microfiche records."

Specialist knowledge and equipment

One of the major challenges that universities and other historical archives face is that the specialised technology needed to scan and capture historically significant documents remains relatively expensive. There is also a shortage of skills and knowledge in South Africa about the process of preserving heritage material.

“The technology today allows us to capture extremely high-quality scans, but it’s essential to get the right colour and image quality across each document, to handle old and fragile materials with sensitivity, and to use the correct file format for future preservation,” says Crowther. “Right now, there is also a lack of information sharing and standardisation between archives and libraries in South Africa.”

Although the regulations in the National Archives Act set some basic standards, most institutions are today following their own process with little inter-institution coordination. “In this regard, South Africa has fallen behind the rest of the world,” says Crowther. “During Heritage Month, it bears thinking about how we will bring the preservation and sharing of our heritage documents up to world standards.

“FCTEC believes that now is the time to start a national effort to establish standards for digitisation of our heritage content as well as platforms to make this rich historical information more accessible online,” he adds. “By making heritage information searchable and shareable, we can not only ensure the integrity of records for future generations, but also help to unlock new insights and knowledge from old records.”

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