**The destruction of libraries is a unique social conflict**

*The aim of the article is to articulate the targeting of libraries as a unique social conflict that requires further scholarly analysis. There is substantial evidence to show that academic libraries ought to be proactive in the transformation agenda of the university. This article represents a paradigm shift from dominant student perspectives that are based on party politics.*

It is important to be clear from the outset. The intention of this article is not to say the destruction of libraries by fire is perpetrated by students during protests or any other suspect. Libraries of all types are important knowledge centers that should be protected and preserved for future generations. However, the pattern of similar events relating to academic libraries in South Africa requires further analysis. More so because discussions about transformation in higher education by student leaders are highly politicized. The discussions seldom consider scholarly perspectives. For instance, the destruction by fire of the library of the Ahmed Baba Institute of Islamic Advanced Studies and Research in Timbuktu in 2013 raised concerns among the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) and the Library and Information Association of South Africa (LIASA). The burning of the University of Kwazulu-Natal (UKZN) Howard College Law Library was part of the discussions within the Library and Information Association of South Africa (LIASA) in 2016. We have witnessed a similar phenomenon with the recent destruction by fire of one of the University of Cape Town Libraries. Yet, academic libraries do not feature prominently in discussions on transformation.

As we commemorate Africa month, the question information workers should ask themselves is why transformation in academic libraries seems such a noble idea to pursue yet so difficult to talk about? This article employs the idea of a knowledge system as a theoretical framework to call attention to transformation in academic libraries, and libraries in general.

**Academic libraries and the knowledge system in society**
Traditionally, libraries support the teaching, learning, and research activities of universities. Their support functions can be broadly construed as organization and storage, as well as the distribution of knowledge. These functions are directly linked to processes that are relevant in society's knowledge system. According to Dick

(1982), society's knowledge system consists of knowledge production, knowledge organization and storage, knowledge distribution, and knowledge application. However, academic libraries only focus on the second and third processes (i.e. organization and storage, distribution). The oversight of the first, and fourth processes (i.e. knowledge production and application) in the functions of academic libraries raises questions about the competing interests and ideologies academic libraries serve. This problematizes academic libraries' position, responsibility, and response to social conflict. Academic libraries are often targeted in different types of protest action in society because of their focus on recorded knowledge, and their close relationship with universities.

**A broader societal problem**

In 2021, we have seen a resurgence of student protests similar to those in 2015 and 2016, and previous generations. Other researchers have also noted the destruction of community libraries during protest action (see Mojapelo and Ngoepe, 2020). Students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds, who are mostly from the diverse black ethnic groups of South Africa, continue to experience numerous challenges relating to financial exclusion, and other deep-seated issues in universities and colleges. There seem to be underlying issues central to student protests. However, such underlying issues are often hidden from the surface and eclipsed by a national discourse that is often dominated by party politics. Matambo (2021) notes that the latest student protests are indicative of a deeper problem bedeviling South Africa. This problem is caused by the perception that democracy has not delivered on the promises that were made to black South Africans in 1994. Although priority was given to student fees by protesting students between 2015 and 2021, issues related to the hidden assumptions that inform the recorded knowledge academic libraries organize, store and distribute are yet to be ventilated.

**A necessary turn to the social context**

Beyond a political lens, the analyses of the nature of academic libraries, and the position of libraries within the broader society require that we also borrow insight from the sociology of knowledge. The author proposes that, during Africa month, the discourse on "decolonization" and "Africanization" makes a scholarly turn to the

sociology of knowledge. By locating libraries within society's knowledge system (Dick, 1982), we will be able to understand why the history and nature of libraries make for such a difficult topic that should feature prominently in discussions and debates on transformation in higher education.

**Transformation in academic libraries**

At present, discourse on transformation in academic libraries is a bone of contention between two camps: information workers who are insensitive to broader societal issues, and want to maintain the status quo; and information workers who recognize decolonization as democratization (Kumalo, 2021). There is a sophisticated contestation of ideas among different racial groups in institutions of higher learning. Evidence of the contestation can be found in the dissertations and theses by young black scholars who are asking epistemological questions (see for example Molepo, 2018). Information workers should be sensitive to broader societal issues in order to avoid the usual reactionary approach to events such as the destruction of academic libraries at the University of Cape Town. Transformation in [academic] libraries is an important topic to discuss. In conclusion, academic libraries should feature prominently in transformation plans of universities.

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