

Opening up South Africa's Heritage

A new project titled Open SA! aims to make South African historical and cultural material widely accessible, by allowing ordinary people as well as professionals to share their heritage online and make it available for republishing and remixing, for the benefit of all.

"We believe that getting ordinary people involved in sharing their history on the internet with artists, historians, students and researchers is a great way to keep local history alive and accessible," said the Open SA! team in a statement.



The Open SA! project is an initiative of popular positive-themed blog SA Rocks and the African Commons Project, a Johannesburg-based non-profit organisation that works to empower communities towards innovation, creativity and wisdom through the internet and other new technologies.

African Commons is working closely with the Alexandria Archive Institute, which is building a collection of open access, internet-based resources for archaeology and world history.

Using the principle of public domain – works that the public may copy, adapt and share without limitation – Open SA! gathers, tags and manages relevant submissions from contributors from all facets of society, and makes them freely available online.

The Open SA! team has another mission, and that is to reach out to young creative voices in South Africa, with a view to teaching them how to find open content that they may freely and legally adapt and share.

Finally, for those whose material needs to be digitized first, Open SA! plans to arrange digitization drives, with the help of volunteers, to transfer collections into the correct format.

Shared Heritage

South Africa's national Department of Arts and Culture, the custodian of the country's rich and diverse heritage, has long held that shared heritage is an important tool in social cohesion and nation building.



The Encyclopaedia of South African Arts and Culture, currently in beta testing, defines nation-building as the fostering of a sense of pride and knowledge in all aspects of South African culture, heritage and the arts.

An additional aspect of nation building is the encouragement of mutual respect and tolerance and inter-cultural exchange between various cultures and art disciplines, which in turn facilitates the emergence of a shared cultural identity based on diversity.

Open SA! takes advantage of new developments and publishing platforms, such as blogging and citizen journalism, and online publishing of photographs, videos and music, which it views as vital components of a new form of democratic speech. This, it says, should be nurtured, and one of the best ways to do that is to provide easy access to quality resources and materials.

Citing examples such as the speech former president Nelson Mandela delivered on his release from prison in 1990, or his successor Thabo Mbeki's rousing "I am an African" speech, the Open SA! project says that these priceless resources should be available to more than just the professional journalists, filmmakers and researchers who were traditionally authorized to re-publish them.

To this end, the public is encouraged to submit their material or material belonging to friends or family, provided that contributors either own the copyright to the materials or have written permission from the copyright holder.



Leading the Field

One of the first contributors to Open SA! is new media specialist and photographer Gregor Rohrig, who has made available a classy selection of his photos taken around Johannesburg.

All photos are licensed under the Creative Commons concept and may freely be shared and remixed,

provided that proper attribution is given, images are used for non-commercial purposes, and any adaptation of the works is distributed under the same or a similar license. These conditions may be waived with permission from Rohrig.

Commenting on the wealth of historical and cultural material held by South Africans, Rohrig asked, "What good are these materials if they cannot be used and reused creatively?"

The talented photographer expects the local creative industry to be even more inspired and encouraged with the unlocking of local resources that have previously been inaccessible.

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