

Disaster at the Mzuzu University Library:
How a fire in 2015 destroyed the existing library, and why scholars disagree on the
progress observed in the library restoration process

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On December 19, 2015, a horrific fire and barriers to emergency response destroyed much of the Mzuzu University Library in Malawi. Only a few news sources and one academic group describe the fire, the damage it caused, and the immediate emergency response procedure in detail (Chavula, 2015; Chideya-Mana, 2015; Chawinga & Majawa, 2018). The restoration of the original library's collection and resources is assessed by student and faculty satisfaction levels in two main studies that present contradictory findings (Chawinga & Majawa, 2018; Chipeta et al. 2018). Still, these two studies on the library's restoration and development offer an interesting comparison of pre-2015 and post-2015 Mzuzu University Library preservation practices. Aubrey Harvey Chaputula, a library science scholar and assistant librarian at Mzuzu University, has written on Mzuzu University library consistently between 2011 and 2020. His work serves as a reference point that helps place the two contradictory 2018 studies into a larger context. Although Chipeta et al. (2018) more accurately highlights the library's disorganizations, Chawinga & Majawa correctly praise the Mzuzu University Library for its quick restoration between 2015 and 2018 (Chawinga & Majawa, 2018; Chipeta et al. 2018).

The only sources describing the damage of the 2015 Mzuzu University Library fire are news articles, which Chawinga & Majawa (2018) denounce as untrustworthy and misinformative. These news media sources speculate that the fire started from electrical faults "when switching over from the national power grid to backup generators" (J. Chavula, 2015). These sources also state that students fought against emergency responders at the scene, and that other unspecified onlookers stole books from those trying to gather them for repair. Chavula (2015) paraphrases a fireman's statement as "they would have saved almost half the library had they been allowed access." It is unclear in existing literature on the Mzuzu University library fire why emergency responders experienced resistance upon their arrival. Currently there aren't

adequate answers explaining why this fire occurred and why those at the scene hurt immediate, emergency preservation efforts.

Chawinga & Majawa (2018) offer the most extensive assessment of the official damage caused by the Mzuzu University Library fire. The items damaged include: “53,000 books, 68 desktop computers, 403 reading chairs, 62 reading tables, 111 shelves, three heavy duty photocopiers, eight printers and other countless valuable items” (p. 184). The general extent of damage quoted is confirmed in Chideya-Mana’s 2015 news article. The total monetary value of the destroyed items was “approximately \$7,854,952” (Chawinga & Majawa, 2018, p. 184). Chawinga & Majawa explain that the only reports on the fire come from local news media, and describe the misinformation and speculation from these news sources as damaging to Mzuzu University’s reputation and student morale. However, they do not correct the information reported in local news.

There was a plan set prior to this disaster that was put into motion “immediately after the disaster” (Chawinga & Majawa, 2018, p. 185). A temporary “interim” library was set up in the University Hall to quickly set up space for library staff and university students (p. 185). Facilities and tools were the first items to be replaced, and by 2018, had been restored to over three-quarters of the former library capacity (Table 1). These included “office spaces, barcode readers, printers, Internet, desktop computers, photocopying machines, LCD projects, CCTVs and digital cameras” (p. 186). While Internet may have been available by 2018, it should be noted that Internet services in the 2018 interim library were reported as lacking (p. 187).

In contrast, Chipeta et al. (2018) found the interim library’s restoration of technological resources to be “underdeveloped” (p. 8). Specifically, Chipeta et al. reported that students’ computer access was limited by “frequent power outages, underdeveloped ICT [information and

communication technology] infrastructure including low Internet bandwidth and the high cost of Internet connectivity in the universities” (p. 8). Chipeta et al. (2018) states that the Mzuzu University interim library has yet to make satisfactory progress in its restoration. This view contradicts the survey findings of Chawinga & Majawa (2018).

After replacing facilities and tools, the library staff worked to replace their collection of books and articles. The disaster response plan created an opportunity for the Mzuzu University interim library to expand its digital collection, which they attempted, but the assistant librarian stated ““there were many issues that required to be sorted out including copyrights, negotiation for licenses and costs for full e-book books or individual chapters”” (Chawinga & Majawa, p. 187). This assistant librarian was likely Aubrey Chaputula, who held the position from 2014 through 2020 and has written extensively on the Mzuzu University library. The interim library’s available electronic books and interlibrary loan services formed a fraction of the former library’s collection (p. 187). Yet the print collection of books and articles, as well as the collection of electronic articles, was fully replaced (in numbers, but not necessarily in specific content) by 2018 (p. 187).

Chipeta et al. (2018) again contradict these findings. In their survey, analyzing first-year undergraduate students’ library usage at Mzuzu University, Chipeta et al. found that “most of the information resources that the students used were old (p. 8). This survey contradicts the findings of Chawinga & Majawa (2018), which concluded by stating that fifteen of the seventeen library staff members participating in their study reported as satisfied with the interim library (p. 190). This does provide an alternative view of the interim library’s lack of digital resources.

Potential causes for differing results between these two post-fire assessments of the interim Mzuzu University Library include the survey sample size (Chawinga & Majawa sampled

sixty-five students and seventeen staff members, while Chipeta et al. collected responses from one-hundred and thirty-five students), the fact that Chipeta et al. only surveyed first-year students, or the fact that Chawinga & Majawa sought context and clarification for survey results in an interview with the assistant librarian.

To fully understand the collection preservation and restoration project from 2015 to 2018, it is essential to understand the Mzuzu University Library strengths and struggles prior to the December 2015 fire. Chaputula (2011) states that challenges to the library's collection preservation and growth included securing its budget, developing its physical book collection and available technological resources. Chaputula lists "collection development activities, staff recruitment and training, infrastructure development, and internal and external travels" as aspects of Malawi libraries which grew from increased budgeting despite the larger, worldwide economic crisis in 2011 (p. 569). Despite the growth observed in local libraries, the Mzuzu University Library did not secure similar funding. Chaputula (2011) quotes the Mzuzu University Librarian as saying "Approved budget is only on paper. The money is not always available. It is the same as having no budget at all" (p. 570). The unclear budgeting raises questions as to the overall organization of the library.

The detailed study and analysis by Chaputula & Kanyundo (2014) on Mzuzu University Library's collection practices provides a reference point for the two 2018 surveys on the interim library collection restoration progress. From a study on the selection, acquisition, weeding and preservation of the existing physical collection, they determined that the Mzuzu University Library had no collection development policy. Specifically they state that "collection developers had no clear ideas on what sort of materials they were supposed to acquire, in what quantities, how they were supposed to procure those resources, how they were supposed to handle worn out

materials, etc.” (Chaputula & Kanyundo, 2014, p. 324). Out of the 3563 books examined, Chaputula & Kanyundo found duplicate purchases, outdated purchases, and haphazard book keeping records (321). The timing of this article just before the 2015 fire and the destruction of most the library’s collection could not have been better.

Chaputula et al. (2020) interviewed library staff members on the usage of WhatsApp as a useful and efficient form of communication with patrons. This study is important because it shows the growth of the Mzuzu University library since the 2018 surveys. Chaputula et al. analyzed WhatsApp specifically because it was popular, inexpensive and efficient. WhatsApp is an optimal technological tool for an institution like the Mzuzu University library, which experiences issues with its budget, technological resource availability and internet usage.

The fire which burned down the Mzuzu University Library in 2015 was so destructive partially due to its general disorganization. Chaputula established the library’s lack of a budget in 2011, and of a collection development procedure in 2014. The fire itself was worsened by people at the event who interfered with emergency responders and preservation personnel. With this context, the contradictory findings of the two studies conducted in 2018 (Chawinga & Majawa; Chipeta et al.) make more sense. The larger sample size and the first year students as the chosen survey population group make Chipeta et al. (2018) a more reliable study with suggestions for improvement. An important note from Chawinga & Majawa is that the growth of the interim library between 2015 and 2018 was quick and noteworthy. Chaputula’s study on the use of WhatsApp in the Mzuzu University Library in 2020 hints at a larger trend toward technological growth since the two studies were published in 2018.

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