

**DIALOGIC PROPERTIES OF UNIVERSITY WEBSITES: A CASE STUDY OF  
THE UNIVERSITY OF GHANA WEBSITE**

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## DECLARATION

I, Laura Mabel Korkuvi, hereby declare that, except for the references to other works which have been duly cited and acknowledged, this work is entirely mine and conducted under the supervision of Dr. Daniel M. O. Adjin of the Department of Communication Studies, University of Ghana, Legon.

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## **DEDICATION**

To God be all the Glory.

Pearl Joan Ayawo Korkuvi; Sis, I appreciate your support through it all.

And to my family.

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## ABSTRACT

Corporate communication tools and processes have, over the years, evolved from the use of traditional methods to the use of internet-facilitated new media. Public relations practitioners are leveraging these new media, such as websites, to engage with their increasingly well-informed and globally-dispersed publics. This is on account, principally, of the opportunities that new, digital and internet-enabled, technologies, are offering bi-directional and interactive communication. Using Kent and Taylor's (1998, 2002) five principles of dialogic public relations as the theoretical foundation, this study sought to examine the dialogic properties and potentials of the University of Ghana website, and to find out how these could be exploited to meet the needs of the University and its diverse publics.

The study employed an inductive research approach, entailing a mixed methods design of a qualitative content analysis of the University of Ghana website and in-depth interviews with two assistant registrars at the Public Affairs Directorate, the public relations arm of the University, and also the head of the University of Ghana Computer Systems (UGCS), in charge of the back-end of the website.

The study revealed that the University of Ghana website was being used mainly for image-building and information-sharing purposes. While much of the indicators of dialogism were observable on the website, there were, also, a wide and unexploited range of dialogic capabilities which, as the interview respondents affirmed, made the University's corporate website a largely under-utilised public relations resource.

Based on the findings of the study, recommendations were made both for further research and for enabling greater, two-way symmetrical engagement by the University of Ghana and other institutions that seek to be globally relevant and competitive.

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# **CHAPTER ONE**

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY**

Information and communication technologies have significantly influenced the nature and processes of human and organizations functioning in every age. Thus, within the last generation, society has evolved from an industrial age (Toffler, 1990), to an information age (Naisbitt and Aburdene, 1990) and even lately, an interactive age (Milne, 2007). As a consequence, organisational communication has gone beyond traditional methods such as face-to-face, group, and even mass communication channels such as radio and television onto online and digital technology platforms. The advent of the internet, especially the World Wide Web (WWW) or simply the web, has played an important role in contemporary organisational communication. In particular, it has revolutionized communication in all fields of corporate communication such as public relations. For instance, in recent years, advancement in internet technology has become a threat to traditional postal services as people now prefer electronic messages also known as ‘electronic mail’ or ‘email’. In addition, through the internet, many people communicate using Blogs, social media (such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter), Internet Relay Chat (IRC), Instant Messaging (IM) and Video Chat. Websites are ‘new media’ channels which continually give individuals, organizations, governments and international agencies a global appeal.

Unlike what was the norm a few years back, now corporate communication/public relations practitioners are leveraging technology to effectively reach and engage with their different,

and often globally-dispersed publics. This is in contrast to conservative and traditional public relations media (i.e. trade publications and brochures), and the mainstream print and broadcast media of mass communication. From the traditional notion of communication as a cog in the wheels of the organizational machinery, the role of the public relations practitioner was to scan the corporate environment and prompt management of the opportunities and threats to organizational goal attainment. The prevailing communication technologies and media were consequently exploited and applied for purposes of corporate image-building and media relationship development. To that extent, media technologies and platforms were imagined and employed in an instrumental way; as a means to achieve and maintain goodwill for the organization (Botan & Taylor, 2004).

In today's digital and internet-enabled global community, organizations of every type – public corporations, business enterprises, non-governmental organizations, educational institutions – are taking account of the potentials for dialogic relationship building (Grunig, 2009) and are going beyond the uni-directional processes of addressing their publics to a bi-directional engagement with their publics (Kent & Taylor, 2002). Technology is increasingly essential for firms to compete and prosper. The technological readiness pillar measures the agility with which an economy adopts existing technologies to enhance the productivity of its industries, with specific emphasis on its capacity to fully leverage information and communication technologies (ICTs) (Global Competencies Report, 2014).

Due to these developments in digital and internet technologies, it has become the norm to judge the international currency and competitiveness of an organization by its presence and visibility on the web. In particular, organizations are being evaluated in terms of their customer appeal by reference to the amount of traffic they attract; not only through their physical doors, but also via visits to their websites or social media platforms. With the evolution of online technologies from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 applications, the stakeholders

and clients of corporate organizations are more able to participate in the creation and mutual exchange of content. Accordingly, there has emerged, also in corporate communications literature, the concept of public relations 2.0 (PR 2.0) (Solis and Breckenridge, 2009).

Organizations and institutions that are taking the most advantage of these technological innovations within the web 2.0 sphere are the multinationals; or organizations with a global profile and client base. One such sector where internet-facilitated global visibility and communication practice is extremely important is in the area of education. Increasingly, Universities and other institutions of higher learning are coming to terms with the need to look beyond their local or national boundaries in order to improve their presence and competitiveness on the global educational league table. One consequence of this globalisation (or internationalisation) of tertiary education is that literally all Universities are increasingly using the web as a vehicle for student recruitment, the search for and retention of talented faculty, and improvements in their financial fortunes.

Universities today create web presence not just for the simple reason of providing information, but more importantly, to effectively communicate with their diverse 21<sup>st</sup> century publics. This latest generation of prospective tertiary students, called “millennials,” have, thanks to globalization, a vastly larger pool of options of Universities to choose from; thus, creating a buyer’s market in which supply must appeal to demand (Cafasso, 2007; Gohn & Albin, 2007).

### **1.1.1 Public Relations and the Internet**

Some 30 years ago, Grunig and Hunt (1984:6) defined public relations as “the management function of communication between an organization and its publics.” What

this definition sought to do was to reflect the then prevailing notion of public relations as the bridge between organizations and their publics – using various media channels which tend to complement each other.

The most basic function of public relations is to establish a relationship by engendering and fostering communication between corporations and their target audiences. Whether it is for the purpose of informing the public or to fulfil the need to connect with stakeholders, mutual dialogue, and influencing individuals, being influenced by them – in other words, two-way communication and feedback – constitute the essentials of public relations (Botan & Hazleton, 2006). Thus, the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) on its part defines public relations as “a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics”. The attributes of this definition reflect the contemporary orientation of public relations as not just a “management function” (as Grunig and Hunt suggested) but a “process” (which evokes the idea of a dialogic, two-way engagement). Such a dialogic process is enabled by the growing application of internet-enabled communication and social media platforms.

Research shows that using social media develops mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and target publics (Yang & Lim, 2009). In particular, new media channels, mostly internet-enabled, offer a leeway out of the unidirectional style which dominated communication approaches during the pre-digital communication era. They offer synergistic advantages to information dissemination than any other medium has ever offered; they transcend all geographical boundaries. According to Skinner et al (2004), the internet can be experienced in many different ways. Its three (3) best known faces are: email, online newsgroups, and the World Wide Web. In particular, organizations, and for that matter educational institutions, across the world are increasingly taking advantage of the World Wide Web to reach a wider and globalized public. These developments signal the changes

that the internet is bringing to the face of public relations. With the internet public relations communication interventions can be enhanced.

Guth and Marsh (2000) posit that communication technology has wrought a direct and patent impact on the practice of public relations. This seems logical, considering that public relations is about communicating, and that computer technology has undeniably revolutionized the broad field and practice of communications. Corporate websites have become the windows through which the people 'outside' an organization preview the organization. Beyond the 'window' function of websites, public relations practitioners communicate about the identity of the company, its history, mission, vision, goal and purpose of the corporation, about the products/services offered, contact information of the corporation, the sale of products/services online and even have the structure to provide after sale services, among others. Pflughoeft et al. (2003), Schneider and Perry (2001), and Turban et al. (2002) have respectively argued that the web can potentially be used for a variety of purposes, such as: communicating internally and externally, sharing data, searching for information on customers, suppliers and competitors, providing customer service and sales support, purchasing and selling products and services, and collaborative working. Huzingh (2000) argues that web technologies, normally the corporate websites, and also intranets and extranets, can be employed to provide corporate or commercial information to customers, business partners or other stakeholders (shareholders, employees, the public, etc.), and within this context, students and other stakeholders of Universities.

Website communication, besides reducing the costs typically associated with employing traditional communication tools, offers a unique and integrated opportunity for interacting with several of an organization's publics (both internal and external).

Biagi (2011), observed that technology makes delivery of messages, and monitoring of its impact on target audience faster, easier and better. He argues further that, public relations practitioners were previously concerned that technology diminishes the hands-on relationship with business, but are now beginning to realize that technology can only aid, and not replace, the potency of the human mind. In this way, all these technologies facilitate the exchange of information, collaboration and the possibility of establishing close relationships based on trust and mutual commitment.

As must-have PR tools, websites are offering a way to integrate text, graphics, sound and video (Bernard, 1996). According to Guth and Marsh (2000), beyond making organizations globally accessible, the internet also provides a means of collecting feedback and analysing public opinion. Websites, per their interactive nature, give Universities the most unique opportunity to nurture dialogism with their internal and external publics, gather and collate useful data, monitor opinions of their publics, among other uses.

University websites are gradually becoming one-stop shops where information that was previously carried in brochures, newsletters and the likes, are now presented. Unlike hard copy, one-way, communication channels like brochures, newsletters, fliers etc., websites come with an additional advantage of interactivity which has proven to be a more effective and productive way of communicating with stakeholders (publics).

Educational institutions at all levels need to understand how to best attract, interest, and satisfy diverse publics that include parents, students, alumni, teachers, public officials, community leaders, non-profit and not-for-profit organizations, and the media.

For Universities that are mostly resource-constrained, and yet required to effectively communicate with a broad spectrum of both academic and non-academic publics, dialogue is most important despite the cost associated with it. With internet usage becoming

widespread in every field, public relations operators have found a unique ally for interacting with their clients and target audiences (Jo and Jung, 2005: 25).

It has frequently been argued that today's public relations practitioners are not taking full advantage of the internet unless they emphasise and exploit its interactive properties to engage in dialogue with their publics. Thus, the concept of interactivity has become the "buzzword" in the public relations literature (Whitaker, Ramsey, & Smith, 2000, p. 350; Wilcox, 2001, p. 388). With no limits to internet usage, it is imperative that public relations professionals in Universities take advantage of the numerous benefits that come with having a web presence.

### **1.1.2 Internet Technology and University Online Presence**

The services provided by Universities – namely: teaching, research and community outreach – are diffused across a vast spectrum of special interest groups, a situation that creates a communication challenge. As websites gradually become choice media for public relations practitioners, the way around this challenge would be for institutions of higher learning to put real effort into using the new medium (websites) as a communications tool (Will & Callison, 2006). As Kent and Taylor (1998) noted, they "are a primary means for communicating with and responding to publics" (p. 267). Beyond the traditional means of mass communication, websites have fast become the most viable and most appropriate alternative media to reaching a sparsely located target.

The Global Competitiveness Report (2014) lists Ghana among the thirty-seven (37) countries in their first stage of a three-phase development continuum. Indeed, the Global Competitiveness Index (GCI), a comprehensive tool instituted to measure the national



competitiveness using microeconomic and macroeconomic indicators ranks higher *Education and training, Technological readiness, Innovation*, among others, as crucial determinants for economies who want to climb up the value chain. These pillars enjoin economies to nurture pools of well-educated workforce, which by extension, compel institutions of higher learning, especially Ghana's premier University, the University of Ghana, to 'open up' to attract 'the best' from around the world. Opening up means employing communication media that transcend the geographical boundaries of Ghana – websites, and by extension internet media.

University rankings and other considerations may come to play when prospective students weigh their options. The popularity of University websites suggests that institutions of higher learning should put real effort into using the new medium (websites) as a communications tool (Will & Callison, 2006). Beyond referrals and word of mouth, Universities that prioritize their websites to offer good user-experiences, are more likely to save time and money if they are able to effectively leverage their websites. The success of Universities in accumulating capital, and developing skills as well as the cultural mores of local communities, largely depend on how effectively they create and maintain mutually beneficial relationships with their communities (Kim, Brunner, & Fitch-Hauser, 2006).

Poock and Lefond, (2001) conducted a study on the website elements that prospective University applicants found engaging or inhibitory to their information-seeking practices. Poock and Lefond, (2001) also investigated the informational content and interactive properties of the websites of Universities in Turkey. Their findings brought them to the conclusion that although Universities were increasingly using the World Wide Web for the functional purpose of student-recruitment; however, little was known about their effective use though. This would seem to betray a lack of optimum realization and exploitation of the potentials of this resource for dialogic public engagement.

Recent African University rankings, place the University of Ghana as the 10<sup>th</sup> best University on the continent. The University ranking was published by Thomson Reuters, the New York-based parent company of the Reuters News Agency, Reuters (cf. <http://ipo.ug.edu.gh/article/thomson-reuters-ranks-ug-10th-africa>)

As a model University in the West African sub region, University of Ghana is a choice-University for prospective students on the continent, and even beyond. What such a complimentary verdict does is that it draws enquiring attention to the University of Ghana. In that process, the first most visible and accessible reference point is the University website. That website becomes more useful if it manifests dialogic properties. Dialogism is a valued attribute that is promoted by contemporary public relations theory and practice.

### **1.1.3 Overview of the University Of Ghana**

The University of Ghana, was established in 1948 as the University of the Gold Coast, an affiliate of the University of London. Thus, the very origins of the University can be said to be genetically anchored on an international identity and lineage. Although it subsequently gained autonomy in 1961, the heritage of its linkage to other international institutions has, ironically, grown over the years (cf. <https://www.ug.edu.gh/about/establishment-University>). Besides the University's main campus situated in Legon, there are other secondary campuses in Accra city centre, Korle-Bu, and Tarkwa. University of Ghana also offers e-learning and distance learning opportunities to satellite campuses and students outside of the national capital, Accra.

The University currently has a student population of approximately thirty eight thousand (38,000), out of which foreign student enrolment stands at one thousand one hundred and

forty two (1,142), which constitutes a little over three per cent (3%) of total student population (<https://www.ug.edu.gh/about/enrolment-and-graduation-statistics>). Over the past ten (10) years, the University of Ghana has recorded an annual average of nine hundred and fifty nine (959) foreign student enrolment.

The table below presents the statistical breakdown of foreign student enrolments over the last 10 years from 2006 – 2015:

**Table 1: Statistical breakdown of foreign student enrolments over the last ten (10) years from 2006 – 2015**

| <b>Year</b> | <b>Total Student Enrolment</b> | <b>Foreign Student Enrolment</b> | <b>Per cent (%) Foreign Student</b> |
|-------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| <b>2006</b> | 10,821                         | 490                              | 4.53                                |
| <b>2007</b> | 18,094                         | 654                              | 3.61                                |
| <b>2008</b> | 26,648                         | 835                              | 3.13                                |
| <b>2009</b> | 34,717                         | 1149                             | 3.31                                |
| <b>2010</b> | 36,243                         | 1314                             | 3.63                                |
| <b>2011</b> | 39,607                         | 1277                             | 3.22                                |
| <b>2012</b> | 39,103                         | 1155                             | 2.95                                |
| <b>2013</b> | 38,826                         | 960                              | 2.47                                |
| <b>2014</b> | 42,009                         | 994                              | 2.37                                |
| <b>2015</b> | 37851                          | 764                              | 2.02                                |

**Source: Institutional Research and Planning Office (IPRO), UG, September 2015**

What the figures show is that at an annual average of 959, foreign students are an important component of the University’s student population. Notable among the University of Ghana’s publics are: current and prospective students; parents; academic and non-teaching faculty and staff; community leaders; alumni. Others include the University Council Members and Board of Trustees; Government agencies; the media; local and foreign partner Universities.

McCollum (1998) and Stoner (2004) argue that, meeting the needs of such a diverse range of publics is difficult; more so, when their interests vary.

The internet, which is one of the most important building blocks of the communication revolution and its usage technology Web 2.0, are not only mass mediums that can spread the knowledge and contribute without an intercessor, but also a natural medium which they can monitor the target audience and the chats that they contribute and gain feedbacks (Özkaya, 2012: 358). For Universities, gaining feedback is crucial in establishing a tradition of two-way communication with their target publics/stakeholders.

The World Wide Web is becoming ubiquitous in the business and education world; and interactivity requires making a commitment to publics and what they have to say (Kent & Taylor, 2003). The services provided by Universities are usually targeted at a vast spectrum of publics, with diverse demographic and geographical orientations.

The competition among Universities that is the plurality of options has produced, means that in their quest to attract the best human resource and the brightest applicants, these Universities must appeal to a global market base. For these institutions of higher learning, having a web presence has almost become as important as their existence. Advantages such a ...and so much more, come with having an effective web presence.

## **1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT**

Several studies (notably Kent & Taylor, 1998; Naude, Froneman, & Atwood, 2004; Reber & Kim, 2006; Ryan, 2003; Saghaye-Biria & Izadi, 2006; Taylor, Kent, & White, 2001) have sought to analyse the presence and nature of two-way communication on organizational websites, from a Public Relations perspective. These studies have found

that virtually all organizations are not fully engaging their publics in two-way communication. Their websites are most often repositories of information with little dialogic communication properties. The overall conclusion from the literature is that technology and the dynamics of global competition have made the website an increasingly indispensable factor of corporate identity and visibility. While this literature has tended to be produced by western-based scholars, it shows that even there, organisations have still not been able to make optimum use of the dialogic potentials of their websites. While most sites are easy to use and provide useful information to visitors, as yet they have not been successful in generating much interactive performance or producing genuine dialogue in order to construct and maintain solid organisation-public relationships; giving grounds to the conclusion that “improvement is required in web-based public relations activities” (McAllister-Spooner, 2009, p.321). However, Taylor et al (2001) propose that, “Cultural variation, different norms of conduct, and different levels of social-political development will demand different approaches to the practice” (p. 630). The internet, and websites, without a doubt, provide endless possibilities for organizations. In this context, establishing a web page means prestige, confidence and new customers for a corporation, and for that matter, Universities. (Falk, 2000).

How is the informational content of the University of Ghana website reflective of the globalization and competitiveness trends established in the literature? Also, it is important to find out if, beyond their functional utility, as recruitment and administrative portals, University websites have been recognized for their potential as unique dialogic public relations tools. To what extent does the University of Ghana website reflect the features of dialogism as propounded in contemporary public relations theories?

### **1.3 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

Three research objectives guided the design and conduct of the study; namely:

1. To determine the dialogic capacity of the University of Ghana website
2. To find out if the University of Ghana is taking advantage of the internet (via its website) to meet the information needs of its publics.
3. To find out how the University of Ghana website can be managed effectively and efficiently to improve upon its current dialogic (interactive) capacity.

### **1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

In order to answer the open questions problematized above, the following research questions were posed:

1. What is the current dialogic capacity of the University of Ghana website?
2. In what ways does the University of Ghana website meet the information requirements of its publics?
3. In what ways can the dialogic (interactive) capacity of the University of Ghana website be improved?

### **1.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

The World Wide Web has suddenly become an integral part of the media channels/tools of used by organizations. Whilst press releases are being released via email, they are further published and permanently available via websites unlike their relatively temporary nature

when they are published via the radio and television. Even more important for public relations practitioners in Universities is the overwhelming task of putting in measures to create maximum visibility and credibility for their institutions.

Despite the pervasiveness of websites, this is an area that has seen little research in Ghana especially in terms of their use and potential as PR communication tools for both public and private Universities. This study seeks to throw more light on the benefits of highly interactive (dialogic) websites, and the myriads of benefits and opportunities that lie in waiting for public relations professionals, especially in Universities. Furthermore, the study's findings would serve as a ready information guide provide for journalists at all times.

## **1.6 OPERATIONALIZATION**

To ensure reliability of this study's findings, key terms and acronyms/abbreviations were operationalized based on Kent and Taylor's (1998; 2002) original scale:

### **Average Time on Site (ATOS):**

This refers to the site visit length; i.e., how long users stay on the website on each visit. In this study, ATOS offers a way to gauge the potential of the University of Ghana website to encourage frequent unique visits; as well as the length of time spent per visit

### **Bandwidth:**

Bandwidth is the capacity of the network to efficiently handle data; i.e., the amount of data that can be transferred over the network in a fixed amount of time. This enables an assessment of the efficiency of the website as a tool for interactive engagement.

**Content:**

Content refers to the website information – including words, pictures, images – that populate each page. In operational terms, this would include all the text, sounds, photographs, videos and other illustrative images and animations that may be encountered by a visitor to the University website.

**Dialogue:**

Dialogue describes the website interaction requiring some form of feedback; in the words of Kent and Taylor (1998), the extent to which there are opportunities for the “negotiated exchange of ideas and opinions” (p. 324).

**Download:**

The transmission and retrieval of information from a website server; usually a user-request. This is particularly important in this study because as Poock and Lefond (2001) found out, University website users have little patience for long download times.

**Ease:**

The extent to which a website enables manoeuvrability with little or no difficulty.

**EEO:**

Equal Employment Opportunities.

**Footer:**

The section at the bottom of a web page. This often includes copyright information and some navigation links.

**Graphics:**

Images or visual representations on a web page. Graphics can enhance the attractiveness and interactive appeal of the University website.



**Header:**

The section at the upper part of a web page. This often includes the main links which let users move around a website easily.

**Homepage:**

It is a first page (also referred as an opening page, start page or main page) of a website, usually the default page.

**Image Map:**

An image that has several links geographically mapped onto it. The University of Ghana website would be assessed for its incorporation (or lack of) an image map.

**Important information:**

Website content that an organization's target find relevant for their purposes.

**Interactive:**

A website is interactive when it prompts a response from the user or in some way can interact with the user dynamically (e.g., sending an email, filling out a form or a partaking in a survey). In this study interactivity was determined based on the range of features within the website that enable the user to make requests or respond to content in a back-and-forth format.

**Internet:**

A global network connecting millions of computers.

**ISP:**

Internet Service Provider

**ITS:**

Integrated Tertiary Software

**Layout:**

The structure of a website, how content are arranged in relation to each other, for a pleasant look and feel.

**Load time:**

The time (duration) it takes to load the content of a web page.

**Navigation:**

The ease with which users are able to move through a website to find what they want.

The more intuitive and easy to use the University website is, the more dialogic and assessable should be its content.

**Nonresponsiveness:**

Email responses that take more than five (5) days to be acknowledged or acted upon.

**Publics:**

Public is all individuals and institutions that are within the organization and those who are outside of the organization, but have a link with the organization itself.

With specific reference to this study, publics would include primarily, students (prospective, current, former), teaching faculty, administrative staff, and members of the general public.

**Responsiveness:**

Email responses that took five days or less to be acknowledged or acted upon.

**Site Map:**

Web page containing links to each page on a site.

**Site visitor:**

The user of a website. In the specific case of this study, it refers to those segments of the target audience that search and log on to the University of Ghana website ([www.ug.edu.gh](http://www.ug.edu.gh)), whether as first-time or repeat “visitors”.

**Stickiness:**

This refers to anything about a website which extends the length of time a visitor spends navigating the website.

**Text:**

The lettered words that appear on a website.

**Traffic:**

Traffic in a web-sense is a measurement of the amount of users that visit a website. The more attractive, informative and user-friendly (and dialogic) a website is, the more traffic it should attract.

**Usefulness (of information):**

Information that is relevant to particular group of publics.

**Usability:**

The level or degree of a page's operating friendliness for the user.

**Website/Site:**

A series of computer files maintained by an organisation or individual that can be accessed via the World Wide.

**Webpage:**

A collection of documents referred to as HTML (Hyper Text Mark-up Language), usually translated by a web browser.

**Website:**

A set of related web pages containing texts, images, audio and video content.

**World Wide Web:**

A graphics-oriented service which makes the internet more accessible.

**1.9 STRUCTURE OF THE STUDY**

This study is structured as follows: Chapter one introduced the study, i.e., contextualizing it in terms of background to the study, the objectives and research questions, and the problem or research gap the study sought to address. Chapter two, which follows, discusses the theoretical framework of the study as well as a review of related literature, spelling out how previous studies have been conducted and the insights they offer for the present study. Chapter three mainly discusses the methodology used in the study – population, sampling criteria and justification, data collection instruments and the data collection procedure. Chapter four presents the findings and a discussion of the various issues that stood out of the findings and their implications to the broader state of knowledge in the field. The concluding chapter (chapter five) synthesises the key findings in relation to the objectives of the study, outlines some of the limitations of the study, and enumerates a number of recommendations for future study, and also for the ‘managers’ of the website’s consideration.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.1 OVERVIEW**

This chapter examines theories that underpinned this study: their proponents, history and the criticisms raised against them. In particular, Kent and Taylor's (2001) five dialogic principles/model is discussed in order to draw out its assumptions and observe its manifestations in this study. In conducting the study, a number of related scholarly literature were reviewed for insights into how these previous studies were conducted, reasons for their particular methodological approach, their data analysis methods, and the findings and conclusions reached. Throughout the review, the study also looked out for the extent to which the dialogic principles proposed by Kent and Taylor were realized in previous 'website analysis' studies.

#### **2.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The dialogic theory of public relations was the underpinning theory for this study. It was complemented with the two-way symmetrical model of public relations for purposes of conceptual clarification – and to acknowledge the synergies that exist in current public relations thinking and practice. The choice of these theories was also informed by findings from the reviewed related literature – and the criticisms they have respectively attracted.

### **2.2.1 Dialogic Theory of Public Relations**

A substantial body of literature suggests that dialogic communication is one of the more important theoretical constructs in public relations, especially in webbed communication (Ryan, 2003). The principal theory underpinning this study, therefore, was the Dialogic Public Relations Theory propounded by Michael L. Kent, Maureen Taylor (1998; 2002).

The roots of the concept of dialogue can be traced to a variety of disciplines in relational communication, and for that matter, public relations (Kent & Taylor, 1998, 2002; Taylor & Kent, 2004).

In this theory, Kent and Taylor (1998/2002) posit that dialogic communication is a process as well as a product (p. 323), which results from deliberate relationship-building interventions via the web. Interaction, an imperative in public relations, cannot be formed, nurtured and promoted unilaterally. Despite being considered one of the most ethical and effective approaches to practising public relations, most organizations do not employ dialogue very effectively or respond to the needs of their publics (Esrock & Leichty, 1999).

Sutherland and Stewart (1999) found that higher educational institutions were exploiting the facility of the internet/WWW to increase their brand competitiveness, and also deliver efficient teaching and learning experiences. For organisations, and for that matter Universities, which need to watch their past and future reputations through dialogue, websites form one of the most useful and modern communication media channels. As beneficial public relations tools, the websites of corporations help to increase the awareness and understanding of their publics in terms of the 'services' on offer. More importantly, when its potential to improve mutual communication is considered, it plays an important

role in terms of communication management, and even knowledge management (Özkaya & Ene (2013).

Broom, Casey and Ritchey (1997) posit that “Relationships are the dynamic results of the exchanges and reciprocity that manifest themselves as the relationships develop and evolve. Relationship formation and maintenance represents a process of mutual adaptation and contingent responses” (p. 95).

Dialogue ensures that organizations, and for that matter Universities, strive to work towards creating open relations with their numerous, and diversified publics. Indeed, communicating with large sparsely located publics can be a herculean task (Kent & Taylor 1998; 2001)

Kent and Taylor’s (1998, 2002) five (5) principles of dialogic communication are:

#### **2.2.1.1 Ease of Use**

This refers to the manoeuvrability and ease with which site visitors can find their way around the website. When an organization’s stakeholder (public) visits a website, it is ostensibly to look for some kind of information relevant for their purpose. Kent and Taylor (1998, 2002) argue that an easy-to-navigate website where information is easily found and consumed is an imperative for relationship-building via the web. “Websites”, they argue, “should be dynamic enough to encourage all potential publics to explore them, information rich enough to meet the needs of very diverse publics, and interactive enough to allow users to pursue further informational issues and dialogic relationships” (p. 341). Indicators that ensure website manoeuvrability include the availability and easy identification of site maps, the incorporation of search engines on the site, as well as the availability of links to related sites (websites).

### **2.2.1.2 Usefulness of Information**

“Websites should be dynamic enough to encourage all potential publics to explore them, information rich enough to meet the needs of very diverse publics, and interactive enough to allow users to pursue further informational issues and dialogic relationships” (Kent & Taylor, 1998: 330). In addition, not only should the information needs of the organization’s primary publics be served, but also the general public should be able to find information that provides answers to their basic questions. Relevance of information ensures long-lasting mutually beneficial relationships between Universities and their sparsely-located publics.

### **2.2.1.3 Conservation of Visitors**

This principle refers to the need to be cautious not to lead visitors to other third-party/competitor sites, and risk not getting them back onto their websites. It further considers keeping visitors on the website for such considerable lengths of time which eventually facilitate long lasting relationships.

### **2.2.1.4 Dialogic Loop**

This principle allows visitors to websites to interact with the organization, enabling the organization to elicit useful feedback which it would have otherwise found out through costly research. Through dialogic loops, organizations, and for that matter Universities, are able to open their ranks to their stakeholders, and even the general public, leading to mutually beneficial relationships. Active email accounts, phone numbers are a sure way to maximizing this principle. According to Kent and Taylor (1998) dialogic loop “allows publics to query organizations and, more importantly, offers organizations the opportunity to respond to questions, concerns and problems” (p. 326). “Merely providing avenues for an organization’s publics to send queries or share opinions is not enough; they should provide timely response to every single



correspondence or query. Dialogic contact with stakeholders must be conducted by trained professionals rather than interns who have limited formal communication training” (p. 327).

Kent and Taylor (2002) further identified five dialogic tenets which overlap due to their communicative orientation; they are:

- i) **Mutuality:** The recognition of organization-public relationships characterised by equality and collaboration. Parties involved in dialogue must argue for their own positions vigorously; unlike in bargaining and negotiation which is all about winning, losing or compromising.
- ii) **Propinquity:** The temporality and spontaneity of interactions with publics. Here, discussions are deliberate and ‘publics’ are consulted in matters that influence them, whilst the issues are ‘hot’, and not after the decisions have been made.
- iii) **Empathy:** The supportiveness and confirmation of goals and interests of an organization’s publics. It literally means walking in the shoes of their publics; thus, even though each party may have their desires, they still seek the other’s good.
- iv) **Risk:** The willingness to interact with individuals and publics on their own terms. Even though Leich and Neilson (1997) acknowledge the risk genuine dialogue poses, participants also risk great rewards characterized by: ‘vulnerability’, ‘recognition of ‘strange otherness’ and ‘emergent unanticipated consequences’
- v) **Commitment:** The extent to which an organization gives itself over to dialogue i.e. genuineness, commitment to the interest of its publics; interpretation, and understanding in its interactions with publics. Here, the discussants put the good of the relationship above their (organization and client) individual interests.

### **2.2.1.5 Generation of Return Visits**

This principle generally refers to incorporating features that ensure visitors to a website return at short intervals due to how interesting they find each visit. Offering online communication and survey forms are ways of ensuring this feature builds strong relationships between organizations and their publics. Other features include providing up-to-date information on developing/changing issues. Offering Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) to visitors is another way of ensuring visitors return at short intervals. To sum up, this principle seeks to maximize the quality of communication between organizations and their publics using ‘online experts’.

### **2.2.1.6 Two-Way Symmetrical Model of Public Relations**

The two-way symmetrical model of public relations is the fourth of the four models of public relations propounded by Grunig and Hunt (1984). The three other models: press agency; public information; and two-way asymmetrical, however employ mainly one-way persuasion-laden tactics of public relations. Thus, the two-way symmetrical model was birthed from the above listed models which failed to consider the need for both organizations and their stakeholders to compromise and collaborate for healthier mutual relationships (Grunig, 1997).

The two-way symmetrical model, according to Grunig (1992), thrives on:

- Constant negotiation whilst encouraging mutual give-and-take benefits between organizations and their publics, rather than persuasion;
- Emphasizing on mutual respect and efforts to achieve mutual understanding;
- Stressing on negotiation and a willingness of an organization and its publics to accommodate and/or adapt, and make compromises, among others.

The internet (and for that matter the website), as an interactive medium offers public relations practitioners the ability to design relationship-building tactics which benefit both the organization and its publics. Not only does the two-way symmetrical model afford organizations (Universities) the ability to ‘speak back’ (Naude et al., 2004, p.89) but also to “find out what is going on out there” with their publics (Grunig, 1997, p. 292). This communication model, thus, is characterized by “willingness of an organization to listen and respond to the concerns and interest of its key stakeholders” (Roper, 2005, p. 65). Consequently, given the internet’s potential to create and enhance two-way communication, it is no longer suitable for organizations, and for that matter Universities, to inundate their publics with information, rather they must talk with them (send and receive) in order to establish long term relationships (Edelman, 2004). Schultz (2000) adds that “Especially promising in this regard is the capacity that interactive, two-way electronic media and database technologies have for creating unique and personalized ‘conversations’ or ‘dialogues’ with individual consumers.”

### **2.3 REVIEW OF EXISTING AND RELATED LITERATURE**

In this section, the available literature is reviewed to demonstrate the state of knowledge in the field, identify any research gaps and guide the assumptions and research design for this study. It includes research on interactive possibilities of blogs for public relations, content analysis of corporate websites, the extent to which websites reflect the attributes and properties of dialogism, and the benefits of website dynamism and visitor traffic to corporate image-building and organisational/business success.

Xifraa and Huertasb (2008) conducted a study to determine the extent to which 67 public relations weblogs, selected from around the world, exhibited the properties of dialogism by

examining, specifically, their structures, usability and interactivity. The study spanned a five-year period between 2001 and 2006. Fifty (50) main variables were developed for the analysis, and later narrowed down to five (5): 'Author', 'Content', 'Interactivity', 'Usability' and 'Connectivity'. The study revealed that 77.6% of the blogs analyzed were personal, written primarily by public relations professionals, whilst 88.1% of the blogs analyzed contained comments on various aspects of public relations. The authors recommended that public relations bloggers make fuller use of the possibilities for interactivity afforded by the medium since this is one of its distinctive characteristics. Furthermore, a study by Du and Wagner (2006) showed that the most successful blogs – those pulling the most number of visitors – were those that managed to give their readers greater worth, both through the manner in which the content is presented and organized, and the social interaction resources on offer to users, principles which Kent and Taylor (1998, 2002) espouse. They also found out that blogs belonging to organizations were more serious and formal, in both content and posts. Given how powerful corporate blogs (websites) are, their value to organizations (including Universities) give a human face to the company and builds up a positive community vision around them (Lee et al., 2006).

Özkaya and Ene (2013) content analysed the corporate websites of 20 most successful companies (in terms of profitability and turnover) in Turkey using the three phases of knowledge management process; i.e., 'dissemination of knowledge', 'knowledge acquisition' and 'knowledge sharing' between the organization and its target audience within a web environment. They sought to study how the virtual public relations activities of each of the selected companies were implemented via their respective corporate websites, and how these companies differentiated themselves from their competitors – mainly by gaining awareness, and also effective results in their public relations campaigns and activities. The study revealed that the 20 companies placed less emphasis on applications

regarding knowledge sharing and more emphasis on applications regarding dissemination of knowledge and knowledge acquisition. The study recommended that those corporations which desired to be more successful in their public relations activities, needed to place more emphasis on applications that are related to knowledge sharing on their web sites. The current study took the cue from their recommendation to specifically examine the knowledge sharing potentials or properties of the University of Ghana website. It was based on the logic of an expected positive association between the dialogic endowment of the University website and its competitiveness as a highly rated and preferred educational institution.

In another study, Booth and Jansen (2009) reviewed how using two methods – log files and page tagging basic visitor information ('visit length', 'top pages', 'internal search information', 'visitor type') could help develop key performance indicators for businesses, and for that matter public relations practitioners. These indicators, they could use to align their business goals and also for website efficacy. The study revealed that tracking unique visits, visit lengths i.e. Average Time on Site (ATOS), offers opportunities for customer recruitment and subsequently relationship-building opportunities via the same medium. Their study also revealed that details on 'top entry', 'top exit', and 'most popular' pages were conduits for public relations practitioners to gain insights which engender actions that improve, tailor-make or enhance the usefulness of their website content. This study sought to explore, and ascertain, the usefulness of information on the University of Ghana website's 'top pages'.

Sommerfeldt et al (2011) sought to find out why websites were not fulfilling the dialogic promise. The study sought to explore why some organizations do not integrate Kent and Taylor's (1998, 2002) dialogic features into their websites. They interviewed thirteen (13) activist public relations practitioners about their perception of websites as tools for information dissemination and resource mobilization. Three (3) main themes emerged at the

end of the interviews: (1) Website communication is perceived to be most effective when tied to issue-specific events and issue currency; (2) Websites cater to existing and highly involved publics; and (3) Websites are viewed as passive communication tools that must be supplemented with traditional public relations practices. Based on these pointers, the present study was designed to also discover the extent to which the University of Ghana website reflected these three considerations.

Gustavsen and Tilley (2003) in a study examined why today's website developers, designers, and for that matter public relations practitioners, are not incorporating interactivity indicators in corporate websites despite the unique advantage it has over traditional media. Wilcox (2001, p. 387) argues that 'interactivity' is one unique characteristic, which traditional media does not offer, thus making the 'interactivity' feature on corporate websites an imperative feature. Gustavsen and Tilley's study adopts, out of the numerous definitions of 'interactivity', Dholakia et al. (2000)'s definition of interactivity: "as those that offer a perception of social presence through the availability of open channels allowing for two-way communication" (p. 10). They draw a correlation between Kent and Taylor (1998) likening 'interactivity' (as a continuum) and Grunig's notion of two-way public relations communication. Gustavsen and Tilley's study found out that low levels of interactivity on the sites had no direct correlation with research and studies on it. Indeed, the average interactivity levels of the 16 corporate websites was low – 43.4%, with only one featuring all six indicators of interactivity, thus scoring 100%. This study was expected to either corroborate or dispute their finding – by examining the elements of dialogism present on the University of Ghana website. They proposed further investigation into how the concept of 'interactivity' could be identified and measured on websites.

In another study by McAllister-Spooner and Kent (2009) they sought to better understand how organizational and stakeholder needs, in educational settings, could be met with an

effective dialogic website design, by reviewing nineteen community college websites. The study revealed interrelatedness of the resource dependency theory and dialogic theory of public relations since both theories emphasise the need for mutually beneficial relations between organizations (Universities) and their publics. The study found that, of the five principles, ‘Usefulness of information’ and ‘dialogic loop’ emerged the strongest indicators of responsiveness; a quality future research and development of University websites should critically consider. They also suggested that future research should focus more on how Universities could incorporate dialogism and interactivity, among others, into their website content, instead of just checking for their absence or presence.

A quantitative content analysis study by Hahn (2010) on the online dialogic features of hospital websites asked whether the size of an organization was an indicator of the dialogic tools used on its website. Her study found out that while the internet allows both large and small organizations to communicate with varied publics, the former (larger organizations) tend to be relatively more dialogic than the smaller ones. This study, despite being qualitative, sought to observe the extent to which her findings might be corroborated – or contradicted – by the indicative findings of a large institution like the University of Ghana.

## **2.4 CHAPTER SUMMARY**

This chapter reviewed the existing literature on dialogic/two-way public relations practice in order to acknowledge the state and direction of scholarship in the field, and to identify the contentions and gaps that invite research attention. The literature showed that the dialogic theory of public relations – which essentially extends the two-way symmetrical model of public relations onto technology- and internet-enabled platforms – has become a popular site and subject of public relations research and practise. However, the review also illustrates

the dearth of scholarship on the dialogic properties and possibilities of University websites in Africa and Ghana; thus vindicating the case for the present contribution. The next chapter discusses the research design and data gathering process employed in this study.



## **CHAPTER 3**

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 OVERVIEW**

This chapter discusses the methodology employed in gathering the data for the study. The content of the website ([www.ug.edu.gh](http://www.ug.edu.gh)) was assessed, based on Kent and Taylor's (1998; 2002) dialogic principles of public relations, whether they formed part of the website's content and architecture or not. The chapter also discusses the population, sample, unit of analysis, method of data collection, among others. This study's unit of analysis were the content of the University website: text, graphics and audio files.

#### **3.2 RESEARCH SETTING**

The University of Ghana website is jointly managed by the Public Affairs Directorate, the public relations unit of the University, and the University of Ghana Computing Systems (UGCS). The public affairs directorate provides information (content) for the website, whilst UGCS is responsible for the technical aspects of management and maintenance of the content and other software. Therefore, the research setting involved examining the website as well as interviewing key staff of the public affairs directorate and the management of the UGCS.

### **3.3 RESEARCH DESIGN**

As indicated above, the study employed the inductive research approach. With this approach no hypothesis will be tested, neither will a large sample be used unlike with the deductive approach where the study would seek to prove true or otherwise, a hypothesis. The inductive approach is commonly used for qualitative data analysis. Therefore, the qualitative design was employed for this study. Qualitative research involves an interpretative, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or to interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003 cited in Flick, 2006).

The study adopted the qualitative content analysis method for observing and interpreting the presence and quality of dialogic properties within the University of Ghana website. In-depth interviews were also conducted with two officials of the Public Affairs Directorate, the public relations arm of the University, and also an official of the University of Ghana Computer Systems (UGCS), in order to provide answers to aspects of the research questions which may not have been possible to validly generate from the content analysis process alone.

#### **3.3.2 Research Approach**

The research approach enables the researcher to describe the assumptions and procedures used in the research. This study used the inductive research approach to explore the dialogic properties of the University of Ghana website. Inductive research enables the collection and reduction of a comprehensive and wide-range of data into brief and detailed summaries of phenomena as they are, and not as may have been possibly conditioned by a set of

hypothesised expectations. It also suggests the possible relations between the research objectives and the findings produced from the analysis of data.

### **3.3.3 Research Population Selection**

The corporate website of the University of Ghana was the population (content source) for the study. Data gathering is crucial in research, as the data is meant to contribute to a better understanding of a phenomenon, the state of knowledge on the phenomenon, and theoretical framework suggested for understanding and explaining its manifestations (Bernard 2002). It is therefore imperative that decisions about the method of obtaining data and the source of that data be taken with sound judgment, especially since no amount of analysis can make up for improperly collected data.

### **3.3.4 Sampling Method & Sample Size**

Purposive sampling, also called judgement sampling, offers a way to take decisions about the type and source of data based on the determination of which artefacts and/or informants can help yield the best quality of the desired evidence. The purposive sampling technique is the deliberate choice of a source or respondent due to the qualities that respondent possesses. It is a non-random technique that is not strictly bound by underlying theories or a set number of informants. Since this study has a unique population – specifically the corporate website of the University of Ghana – the researcher adopted the purposive sampling technique. Purposiveness also guided the selection of respondents for the in-depth interviews; namely, two assistant registrars at the Public Affairs Directorate - the public relations arm of the University, and also the chief administrator of the University of Ghana Computer Systems

(UGCS), in charge of the back-end of the website. The sample size selected for this study was the same as the population.

### **3.3.4 Data Collection Method**

Various web analytics methodologies exist. However, for the purposes of this study, the units of analysis identified earlier – text, graphics, audio and visual content – were analysed to ascertain the extent to which the website, [www.ug.edu.gh](http://www.ug.edu.gh), reflected the attributes of Kent and Taylor's (1998, 2002) dialogic principles of relationship-building.

Qualitative content analysis is a data gathering technique that enables communication researchers to observe not just the presence of particular units of textual analysis but to also examine and explain the connotations conveyed by the nature of content categories discovered (Creswell, 2013). The most important reason for its popular usage is that knowledge with rich content is revealed by means of standard labels (Altunisk et al., 2001: 226). Elsewhere, Krippendorff (2004) defined content analysis as “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use” (p. 18). Despite its effectiveness as a way of scrutinising, especially, the content of electronic media, the strictly quantitative content analysis technique is criticised, among other reasons, for failing to reckon that much of the meaning attributed to communication content is implicit and necessarily subjective (Deacon, et al., 2007). Thus, content analysis as used in this study was sensitive to the subjective judgment and interpretation inherent in any assessment of not only the presence but also the quality of the factors by which the dialogic properties of the University of Ghana corporate website might be evaluated according to Kent and Taylor's Dialogic Principles of Public Relations.

### 3.3.4.1 Data Collection Procedure

The data collected for this study was done through a two-step sequence entailing, first, an examination of the dialogic quality of the University of Ghana Website against Kent and Taylor’s (1998; 2001) five-category model (principles): Usefulness of information, Ease of interface, Dialogic loop, Conservation of visitors and Generation of return visits. Then, informed by some of the observations made from the content analysis, and in keeping with the inductive approach of the study, the in-depth interviews were conducted in turns, with Pascaline Kuunzungla Songsore and Esi Essuman Johnson, Assistant Registrars at the Public Affairs Directorate (PAD) of the University of Ghana, and Patrick Kutin chief administrator - University of Ghana Computer Systems (UGCS).

**Table 2: Summary of Kent and Taylor’s (1998, 2002) Dialogic Principles Of Relationship-Building adapted from McAllister-Spooner & Kent (2009).**

| <b>Ease of Interface</b>  | <b>Usefulness of Information</b>  | <b>Conservation of Visitors</b>   | <b>Dialogic Loop (Interactivity)</b>  | <b>Generation of Return Visits</b>   |
|---|---|---|---|--|
| The ease of identifying site maps on the University of Ghana home page. | The availability of the University’s vision and mission statement on the website. | Whether the University of Ghana website includes a calendar of events on their website. | Are there opportunities for visitors to the University website to send messages and requests? | Are there features on the website to ensure that visitors return at short intervals? |

|  |   |   |   |   |
|--|---|---|---|---|
| The ease of identifying major links to other sites on the University's home page.  | The frequency and presence of updated information on the website.   | How long does it take a visitor to load a page? (According to Kent and Taylor, 1998, 2002 it should take four (4) seconds to load). | Do the visitors have the option to fill out surveys identifying priorities and expressing opinions on issues?       | What informs the placement/ positioning of the external links and advertising messages? |
| The incorporation of search engines by the University of Ghana on their home page to be used in searching for other/related information. | The presence of news stories posted on the website i.e. <a href="http://www.ug.edu.gh">www.ug.edu.gh</a> within the last 30 days. | Whether explicit statements are made, and if they are appealing to visitors and inviting them to return to the website.             | Does the University of Ghana respond to emails and enquiries with speed (immediately)? Up to two (2) weeks or more. | The availability of discussion forums/sessions on the website.                          |
| The availability of site maps on the home page.  | The availability of downloadable information and graphics on the University of Ghana website                                      | If there is evidence of a clear posting of the last update date and time.   |   |   |

**Source: McAllister-Spooner & Kent (2009).**

During the content analysis phase, the website, [www.ug.edu.gh](http://www.ug.edu.gh), was evaluated, and checked for the individual indicators listed in the table above i.e., the principles of dialogic public relations, as proposed by Kent and Taylor (1998, 2002; cf. also Jose & Lee, 2007, p. 311). Their availability or absence was respectively coded onto the coding sheet provided as Appendix A. The observations were then tallied to reflect the quality of dialogic properties of the University of Ghana website. This inductively-driven process produced, in the end, a

total of 54 indicators across the five distinct observable properties of dialogism. The specific indicators are used to discuss the findings reported in Chapter four.

During the interviews phase, the two respondents – first the assistant registrars from the PAD and later the chief administrator – UGCS were asked questions pertaining to the primary goals for setting up the University of Ghana website; the key information posted on the website and the extent to which those expectations were being met; the management and maintenance of the website and the challenges encountered; the assessment of the contribution of the website to the public relations and brand identity of the University of Ghana. The interview schedule used is presented in this report as Appendix B. Their respective responses were tape-recorded and transcribed according to the order of the questions posed. The transcribed responses were then analysed as reported in Chapter four.

### **3.3.5 Research Validity and Reliability**

Saunders et al. (2003) define validity as the extent to which a data collection method accurately captures what it was intended to measure. Further, they suggest that more importantly, the questions must be understood by the respondents in the way intended by the researchers and the answer given must be understood by the researcher in the way intended by the respondent. Internal validity – whereby clear conditions are believed to lead to other conditions (Yin, 2008) – was adhered to, through explanation building and pattern matching during the data analysis. Beyond this, the researcher ensured that interviewees knew that if any uncertainties occurred while collecting the information, a call back for clarity and a more descriptive explanation will be made. Regarding reliability – the extent to which this research data collection techniques or procedures can be repeated and should yield fairly consistent or logically explicable findings – questions were simple-worded and

determined to be easily understood by the respondents through the back-and-forth nature of the questioning process of in-depth interviews. The respondents were not coerced to answer the questions; the respondents/interviewees were willing to provide answers to the questions, and took the interview session seriously.

To ensure inter-coder reliability of the data collected, the researcher discussed each of the 54 indicators generated from the literature with one coding assistant who had been recruited for the purpose. Each of the two (2) coders then independently assessed the University of Ghana website using the 54 items (indicators) and the results were compared. From this process, only twelve (12) items were found to have been coded differently. Modelling along McAllister-Spooner's (2008) approach, a three-point Likert-scale was then adopted on the coding scheme to measure each of the indicators under the five dialogic principles as follows: 0 = Not Available; 1 = Available, Low; 2 = Available, High.

### **3.3.6 Chapter Summary**

This chapter describes the methodology adopted for the study. It included an account of, and reasons for, the inductive research approach employed; a description of the research setting; a systematic account of the qualitative research design used, and the justification for the choice. It also described the process and reasons for the purposive selection of research population and samples from which data was collected. The results of these processes are reported in Chapter four, which follows.



## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

#### **4.1 OVERVIEW**

This study was designed to look for indicators of dialogism on the University of Ghana website. This was complemented by informant interviews with two Assistant Registrars of the Public Affairs Directorate - the Public Relations arm of the University, and one with Patrick Kutin, chief administrator - University of Ghana Computer Systems (UGCS), in charge of the backend and technical management of the website. This chapter presents the findings and analysis of the data gathered from this mixed methods design

#### **4.2 RESEARCH FINDINGS**

The findings from the study are reported broadly according to the five dialogic principles of relationship building propounded by Kent and Taylor (1998; 2002); namely: (1) Ease of (interface) Use; (2) Generation of Return Visits; (3) Maintenance of Visitors; (4) Dialogic Loop; and (5) Usefulness of Information. The inductive process of assessing the presence (or absence) and nature of these principles produced a total of 54 indicators that were found to be consistent with similar indicators in the literature on the dialogic properties of websites. The indicators are tallied according to a three-point Likert scale as follows: 0 (= attribute not available); 1 (= attribute available, but low); 2 (= attribute available, and high).

#### 4.2.1 Ease of (Interface) Use

This principle assessed the ease with which visitors to the website could navigate the website, with little or no difficulty. The principle was rated using a nine (9) indicators index as shown in Table 3.

**Table 3 4.1: ‘Ease of use’ rating of University of Ghana website**

| No.                        | Indicator/attribute   | Assessment  |            |             |
|----------------------------|---|-------------|------------|-------------|
|                            |   | 0           | 1          | 2           |
| 1                          | The availability of site maps/major links on the home page to the rest of the website |             |            | ✓           |
| 2                          | The ease of identifying site maps on the University of Ghana home page                | ✓           |            |             |
| 3                          | The ease of identifying major links to other sites on the University’s home page      |             |            | ✓           |
| 4                          | Logical hierarchy of information  | ✓           |            |             |
| 5                          | Availability of option to access information with images off                          |             |            | ✓           |
| 6                          | The incorporation of image maps   | ✓           |            |             |
| 7                          | The incorporation of search engines/window on the home page                           |             |            | ✓           |
| 8                          | Availability of external links, advertising on the website, and rationale             | ✓           |            |             |
| 9                          | Availability of website glossary  | ✓           |            |             |
| <b>Total percent (N=9)</b> |   | <b>55.6</b> | <b>0.0</b> | <b>44.4</b> |

Source: Field Work, June 2016

According to Taylor et al. (2001, p.269) the more navigable, or “user friendly,” a website is, the more likely a visitor is to return to the site. Therefore, the presence (low or high) or absence of any of the nine indicators, as respectively indexed in the table, was used to determine and express the extent to which the website is intuitively navigable for visitors to use, understand, and possibly return.

The table reveals that the University of Ghana website at the time of the study, had major links to other the over one hundred and fifty (150) pages despite not having a an image map; and consequently, offered no basis for assessing second attribute; namely, the ease of identifying site map on the website. A sitemap is essential on a website because it makes it easy for visitors to know the exact location, or where they can find specific information. Thelwall (2009:23) defined a site map as a “visually or textually organized template of a website’s content that allows the users to surf through the site to find the information they are looking for.”

However, all of the remaining seven attributes of ‘ease of (interface) use’ were coded as present to some degree – high or low. Specifically, with reference to the third attribute, the site had clearly marked sections indicating what information was available on each of the menu tabs on the home page, and was consequently coded as “Available, high”. The website had a search window which ensured easy navigation to other parts of the 150-page website. Indeed this study’s data gathering from the website was significantly facilitated by the availability of the search window.

Patrick Kuti is the head of University of Ghana Computing Systems (UGCS) had this to say about the use of site maps on the University of Ghana website:

*The University of Ghana website is so user-friendly, even without a site map navigation and manoeuvrability is easy. Then also, the ‘quick links’ link featured on*

*the footer of the home page, and some selected pages enable our visitors to enjoy navigating through our website.*

#### **4.2.2 Usefulness of Information**

Regarding the second principle of dialogic public relations, that is the usefulness of information to specific publics, the website was coded for the relevance of information to the various publics the University of Ghana has to deal with on a regular basis. They include: Students; Alumni; University Staff (Teaching and Non-Teaching); partner Universities; among others. Towards this end, a twenty five (25)-indicator scale was developed to content analyse the usefulness of the information posted on the website. The specific ratings of each of the indicators are shown in Table 4; and are the basis for the assessment of the website in terms of Kent and Taylor’s (1998; 2002) second principle of dialogic properties.

**Table 4 4.2: ‘Usefulness of information’ rating of University of Ghana website**

| No. | Indicator/attribute   | Assessment |   |   |
|-----|---|------------|---|---|
|     |   | 0          | 1 | 2 |
| 1   | The availability of the University’s vision, mission statement, philosophy and history on the website |            |   | ✓ |
| 2   | Academic programs   |            |   | ✓ |
| 3   | Clear links to academic information   |            |   | ✓ |
| 4   | Admissions information  |            |   | ✓ |

|    |  |   |   |
|----|--|---|---|
| 5  | Online application forms   |   | ✓ |
| 6  | Online registration  |   | ✓ |
| 7  | Online course search   |   | ✓ |
| 8  | Employment opportunities   |   | ✓ |
| 9  | Cultural diversity (EEO) statements                              | ✓ |   |
| 10 | Fair business practices statements                               |   | ✓ |
| 11 | Work environment statements                                      |   | ✓ |
| 12 | Annual reports   |   | ✓ |
| 13 | Grant opportunities  |   | ✓ |
| 14 | Continuing education opportunities                               | ✓ |   |
| 15 | Funding opportunities  |   | ✓ |
| 16 | Career placement services  |   | ✓ |
| 17 | Civic involvement  |   | ✓ |
| 18 | Policies and procedures  |   | ✓ |
| 19 | The availability of press releases in a chronological manner     |   | ✓ |
| 20 | The presence and frequency of updated information on the website |   | ✓ |

|                             |  |            |            |            |
|-----------------------------|--|------------|------------|------------|
| 21                          | The presence of news stories posted on the website within the last 30 days                                     |            |            | ✓          |
| 22                          | The availability of Faculty expert list/ bios  | ✓          |            |            |
| 23                          | The availability of downloadable information (audio and video) and graphics on the University of Ghana website |            |            | ✓          |
| 24                          | The availability of audience-specific links, portals, targeting particular audiences.                          |            | ✓          |            |
| 25                          | The availability of demographic reports  | ✓          |            |            |
| <b>Total percent (N=25)</b> |  | <b>16%</b> | <b>24%</b> | <b>60%</b> |

Source: Field Work, June 2016

The home page of the University of Ghana website is considered the focal reference page, because it serves as the ‘front door’ to all the website’s pages, and their content. The availability of the University’s vision, mission statement, philosophy and history were duly captured on the website. The look, feel and experience on a website’s home page largely informs the length of valuable time visitors would spend there.

All academic programs offered by the University of Ghana were available via a link labelled “ACADEMICS” on the home page of the website. Programs were grouped according courses offered by each of the four colleges (Humanities, Education, Health Sciences, and Basic and Applied Sciences). Detailed programs of study were also available for reference and downloading. In addition to the handbooks, the website had handbooks for fresh undergraduate and graduate students, also available for downloading. Other details featured under “ACADEMICS” were information on the various colleges, institutes and centres, academic calendars, examination timetable, student services, academic schedules, accommodation, among others.

Links to admission lists for fresh students were prominently featured on the home page of the website; these links were in the form of flash banners on which students and visitors could click to access admissions lists. Other links related to admissions included: “checking of admission status for prospective undergraduate, post graduate students, international/foreign students, “printing of provisional letter of admission”. The study also revealed that students and, indeed, other users could access information on payment of fees, as well as a step by step walk through the registration process. According the chief administrator of the website, Patrick Kuti:

*The placement of specific links on the UG website is timed. In the first two months of every academic year, links and banners on admissions and related issues feature prominently on the Home page, for easy accessibility.*

Links to online application forms were available on the website for direct access. Alternatively, prospective students could also download the application forms to fill manually. The online registration forms, Kuti said, were particularly targeted at foreign/international and also prospective students not resident in Accra, for convenience. Students could also search through courses online to inform their choices whilst filling their application forms. The University, the study revealed, relied heavily on the website to advertise vacancies for senior member positions, and sparingly through the mass media, when the internal resource (website) was ‘inadequate’.

No statements on cultural diversity were found on the website, however a statement in the welcome message on the International Programmes Office (IPO) page promises a peaceful and rich cultural experience for non-Ghanaian/international students.

Even though fair business practice and work environment statements were not explicitly featured on the website, a document titled “Statutes of the University”, contained

comprehensive details on all the University's processes, policies and procedures. The study also found out that the website publishes annual reports of the University of Ghana. However, the University's annual reports, as well as lists of deans and directors of some colleges, had information that was not up-to-date, at least at the time of the study. The most current report published on the website at the time of collecting the data (September 25th, 2015), available via a link labelled "Click here to download the University of Ghana Annual Report" was dated March 2012. The report, a 365-page document, was available in Portable Document Format (PDF), for downloading. Clearly missing were the 2013 and 2014 annual reports. However, the study found other annual research reports from various faculties the University published on the website, with the latest publication being the 2013/2014 edition. The alumni section of the University website featured bank details for members of the general public, especially alumni, who wished to make or redeem pledges, to contribute towards scholarship schemes or other related uses. Also, the study found "Aid information" on a dedicated page on the website, for needy but brilliant Ghanaian students. The page provided details on the sources of funds (internal and external) to the Student Financial Aid Office, and the eligibility criteria to access the funds, amongst other information. Then also, alumni who wished to support the University's projects were provided with a dedicated email address through which they could channel their enquiries and support.

Neither the home page nor the Public Affairs Directorate page of the website had a clear link to the University's press releases. However, using the search window, the researcher was able to find a list of news (press) releases published on the website; the latest dated August 7, 2015, titled "News Release: UG Launches Collegiate System". Meanwhile, in an interview with an assistant registrar at the Public Affairs Directorate, Pascaline Kuunzungla Songsore, she explained that press releases were usually published on the website only as a link attached to news stories:



*We have issued a lot of press releases.... What happens is this: For instance, the Africa Integras thing, I think there was a release attached to it. We said the event had taken place; the story was there, and the release was put as a link... because the story allows us to tell what happened during the event; put up pictures, and then we have the release as part of it.*

News on the University's activities and announcements on impending programmes were consistently updated to the extent that at the time of collecting the data, news about an activity that had taken place on the day had been published. In place of a Faculty list, the University of Ghana website had a list of "Principal Officers", ranging from a list of Principal Officers, Central Administration, Office of Provost/Deans among others. The two assistant registrars of the Public Affairs Directorate of the University explained that the main purpose for establishing the University website was for publicity and image-building. To illustrate this Songsore explained that:

*Upon changing to the collegiate system, the University had replaced all faculty lists of deans and directors of the various colleges. We needed to communicate this both for the idea of greater effectiveness that the changes were intended to produce, and for the sheer purpose of informing the public.*

No demographic reports, whatsoever, were found on any of the web pages of the website. The University of Ghana website allowed downloads; documents and files could be downloaded in mainly PDF formats – from annual reports, to speeches, audio files among others.

### 4.2.3 Conservation (Maintenance) of Visitors

This principle, according to Kent and Taylor (1998, 2002), refers to how organizations are able to ‘bond’ with their site visitors, encouraging them to spend time on their sites without switching to other sites.

The four (4) indicators used to analyse this principle are indicated in Table 5, below.

**Table 5 4.3: Conservation (Maintenance) of visitors rating of University of Ghana website**

| No.                        | Indicator/attribute  | Assessment   |              |              |
|----------------------------|--|--------------|--------------|--------------|
|                            |  | 0            | 1            | 2            |
| 1                          | Important information available on the home (first) page     |              |              | ✓            |
| 2                          | Calendar of Events   |              |              | ✓            |
| 3                          | Evidence of a clear posting of the last update date and time | ✓            |              |              |
| 4                          | *Loading time(>4 secs) - Refer to Table 4                    |              | ✓            |              |
| <b>Total percent (N=4)</b> |  | <b>25.5%</b> | <b>25.5%</b> | <b>50.0%</b> |

Source: Field Work, August 2015

To assess the first indicator, that is, “The availability of important information on the home (first) page of the website”, the researcher checked for the extent to which all fifty-four (54) indicators on the coding sheet could be found, directly or indirectly (through links), on the home page. Approximately seventy three percent (73%) of the indicators could be found on the home page.

The University of Ghana website had a calendar of past, present and future activities - Congregation and Matriculation, public lectures and alumni activities, among others. Also, prominently featured on the website was the academic calendar for the 2015/2016 academic year. The study further established that, apart from news stories bearing clear dates of publication, there were no additional details on the exact time they were posted or updated; every other publication neither bore dates nor time of publication.

In order to ascertain the duration/time it takes for the website content to load upon entering the URL for the website, the researcher monitored the ‘loading time’ using three (3) different Internet Service Providers/mobile broadband networks to monitor the loading time. For each of the networks, the ‘experiment’ was done two times within the study period. The table below gives details of the ‘loading time’ for each of the networks chosen on different dates.

**Table 6 4.4: University of Ghana website loading time**

| <b>DATE</b>                 | <b>NETWORK/ISP</b>        | <b>LOADING TIME</b> |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------|
| August 31, 2015             | MTN                       | 0.51 seconds        |
| September 3, 2015           | Vodafone                  | 0.77 seconds        |
| September 7, 2015           | Surflin Wi-Fi             | 0.44 seconds        |
| September 10, 2015          | MTN                       | 0.58 seconds        |
| September 23, 2015          | Surflin                   | 0.54 seconds        |
| September 30, 2015          | Vodafone Mobile Broadband | 0.56 seconds        |
| <b>AVERAGE LOADING TIME</b> |                           | <b>0.57 seconds</b> |

Source: Field Work, August 2015

According to Kent and Taylor (1998), websites should take an average of four (4) seconds to load. However, the study found out that the average loading time of the website content

for all the six (6) times the website was tested, using the three (3) different ISPs/networks was 0.57 seconds.

#### 4.2.4 Generation of Return Visits

To measure this principle, eight (8) indicators were used for the assessment, as indicated in Table 5. Counting thirty (30) days back from the day of the data gathering, as many as thirteen (13) news stories had been published on the website. Each story had supporting images with their respective dates of publications captured beneath each headline.

**Table 7 4.5: ‘Generation of Return Visits’ rating of the University of Ghana website**

| No.                        | Indicator/attribute   | Assessment   |              |              |
|----------------------------|---|--------------|--------------|--------------|
|                            |   | 0            | 1            | 2            |
| 1                          | The availability of news items posted within last 30 days           |              |              | ✓            |
| 2                          | Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) section                            | ✓            |              |              |
| 3                          | Links to related websites   | ✓            |              |              |
| 4                          | ‘Bookmark now’ statements   | ✓            |              |              |
| 5                          | Statement of return (Explicit statements asking visitors to return) | ✓            |              |              |
| 6                          | The availability of calendar of events                              |              |              | ✓            |
| 7                          | The availability of discussion forums/sessions on the website.      | ✓            |              |              |
| 8                          | The availability of feedback/survey forms                           |              | ✓            |              |
| <b>Total percent (N=8)</b> |   | <b>62.5%</b> | <b>12.5%</b> | <b>25.0%</b> |

Source: Field Work, August 2015

Taylor et al. (2001) posited that because relationship-building entails time and trust, websites should constantly feature content, be it in the form of audio, text, images or videos, that make them attractive and visit-worthy. This would often include content such as updates on developing issues or information, new or changing issues, special issues platforms or forums, links or windows for frequently asked questions (FAQs), easy-to-download or forward/mail information and referral services or links to given URLs for additional information. At the time of the collecting data from the University of Ghana website, there was no comprehensive Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) document which visitors could refer to. However, a three-question FAQs document was found on the “Admissions Enquiry” page. Asked why the University would not tally and translate the numerous emails that flood the PAD’s enquiry email inbox into FAQ formats, Esi Essuman-Johnson, an Assistant Registrar at the Public Affairs Directorate said:

*The questions are very many and varied. Like I said, if you understand how the University is.... It has so many specialized units that need specialized information/attention... I cannot speak on admissions, for instance; so if you ask me something directly related to what we do here, why not. But if it relates specifically to admissions we’d rather direct you to admissions, so they tell you more factually: these are your grades...Somebody is asking ‘how can I apply for this...can I do that...?’ We cannot add that to our core functions...*

Asked if the University of Ghana website provided links to any external websites, this is what the assistant registrar had to say:

*Yes, if it is a project on campus. You know recently there was this...MESA, they wanted us to link their website to the University of Ghana website, and that doesn’t*

*happen often... This was a project by the Oceanography Department and they have a project website. So we either insert a link in the story or announcement or publicity or something saying there is a workshop, directing people to their website. We've had requests from outside bodies wanting to link to the website, but we have denied access... Everything is in support of what we do... and you cannot advertise on our website...Commercial, no! Unless you are working on a project in a unit and the publicity is coming under the auspices of that unit...*

Kent and Taylor (1998: 330 - 331) recommend that organizations in the name of providing relevant content (information) should guard against directing visitors away from their websites, since they risk the consequence of they (visitors) not returning. Clearly, the University website complies with Kent and Taylor's recommendation, above, ostensibly to maintain to ensure visitors stay longer on their site. More so, unlike some websites that commercialize spots on their sites, the University of Ghana website says everything they do is in support of their website with no nonrelated third party or commercial interests.

#### **4.2.5 Dialogic (Interactivity) Loop**

This study used eight (8) indicators to measure this principle, as shown in Table 7.

**Table 8 4.6: 'Dialogic (Interactivity) Loop' rating of University of Ghana website**

| No. | Indicator/attribute   | Assessment |   |   |
|-----|---|------------|---|---|
|     |   | 0          | 1 | 2 |
| 1   | Existence of opportunities for visitors to the website to send emails and requests; |            |   | ✓ |

|                            |  |              |              |              |
|----------------------------|--|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| 2                          | Links to contacting PR staff directly;                             | ✓            |              |              |
| 3                          | Opportunity for e-mail response;                                   |              |              | ✓            |
| 4                          | Responsiveness to emails;  | ✓            |              |              |
| 5                          | Links for contacting Faculty experts directly;                     |              | ✓            |              |
| 6                          | Links for contacting governing body directly;                      | ✓            |              |              |
| 7                          | Presence of online survey forms for expressing opinions on issues; |              | ✓            |              |
| 8                          | Opportunities to vote on issues.                                   | ✓            |              |              |
| <b>Total percent (N=8)</b> |  | <b>50.0%</b> | <b>25.0%</b> | <b>25.0%</b> |

Source: Field Work, August 2015

The study revealed that the University of Ghana website aside from the availability of an email address to the PR directorate (PAD) had a couple of email addresses through which visitors to the website could channel their enquiries to the heads of the various directorates, colleges, departments, and some key staff. On this account there were no direct links to contacting PR staff apart from the following: [pad@ug.edu.gh](mailto:pad@ug.edu.gh).

However, despite putting out the aforementioned email address, and phone number, and postal address as the official (main channels) for enquiries, the directorate did not have the capacity to provide answers to the numerous, varied emails received daily. To this observation, Essuman Johnson explained that a trained staff had been purposely employed to give dedicated attention to such enquiries:

*We do have a dedicated staff who looks at the emails and requests coming in, then forwards them. They come through in hundreds within an hour. It's really that bad.... If the person is able to handle them at his level, he answers them, otherwise he forwards them to either of us or the director; and those that have to respond to them.*

Despite providing a list of Principal Officers, Hall heads, Tutors, Provosts, Deans and Governing Council, there were no links for contacting them directly. The study found out that the Academic Affairs Directorate page had as many as three (3) general contact email addresses:

1. [studentsaccounts@ug.edu.gh](mailto:studentsaccounts@ug.edu.gh)
2. [academic@ug.edu.gh](mailto:academic@ug.edu.gh)
3. [sgsadmissions@ug.edu.gh](mailto:sgsadmissions@ug.edu.gh)

There is also the following cell phone number: 020-8106480.

To send enquiries to any of the links provided above, students were required to quote their unique student numbers; the instruction read: “**Note:** In sending the complaint please indicate your Student Number.”

The study found the names, designations and email addresses of key staff of the Academic Affairs Directorate on the website, as depicted in Appendix ‘B’, attached. Other directorates, however, did not have details of their key staff perhaps to demonstrate the level of importance the University places on academic affairs.

In order to test for ‘responsiveness to emails’, the researcher sent an enquiry email to the address, [academic@ug.edu.gh](mailto:academic@ug.edu.gh), provided on the admissions page of the website. Fourteen (14) days on, no response had been received. On three consecutive occasions when the researcher put through follow-up calls to the cell number provided above, and it was



constantly off; thus, making the provision of the above contact details apparently merely procedural, and not for the functional purpose or intent of being a communication conduit.

From the study it became evident that the public affairs directorate, and for that matter the University, wasn't considering upgrading its dialogic capacity anytime soon.

When asked about new ways through which the University website, could meet the information needs of its publics (Research question 2), Essuman-Johnson explained as follows:

*As you can see we are also a bit conservative in our approach. Maybe we are stuck to the traditional ways. We haven't evolved much with the way things are moving, and it has also worked; and so far, we have never come under attack. We haven't felt the pressure to, as it were, modernize. Like I said, we haven't felt the pressure; nonetheless, there's a growing concern, a few people expressing the interest, and once you start you realize that you create the need for it.*

It is obvious from the above response that there is no urgency, whatsoever, on the part of the University of Ghana to 'change' from the traditional ways of meeting the information needs of its students. As it were, public/semi-autonomous Universities such as the University of Ghana don't have much to lose unlike with the private Universities who literally have to 'work hard to earn' and build on the relatively young status on the Ghanaian academic map. One may ask, but for the infrastructural endowment of the University of Ghana acquired over the years, how else, could it have continued to attract such numbers (enrolments-wise), a quarter of which the private Universities would innovate to have. It is definitely not enough to say: "We haven't felt the pressure to, as it were, modernize."

The University of Ghana's need to modernize (via its website) is a must-do, not a nice-to-have:

*The placement of specific links on the UG website is timed. In the first two months of every academic year, links and banners on admissions and related issues feature prominently on the Home page, for easy accessibility.*

By inference, the University of Ghana has no clear criteria for meeting the information needs of its publics; it is either determined by the academic calendar, calendar of events or public lectures.

The study also sought to find out ways in which the University of Ghana website could be managed effectively and efficiently to improve upon its dialogic (interactive) capacity (Research question 3). Essuman Johnson of the public affairs directorate explained that the University was in the process of launching its social media policy and following that, to formally employ the use of social media platforms as options for interacting with its key publics:

*We are developing our social media policy. It demands a policy because it is so live, more dialogic, and open. You can just imagine the information that is coming in, and you don't have enough time to even think through. So we have one of our staff undergoing training. We are now setting up a twitter account and are now trying to see if we can start tweeting about certain big events. For instance we have an Aggrey Frazer-Guggisberg lecture coming up.:*

Touching further on the issue of social media, a web-based, highly interactive (dialogic) medium, she expressed frustration at the number of unofficial facebook accounts unknown individuals had created in the name of the University of Ghana. To verify this concern, the researcher searched for 'University of Ghana' on facebook and as many as four accounts popped up: "UNIVERSITY OF GHANA, LEGON", "University of Ghana", "University of Ghana, Legon", and "Legon Campus." This situation notwithstanding, she added that:

*Part of the plan is to get student ambassadors and graduate students who would be tweeting about and live events and programs...It's all in the pipeline. It could be sooner than a year. It's all about resources also; it is a lot of work, and it can be very time consuming.*

The Academic Quality Assurance Unit also provided a contact email address, a postal address and an incomplete phone number, as follows:

**Address**

The Director

Academic Quality Assurance Unit

University of Ghana

P. O. Box LG25

Legon, Accra

Ghana

**Email:** [qau@ug.edu.gh](mailto:qau@ug.edu.gh)

**Telephone:** +233 302

+233 302

During the period of study, three survey types were found on the University of Ghana website. They are:

**1. Exit Survey for Graduating Classes:**

“This survey is intended to help us learn more about your experiences as Graduates of the University of Ghana. Your responses would help Faculties, Administrators and Management of the University to improve upon programmes and the educational experiences of future students. Click [here](#) to access it.”

## 2. **Graduate Tracer Survey:**

“The purpose of this survey is to find out whether graduates of University of Ghana imbibe the knowledge and skills required of them during their course of study and are able to compete favourably on the job market after graduation. Click [here](#) to access it.”

## 3. **The Course/Lecturer Evaluation:**

“Kindly **click here to evaluate your courses/lecturers**. Follow this same process to evaluate all courses you studied in the first semester, 2014/2015 academic year. Thank you.”

### **4.3 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

This section discusses the implications of the findings for best practice and lessons on how public relations practitioners in the University of Ghana, and for that matter in University institutions generally, could synergize the benefits that come from adapting the five (5) principles of dialogic public relations propounded by Kent and Taylor (1998; 2002): Ease of (Interface) Use; Usefulness of Information; Generation of Return Visits, Maintenance; and Dialogic Loop (Interactivity). The five (5) principles which were further disaggregated into fifty four (54) indicators (codes), sought to establish which of the codes were featured on the University of Ghana website.

Selected codes (indicators) from the 54-indicator guide, were also incorporated into an interview guide (APPENDIX A) to help respond to the second and third objectives which guided the conduct of the study. In order to discuss the findings in their right perspective, they will be discussed in relation to the specific research objectives.

**Research Objective 1** sought to determine the dialogic capacities of the University of Ghana website. This discussion of the findings would highlight mainly on the salient indicators, under each principle.

#### **4.3.1 Ease of (Interface) Use**

Of the nine (9) indicators of this principle, only four, (4) representing 44.4% were available on the website, as indicated the summary of findings above. Major links, to the rest of the website, existed on the home page and major sections rest of the website. Despite the unavailability of site maps on the website, information was arranged in a logical manner under seven (7) main tabs: Home; Admission; Academics; Research; Library; International Programmes; and Freshmen Info.

Despite their relative importance of site maps as espoused by Thelwall (2009), they were conspicuously absent on the website were. Thelwall explains that site maps enable visitors navigate an entire website from a single location, avoiding wasteful and random searches and routes. Image maps, website glossary, and links to external websites, all helpful navigation tools, were also unavailable on the University of Ghana website. The header of the homepage featured a search window through which users/visitors could query or search for specific information using key words or phrases. Better still, the absence of the site maps, the search window made it relatively easier to navigate the website, with very low reliance on images and graphics. This notwithstanding, the absence of a majority (55.6%) of the ‘ease of interface’ features/indicators used for this study clearly shows that the University of Ghana website still has lot of room for improvement. For a one hundred and fifty page website, these tools cannot be overlooked. The presence of all these indicators, according to Taylor et al. (2001) are good predictors of dialogic potential because the more navigable

or user-friendly a website, the more likely a visitor is to return. Ease of (interface) use the study revealed had a direct bearing on the chances of visitors returning to the website.

#### **4.3.2 Usefulness of Information**

Through websites organizations are able to keep their audiences informed; and from a public relations perspective, project their image, distinguishing themselves from competition, and also tout their strengths and core values. This principle was tested using a twenty five (25)-indicator scale, as indicated in the coding sheet (APPENDIX A). Fifteen (15) of the indicators of this principle, representing 62.5%, were present on the website. Kent and Taylor (1998, p. 327) argue that featuring information “information of general value to all publics, including organizational background information is an imperative.” McAllister-Spooner and Kent (2009) in their study of nineteen community colleges on how stakeholder needs in educational settings could be met found out that ‘usefulness of information’ and ‘dialogic loop’ emerged the strongest indicators of responsiveness. To some extent, this study corroborates McAllister-Spooner and Kent’s findings, however, despite the availability of opportunities for visitors to send emails to dedicated email addresses, the response rate was nearly zero (at least during the study period).

A major characteristic of this principle is the ‘vision, mission statement, philosophy, logo, and history of the organization of the website’, which the website prominently features.

In addition to the mission statements, vision, philosophy, logo and corporate history found on the website, press releases were prominently featured on the website. Aside from the available and clear links to press releases, most news stories and

announcements also featured links to press releases, thereby making navigation from a single location possible. News stories on the website, as current as they were, are sure reasons for, and positive predictors of, return visits.

Esi Essuman Johnson explained that in addition to using the University of Ghana website for publicity purposes:

*The website is also used to build our image. Generally when you visit our website, the look and feel of the site and stories that we put out should attract and keep your attention and interest and create a positive impression about us. There is no way we put out anything negative about us; we are always putting out things happening and collaborations here and there.*

Generally the information captured on the website is not particularly audience-specific. However, it tends to be generically biased towards students, and the general public. Most of it is academic information. The respondent from the public affairs directorate explained that:

*For most students, they know that around the time for admission, they know that they would find school fees schedule...it's all there; and so everybody goes there. Even more specifically on the website you see that we are announcing, conferences and workshops so it is targeted at... so you know that if I come to the University of Ghana website, I might find information about workshops and conferences and call for papers, and you may apply. When we advertise in the newspapers for congregation, matriculation and admissions, we direct people to the website; and you know that. If we are putting out information about admissions, you know that its relevant information to students and they need*

*it. Most often our communication through the mass media also seeks to direct traffic to the website.”*

Aside from publishing student-specific, and alumni-specific information, all other information had been lumped together (wholesale), leaving other categories of its publics, to grope, in the absence of site and image maps whenever they have to access the website. Interestingly, the study revealed the availability of a link on the Public Affairs Directorate page leading to the “Alumni Affairs Unit” page. The ‘Alumni page’, by far, was the most ‘audience-specific’ on the website; the information published on that page was mainly alumni-related, making it the most ‘audience-specific section/information the website. This suggests that the University of Ghana does not consider reaching all its publics via the website, despite its potential and cost saving attributes. Indeed Songsore corroborated this when she said: “I won’t say that we are able to reach all our publics via the website. Definitely not.”

According to Kent and Taylor (1998; 2002), University websites would not be maximizing their fullest potential of becoming ‘well organized information extensions’ if they fail to address all their bona fide stakeholders. Obviously, parents, government agencies, community leaders, among others, had been left out so far as the specificity of information is concerned. No clear links existed for these categories of the University’s publics.

Featuring links to academic programs and other academic information on the home page makes a website a one-stop shop for all its visitors. The availability of links to the images and profiles of the University’s governing Council and leadership gives some prestige to the University, recently announced as the only University in Ghana to have made it to the ‘Times Higher Education’ (THE) World Rankings. For a University keen on internationalization, publishing the image of former United Nations (UN) Secretary-General, Kofi Annan



(Chancellor), and the images of other high ranking officers of the University leadership sure public relations and relationship-building dialogic tool; it helps visitors to visually connect to names they otherwise would not have connected with.

Publishing policies and other administrative details is able to improve levels of informational transparency and mutual trust between the University and its publics. Logos, audio speeches were available for downloading. Particularly useful about this option is the ability of students, and indeed other researchers, to use these downloadable materials in their work, easing the burden of having to go through bureaucratic processes to secure such basic data.

### **4.3.3 Generation of Return Visits**

Eight (8) indicators were used to assess this generation of return visits dimension as indicated in Table 5. This principle, the study found out had the least percentage score. Relationship-building in public relations practice is achieved through deliberate and conscious efforts. Kent and Taylor (1998: 327-328) suggested that organizations can only transform their websites into useful resources for their primary publics and the general public at large if they provide content of value.

With this principle of generation of return visits, public relations practitioners must find ways of creating and nurturing long-lasting relationships with their publics online, according to McAllister-Spooner (2009). By extension, this means incorporating website features which ensure visitors repeatedly and frequently return to the website.

“Bookmarking a page”, according to Nielson (1998), “is almost as good as getting them (visitors) to voluntarily receive email.” Simply providing a ‘bookmark now’ window, or other explicit statements of return on a website, is most likely to trigger frequent visitor-return to a website. No such feature was found on any part of the website. However, nearly

every page on the website featured a calendar of past, recent and future events, a must-have, relationship-building technique to generate return visits to a website, according to Kent and Taylor (1998; 2002).

Furthermore, the website proved to be the one-stop-shop for up-to-date University-related new and academic-related announcements. Counting back thirty (30) days from the last day of the data collection period, the website had published as many as fourteen (14) news items on recent events and news-worthy activities. Another commendable feature of this principle was the availability of a calendar of events on the website – past, present, and future – especially on the home page. Flash banners announcing upcoming events hitting every visitor to the website in the face even before they navigate to other pages to find specific information was very commendable. The Public Affairs Directorate revealed that a survey had been conducted of participants in most events announced on the website which showed that as many as 80% of the participants got to know about it through the website ‘announcement’ “Special discussion fora, news commentaries, on-line question and answer sessions,” among others are features Kent and Taylor (1998) recommend. One would expect that the University would capitalize on the advantages that come with having a comprehensive FAQs section to ‘manage’ the constant influx of enquiry emails, especially at the beginning of the academic year when admission issues are rife. Despite the ability to request for information, responses to emails was extremely slow (no response was received, two weeks after sending an enquiry mail). As a matter of urgency, avenues for reaching the University where visitors require prompt responses to their ‘emergency enquiries’ must be looked at again. Employing more staff to respond to emails is an imperative for the University.

As indicated earlier in Chapter 2, visitors value website FAQs for the convenience it offers instead of having to resort to making calls, sending emails or travelling long distances to access information which are mostly not effective.

Options for the general public to create online accounts did not exist on the website. However, students and staff could access their personal information via the website using the MIS and ITS portals. What if the above mentioned stakeholders have challenges or queries? Such avenues are visibly missing on the website.

According to Taylor et al. (2001, p.269) the indicators of the ‘ease of (interface) use’ are good predictors of dialogic potential, because the more navigable, or user-friendly a website, the more likely a visitor is to return. The principles of ‘ease of (interface) use’ and ‘generation of return visits’ are intrinsically dependent on each other.

#### **4.3.4 Conservation (Maintenance) of Visitors**

This dimension – conservation of visitors – upholds that website features should make the visitor’s time on the website worth their while. McAllister-Spooner (2009, para. 4) says that the content (texts, links and graphics) should offer “value to their site visitors, and conserve visit time.” Without site and image maps, navigation and user experience for such a vast website would be quite problematic.

According to Kent and Taylor (1998), website load time, inclusion of calendar of events, evidence of clear posting of the last update date and time, among others, make the visitor’s time on a home page well-intentioned. Being able to attract and maintain a captive audience largely depends on the stickiness of a website, and by extension how long visitors would remain on it for. Smith (2009) found out that visitors to websites may be forced to move to other websites at the least interruption; for instance, if it takes more than four seconds to

load, and/or it does not feature relevant information for the needs of the visitor. Thus, it behoves on public relations practitioners, and for that matter website managers, to ensure that the speed of loading is fast, always. This study recorded an average loading time of 0.57 seconds, with the best loading time being 0.44 seconds, a speed which Kent and Taylor (1998) say is still slow. They assert that to maintain visitors on a website, the average speed of loading must not exceed 0.04 seconds. However, as the only one-stop repository of the University's academic information etc. caution must be exercised not to frustrate visitors to the website. Making visitors' time spent on the site worth their while is critical.

On the issue of providing links to other websites, Essuman-Johnson, assistant registrar at the Public Affairs Directorate, said:

*Yes, if it is a project on campus. You know recently there was this...MESA, they wanted us to link their website to and that doesn't happen often... this was a project by the Oceanography Department and they have a project website, so either in a story or an announcement or publicity or something saying there is a workshop, directing people to their website. We've had requests from outside bodies wanting to link to the website, but we have denied access... Everything is in support of what we do... and you cannot advertise on our website, nothing commercial, unless you are working on a project in a unit and the publicity is coming under the auspices of that Unit.*

Notwithstanding the risk of losing visitors to other sites, and likelihood of they not returning, the University of Ghana website can go ahead to include "essential links" that have "clearly marked paths for visitors to return to your site" (Kent & Taylor, 1998, p. 330). However, without site maps on the University of Ghana website, the site is clearly not ready for this kind of 'risk'.

Apart from press releases, posts on the front page, and elsewhere on the website did not come with clear dates and times. A site visitor may well not be sure if the news items and information, they may be seeing for the first time is new or old. Noteworthy is the fact that visitors may also want to refer to such website information in their academic or professional work; for which temporal information is usually required. Having useful information, and useful links on the home page, leading to other pages of the site, proved to be the engaging feature for this principle.

#### **4.3.5 Dialogic (Interactivity) Loop**

It is possible that, as with Taylor and Kent's (2004, p.73) findings from their own study on Congressional websites in the USA, the European parties are unaware of the fact that their websites offer the potential to "become portals for public discussion, debate and deliberation". The under listed indicators adapted from Kent and Taylor's (1998) referring to measures of interactivity, were tested by checking for their availability/non availability on the University of Ghana's website:

- Existence of opportunities for visitors to the website to send emails and requests,
- Links to contacting PR staff directly,
- Opportunity for e-mail response,
- Speed of response to emails,
- Links for contacting Faculty experts directly,
- Links for contacting governing body directly,
- Presence of online survey forms for expressing opinions on issues, and
- Opportunities to vote on issues.

Ward and Sweetser (2014) in a study revealed that one's likelihood of returning to an organizational blog or website was highly dependent on its dialogic capacity. By extension, this translates into the ability of the website to effectively incorporate the above indicators to reap the full benefits dialogue over the internet. The study revealed, that most directorates of the University provided email links, either on the header or footer, through which visitors could reach them. On the home page, however, there was a "Contact" link on the header, and also a "GET IN TOUCH WITH US" tab on the footer.

Servier (2004) suggests that colleges (Universities) should use the internet (through) their websites to facilitate contact with people, and also make it convenient for prospective students to email faculty and staff. However, two emails sent by the researcher on separate occasions through the Official Public Affairs Directorate link – [pad@ug.edu.gh](mailto:pad@ug.edu.gh), and also [academic@ug.edu.gh](mailto:academic@ug.edu.gh) were not replied fourteen (14) days on, which makes the University of Ghana website highly unresponsive, according to Kent and Taylor (2001). It appears that, certain features, for instance, "Contact" on the header, and "GET IN TOUCH WITH US" tab on the footer are superficial, perhaps for procedural purposes only

Fulda and Kwasik (2004, p. 374) and Harris (2009) argue that organizations (Universities) should not only see their websites as a natural extension of their services, but also as an opportunity to enhance relationships. Clearly, the University i.e. the PAD has not given Fulda, Kwasik and Harris's suggestions argument a thought, which leaves yet again more room to improve on relationship-building capacity of the University of Ghana website.

Because the internet is capable of establishing interactive, two-way symmetrical communication, it is important that practitioners develop dialogic feedback loops (Kelleher, 2009). Songsore revealed that most staff use the ITS to put through requests and also submit personalized data such as leave approvals and accessing pay slips, among others online. Students on the other hand used the MIS to access personal academic information, and also put through student-related requests.

*Also, one thing I forgot to mention is the ITS (Integrated Tertiary Software) is also on the website, these days, we do a lot through the ITS. So for instance, students are able to check their results on the **MIS**? ITS is for staff and the version for students is the MIS, and that is where you register, print your admission letter... everything...I also just wanted to say that for staff also, we do our leave approvals and applications online and we do the website... you can access your pay slip online.*

The findings on the dialogic capacity of the University of Ghana website can be best described as ‘monologic loop’ since information flow is mainly one-way, not two-way as espoused by the two-way symmetrical model by Grunig and Hunt (1984). Kent and Taylor (1998) reiterated the fact that organizations should know that good relationships cannot automatically result from use technology use (p. 324). Rather, the manner in which the technology is deployed and used is what determines its impact on the organization i.e. the University’s relationship with its publics (Park & Reber, 2008). Obviously, the University of Ghana has invested in the valuable infrastructure i.e. UGCS to support its website however, the website’s potential seems underutilized per Park & Reber (2008)’s finding above.

Kent and Taylor (1998, pp. 326-327) advise that “ideally, dialogic contact with stakeholders is conducted by trained professionals rather than interns of website managers who have limited formal communication training.” Having just one officer officially responsible for responding to emails is clearly inadequate considering the number of emails that flood the email addresses provided above. Hahn (2010) in a study of hospital websites found out that larger organizations tend to be relatively more dialogic than the smaller ones. Hahn’s finding, however, does not corroborate the findings in this study as the response rate is very slow that is if existent at all.

#### **4.4 CHAPTER SUMMARY**

This chapter presented the findings of the study by reporting the outcomes of the analysis of the corporate website of the University of Ghana based on Kent and Taylor’s (1998, 2002) five principles of dialogic public relations. Guided by previous related studies, this study generated 54 indicators for operationally evaluating the presence and quality of the five principles. These principles were further illuminated by insights from three in-depth interviews conducted with officials of the PAD and UGCS, variously responsible for content generation or website management. On the whole, the findings suggest that while the University of Ghana is exploiting the advantages offered by websites for leveraging engagement with its diverse publics, there still exists a wide spectrum of unexploited potentials.



## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### **5.1 OVERVIEW**

This chapter summarises the main issues raised and discussed in the study. The recommendations should also serve as a scholarly reference for further studies on the subject matter, and also inform the Public Affairs Directorate and University of Ghana Computer Systems on ways to making the website a lot more dialogic.

#### **5.2 CONCLUSIONS**

Despite the number of years that have passed since the dialogic theory of public relations was propounded, gaps still remain in the way the University of Ghana has applied the theory. It is evident that the University of Ghana, the case study institution, is still learning how to maximize the dialogic potential of its website, beyond the current information-sharing-function.

Also, it may be concluded that annual reports were not posted as quickly as would be desirable for enabling a useful reliance on the website for the most up-to-date information.

Two-way dialogic communication facilitated by the strategic usage of the web 2.0 technologies (the internet), is one of the best ways organizations (Universities) can build relationships with their publics (Kent & Taylor, 1998).

Consequently, it can be concluded that the University of Ghana website despite having an appealing and well-designed look and feel, and providing a lot of student-specific and other useful information, is still underutilized in terms of the interactive features that enable stronger relationships with an organization's publics. That notwithstanding, having a web presence is a giant step forward towards reaping the benefits of 'webbed communication and dialogue'.

### **5.3 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

One important limitation of this study was the period of time used in gathering the data. A lengthier period would have revealed a greater depth of findings and also generated more insights leading to more reliable results which could have been generalized.

The study was limited to the University of Ghana website only, but a comparative study would have provided critical insights about possible variable predictors of website dialogism based on variable institutional structures and cultures. It would also have enabled better representativeness and more valid generalizations of the findings beyond the specific association of the present findings to the University in Ghana. In lieu of that this study's findings cannot be extrapolated to all public Universities in Ghana.

Also, this study sought simply to look out for the features that make the University of Ghana website dialogic. Thus, it is limited in the sense that the study could investigate further into the reasons for the inclusion and exclusion of particular dialogic indicators (features). Indeed at the time of the study, staff of the UGCS were extremely busy, and could not make time to grant an interview to find out the reasons behind the presence and absence of critical features on the University website. On the responsiveness of the website, the study could

have established a different finding if the study period had spanned over a much longer period, at different times of the year – admission season (first semester) and other seasons (second semester and during vacation).

Time and financial resource constraints did not allow the researcher to gather insights from the students from whom richer insights on user-experience can be gathered. Indeed at the time of gathering data for the study, students were on vacation. Also due to time constraints, the researcher could not search extensively enough to find literature on similar studies in Ghana or elsewhere in Africa. Indeed, this would have provided a better context to situate this study and its findings.

#### **5.4 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE STUDIES**

Based on the research results, findings of the study and the conclusions drawn above, the study proposes the following recommendations for future studies, and to inform the optimum utilisation of the advantages that websites offer for improving dialogism via the University of Ghana website:

1. Future research should thus consider supplementing the methods used in this study - content analysis and in-depth interviews, with survey questionnaires to validate the findings. Wimmer and Dominick (2011) propose that researchers can reduce the impact of selective perception and reactivity by using at least two methods of data collection. They also add that “triangulation, or supplementing observational data with data gathered by other means such as questionnaires ensure accuracy.” (p.126). Thus, user-insights gathered from a survey of students, and/or sections of the

University's other publics would be most helpful in providing a different perspective.

2. Unlike the traditional 'one-to-many monologic' communication techniques, social media offers 'many-to-many dialogic' advantages which the University of Ghana website must take advantage of. According to McCann, (2008) social media has forever changed the way we communicate, interact, share, and ultimately conduct our relationships with family, friends, co-workers, politicians, news media, celebrities, and companies alike. The University of Ghana beyond its website can take advantage of the web 2.0 applications such as 'Twitter' and 'Facebook' since the benefits they come with far outweigh the resource-constraint challenge(s) raised by the assistant registrar, in the interview. The same way student-volunteers have effectively manned 'Radio Univers', a University of Ghana-owned campus-based radio station, so can these millennials, if appropriately trained, man the University's social media platforms around the clock. The insights, the University can generate from the interactions via these platforms is unquantifiable financially. Caution must however be exercised not to leave the management of these social media platforms to student volunteers only, as enumerated by Essuman-Johnson. Indeed Kent and Taylor (1998)'s assertion that dialogic contact with stakeholders must be conducted by trained professionals rather than interns who have limited formal communication training (p. 327) should be the University's guide. Closely related to this recommendation is the need for the University to increase the number of trained public relations personnel who respond to official email enquiries.
3. One startling finding from the study was the absence of a comprehensive 'FAQs' document on the website on the University of Ghana website. FAQs, literature reveals, have become integral parts of website navigation tools. Visitor-queries

(emails) to the University's website could be reduced significantly, to lessen the load on the limited human resource (one person at the time of the study), if a comprehensive 'FAQ' is introduced onto the website, with links, that provide stock answers to the subjects of routine enquiry. Despite the presence of a search engine on the website, sectionalizing the FAQs in addition to a search window on the page would enhance navigability. In the absence of data to initiate/create such a page (FAQs), the University over time can accumulate information from the email enquiries, letters and calls that come through, and 'grow' the document.

4. Eisenberg (2005) proposes online surveys, focus group discussions, hiring a full-time analyst(s) as some of the imperatives for site improvement, which he argues is an essential process, and not a one-time activity. According to Eisenberg, more and more businesses are realizing the benefits of critically analysing their website/website traffic and are taking measures to improve their profits based on these numbers. Eisenberg's proposal though over a decade old still holds true, and the Public Affairs Directorate would require a research team (a full time analyst(s)) who will generate insights from traffic to the website for site improvement.

Going forward, the University of Ghana, through its website, must capitalize on the rise in internet use among its publics as a springboard to build better and stronger relationships with its publics.

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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A: DATA COLLECTION CODING SCALE

(Adapted from McAllister-Spooner and Kent, 2009)

**KEY: 0 = Not Available;            1 = Available, Low;            2 = Available, High**

#### **EASE OF (INTERFACE) USE**

| INDICATORS   | 0 | 1 | 2 |
|--|---|---|---|
| The availability of site maps/major links on the home page to the rest of the website. |   |   |   |
| The ease of identifying site maps on the University of Ghana home page.                |   |   |   |
| The ease of identifying major links to other sites on the University's home page.      |   |   |   |
| Logical hierarchy of information   |   |   |   |
| Availability of option to access information with images off                           |   |   |   |
| The incorporation of image maps  |   |   |   |
| The incorporation of search engines on the home page.                                  |   |   |   |
| Availability of external links, advertising on the website, and rationale.             |   |   |   |



**USEFULNESS OF INFORMATION**

| INDICATORS   | 0 | 1 | 2 |
|--|---|---|---|
| The availability of the University’s vision, mission statement, philosophy and history on the website. |   |   |   |
| Academic programs  |   |   |   |
| Clear links to academic information  |   |   |   |
| Admissions information   |   |   |   |
| Online application forms   |   |   |   |
| Online registration  |   |   |   |
| Online course search   |   |   |   |
| Employment opportunities   |   |   |   |
| Cultural diversity (EEO) statements  |   |   |   |
| Fair business practices statements   |   |   |   |
| Work environment statements  |   |   |   |
| Annual reports   |   |   |   |
| Grant opportunities  |   |   |   |
| Continuing education opportunities   |   |   |   |
| Funding opportunities  |   |   |   |
| Career placement services  |   |   |   |
| Civic involvement  |   |   |   |

|   |  |  |  |
|---|--|--|--|
| Policies and procedures   |  |  |  |
| The availability of press releases in a chronological manner  |  |  |  |
| The presence and frequency of updated information on the website.   |  |  |  |
| The presence of news stories posted on the website within the last 30 days.                                     |  |  |  |
| The availability of Faculty expert list/ bios   |  |  |  |
| The availability of downloadable information (audio and video) and graphics on the University of Ghana website. |  |  |  |
| The availability of audience-specific links, portals, targeting particular audiences.                           |  |  |  |
| The availability of demographic reports   |  |  |  |

### **CONSERVATION (MAINTENANCE) OF VISITORS**

| <b>INDICATORS</b>   | <b>0</b> | <b>1</b> | <b>2</b> |
|---|----------|----------|----------|
| Important information available on the home (first) page.     |          |          |          |
| Calendar of Events  |          |          |          |
| Evidence of a clear posting of the last update date and time. |          |          |          |
| Loading time(>4 secs)   |          |          |          |

## **GENERATION OF RETURN VISITS**

| <b>INDICATORS</b>   | <b>0</b> | <b>1</b> | <b>2</b> |
|---|----------|----------|----------|
| The availability of news items posted within last 30 days           |          |          |          |
| Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) section                            |          |          |          |
| Links to related websites   |          |          |          |
| 'Bookmark now' statements   |          |          |          |
| Statement of return (Explicit statements asking visitors to return) |          |          |          |
| The availability of calendar of events                              |          |          |          |
| The availability of discussion forums/sessions on the website.      |          |          |          |
| The availability of feedback/survey forms                           |          |          |          |

## **DIALOGIC (INTERACTIVITY) LOOP**

| <b>INDICATORS</b>  | <b>0</b> | <b>1</b> | <b>2</b> |
|--|----------|----------|----------|
| Existence of opportunities for visitors to the website to send emails and requests |          |          |          |
| Links to contacting PR staff directly  |          |          |          |
| Opportunity for e-mail response  |          |          |          |
| Speed of response to emails  |          |          |          |
| Links for contacting Faculty experts directly                                      |          |          |          |
| Links for contacting governing body directly                                       |          |          |          |
| Presence of online survey forms for expressing opinions on issues                  |          |          |          |
| Opportunities to vote on issues  |          |          |          |

## **APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDE**

### **Overview**

Good morning madam, and thanks for accepting to grant this interview. My name is Laura Mabel Korkuvi, a student of the Department of Communication Studies, University of Ghana, conducting a study on the topic 'Dialogic properties of University websites – A case study of the University of Ghana website'. With your kind permission, I would like to record our interview alongside taking notes, as a backup. Then also, I would be grateful if you can facilitate an interview with any other person to provide further assistance in this regard,

Thank you once again.

### **Questions:**

1. What are the primary goals for setting up the University of Ghana website? Kindly give me a brief background/history of the University of Ghana website.
2. How is the University of Ghana website used as a public relations tool?
3. How does the University of Ghana website contribute towards achieving the public relations goals of the University?
4. How do you determine the information needs of your publics?
5. What kinds of information do you routinely post through the website for the consumption of your:
  - a. Internal publics, and
  - b. External publics
6. How do you, in turn, ensure that the public are able to reach you through the University of Ghana's website? What specific features on the website enable this?

7. Why would you say that the University of Ghana website's potential as a public relations tool is being (a) fully used or (b) under-utilized?
8. Is there anything else you would wish to say about the website in relation to your function as the head of the public affairs directorate?

Thank you very much for your time; I am grateful. I would call on you again should the need arise for additional information.

## **APPENDIX C: TRANSCRIBED INTERVIEW**

### **What are the primary goals for setting up the University website?**

Patrick would answer the second part which is the brief background, and history of the University website. The goals of setting up the website mainly is information sharing information sharing publicity because we publicize the University programmes, academic programmes and courses of study and all that we publicize our research findings and collaborations...

### **Are these research findings available to the public?**

When I say research findings I'm mainly not just saying that the University of Ghana has done this research but people a lot of these research groups that are being formed to work on things like they will have a conference and they will have papers delivered; it is people's research findings. So all these colloquia that various schools organize, it is dissemination because they ask people to deliver based on their area of specialization. Also, for reaching out to our various publics because using the using the academic affairs issue as an example for instance during admissions time, we put up the list of students who have been successful and then they can do their registration online and we even have the payment of fees and things like that there is this UGpay, you can do some online access through the University website to do all that.

### **But then, are you able to reach all your publics through your website?**

I won't say that we are able to reach all our publics; definitely not. I also want to mention one key the library, very important. The library has started the digitization process so you can read all these publications and things like that online; you can have access to them on or off campus."

**Esi:** The website is also used to build our image. Generally when you visit our website, the look and feel the stories that we put out, there is no way we put out anything negative about us, we are always putting out things happening and collaborations here and there.

**(I remember at a point I had to request for out of campus access)**

**Which classes of your publics are you able to address through your website? I noticed that the last press release that was published was in 2014, on the gate issue, entry and exit into the University... is that to say that since that incident, you haven't issued any press releases. Or it is that you don't publish them on the website?**

Press Releases? We have issued a lot... What happens is this. For instance, the African Integras thing, I think there was a release attached to it. We said the release had taken place, the story was there, and the release was put as a link, because the story allows us to tell what happened during the event put up pictures, and then we have the release as part of it. Even last week the one about Thomson Reuters ranking the University of Ghana.

**That reminds me of something, I read that story a long time ago on Citi FM online; in fact in my dissertation that was the source I quoted.**

It also depends on ... some of these things, how do I put it, we don't get to hear of them immediately, so... Additionally they have announced their rankings, and they've done whatever story which would mention University of Ghana in three or four lines, but we take our time to do... we don't just talk about Thomson Reuters, but we talk about other rankings which shows that we are really inching closer towards becoming a world class University .... What we have on our website is more in depth than what Thomson Reuters.... They would immediately announce it because they have seen University of Ghana ... it give more details than what Thomson puts out...

We would take our time to flesh it out and expand it and have the VC say a few things about it or some other relevant person say something about it which might take about a week ... and we are not in a race to publish our stories. And I also think that we don't have a specialized newsroom to say that we are working on stories ... u know it is part of our functions as the Public Affairs Directorate

**Dedicated Newsroom?**

No we don't have that.

**What at the processes a story like that goes through before it gets published? Because it came out some time back but like she said...**

I think that some of our academic staff are members of some international bodies ... so they get such information quickly and so sometimes you get some of them sharing... oh, I just found this, UG has been part of this collaboration or has been involved in this ground breaking whatever... so they see it in their emails and share it with the University community in their emails then we pick it from there and do a release or story out of it... if you think it is something you want to blow up, it's of good relevance...we investigate to examine and see if it is something we want to blow up or of good relevance...

**How do you determine the information needs of your publics? How sure are you that the information you share on your website appeal to all those you intend reaching...?**

Well, most of it is academic information so the students need it anyway... For instance for students, they know that around the time for admission, they know that they would find school fees schedule...its all there; and so everybody goes there. Even more specifically on the website you see that we are announcing, conferences and workshops so it is targeted at... so you know that if I come to the University of Ghana website, I might find information about workshops and conferences and call for papers and you may apply. When we advertise in the newspapers for congregation, matriculation and admissions, we direct people to the website; and you know that. We if we are putting out information about admissions, you know that its relevant information to students and they need it. Most often communication through the mass media directs traffic ...from public affairs, because we announce our events, even of its just a workshop organized by the department of communication studies, you can be sure that... Also, one thing I forgot to mention is the ITS (Integrated Tertiary Software) is also on the website, these days, we do a lot through the ITS. So for instance, I think students are able to check their results.... **How different is the ITS for the MIS?** ITS is for staff and the version for students is the MIS, and that is where you register, print your admission letter... everything...I also just wanted to say that for staff also, we do our leave approvals and applications online and we do the website... you can access your pay slip online ... I'm saying this because initially I said it wasn't that interactive so it's quite interactive, so you have no option but to go there.



**So is that to say, you can't do hard copy applications ...?**

I think the junior staff use hard copy applications. Mostly the nature of their work doesn't demand that they use a machine.

**Can a group like the Alumni of the University, can they go to the website to access some specialize information.**

There is an alumni website but not here (website)...There is a different website but it is linked to it... but they can register online to join the association.

**At what point can somebody like me register?**

I think they are coming up with something like an affiliate ...even though I cannot speak authoritatively on it. You can register online and pay in the office... **So directly on the website, there is nothing but you direct traffic to their website.**

**Is there anything else you would like to add?**

I think I would take back my words when I said it is not interactive...it is interactive. Also, it depends on how you look at it. I think these days when people say a website is interactive, they are thinking, their mind goes to live chats, instant feedback.

**How long does it take your outfit to get back when people fill the website form or make enquiries?**

Well, the feedback form doesn't come to us ...For a thing like the student evaluation of lecturers, it goes to the Academic Quality Assurance Unit, they handle that, we don't have any role to play in that, it's purely academic. However, there is nothing for the general public, nothing like that. So if they have complaints...and we do have a dedicated staff who checks emails...the emails come through in hundreds in an hour, it's really that bad.

**And how many people do this (handle emails)?**

Myself, she does... but there is somebody who is dedicated to look at the emails coming in, and the requests then forward them. If the person is able to handle them at his level, he answers them, otherwise he forwards them to either of us or the director; then those that have to.

**Who qualifies to do this (answer the emails)?**

We have a dedicated senior staff, trained, to do this. Senior staff, because it is one of the things...we didn't use to have a dedicated staff so we had to share it ...he does this under supervision, and because he is trained, he knows questions that are coming, for admissions or specific questions, he knows where to direct them to.

**Can't this (the emails) be turned into an 'FAQs document' which you can publish?**

"The questions are very many and varied. Like I said if you understand how the University is .... It has so many specialized ... that needs specialized information/attention... I cannot speak on admissions...so if you ask something directly related to what we do here, why not. So we rather direct you to admissions, so they would rather tell you these are your grades...somebody is asking how can I apply for this...can I do that...we cannot add that to our core functions..."

**I want to believe the kind of information you publish on the website is as a result of the kind of questions that have been asked over the years....because in the past I doubt if you were publishing admission lists...how long ago did this start?**

This whole digitization started ....going online and doing everything online....of course when I was in school there was nothing like that, registration was paper ...my time it was all manual, 1999? Very manual. When you get to school, you pick your form and move from one department to the other; it is a long...everything is the new way and everything is online, making things more efficient, saves time and convenient and all that...

**The emails that come on, do you have any statistics?**

No, we don't. it is very varied, but a lot of it, student enquiries: I want to do this course, I want to get on this programme, most of them are student enquiries. You also have people from other Universities wanting to verify student records, you have people who are seeking collaborations, sometimes and want to introduce their services to the University and all of that. Recently someone emailed us...But a lot of it boils down to our core business teaching and learning. Somebody wrote to us saying he's been paying fees for someone who is running a German course at the University of Ghana and expecting to pay so much and is writing to confirm...We don't teach German, this is an English University. The receipts he produced were false, were actually fabricated... of course, we immediately knew that, this is a hoax. We went back to the school of languages and made sure they don't teach German, not even as a one day weekend course or short course

**Talking about security, how protected and secure is the website?**

Patrick should be in the best position to answer this one... But you know we answer our emails through the website as well. If you don't have outlook; some of us use outlook but sometimes if you are out of the office that is what we use.

**Let me quickly run through this: the theory I am using is Kent and Taylor's (1998; 2002) dialogic theory of public relations; it looks at five principles – Usefulness of Information, Maintenance i.e. getting people to stay on the website for long; I wonder what you have on the website that would make somebody want to stay there for long and not move elsewhere?**

You access all your things through the website.

**Do you advertise on the website?**

Vacancies, yes. Our internal adverts

**Nothing External? Do you direct people to other websites, from your website?**

“Yes, if it is a project on campus. You know recently there was this...MESA, they wanted us to link their website to and that doesn't happen often... this was a project by the oceanography department and they have a project website, so either in a story or an announcement or publicity or something saying there is a workshop, directing people to their website. We've had requests from outside bodies wanting to link to the website, but we have denied access... Everything is in support of what we do... and you cannot advertise on our website...Commercial? No! Unless you are working on a project in a unit and the publicity is coming under the auspices of that unit...”

**And we also have generation of return visits; do you have features like bookmark now etc.?**

No.

**And last but not the least, dialogic loop which refers mainly to interactivity? There are no live chats? Are there?**

No. We are developing our social media policy... if you search for University of Ghana on Facebook, which you would find...All sorts of people, I don't know, from where, have created University of Ghana pages.... Because it demands a policy because it is so live and open you can just imagine the information that is coming in, and you don't have enough time to even think through. So we have one of our staff undergoing training, we are now setting up a twitter account and are now trying to see if we can start tweeting about certain big events. For instance we have an Aggrey Frazer-Guggisberg lecture coming up... I think part of the plan is to get student ambassadors, graduate students who would be tweeting about what programs...it's all in the pipeline.

**That might make it a lot more dialogic but that wouldn't be through the website, or?**

But of course, you know social media platforms are always linked to the website. .... Where we put up stories, and can tell how many people have looked at it....so those things are in the pipeline.

**How soon? In a year?**

Could be sooner. It's all about resource also. Having a dedicated staff and people who understand.... The UGCS should ...for us but we need to have a good policy on it...it's a lot of work and it very time consuming, but it is something that is in the pipeline... but as you can see we are also a bit conservative in our approach; maybe we are stuck to the traditional ways. We haven't evolved much with the way things are moving, and it has also worked, and so far we have never come under attack... accessing the needs of our publics. We haven't felt the pressure to as it were modernize. So far it has worked very well. We have an intranet where we send emails, information..... like I said we haven't felt the pressure; nonetheless, there's the growing pressure, a few people expressing the interest, and once you start you realize that you create the need for it.... Not too rushed.

Speak to Patrick about the other questions.

## **APPENDIX D: KEY STAFF MEMBERS OF THE (ACADEMIC AFFAIRS)**

### **DIRECTORATE – UNIVERSITY OF GHANA**

**E. A. Amartey - Director** eamartey@ug.edu.gh  
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