

Chapter 7

Developing a Digital Engagement Strategy for Ghanaian University Libraries: An Exploratory Study

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ABSTRACT

This study represents a framework that digital libraries can leverage to increase usage and visibility. The adopted qualitative research aims to examine a digital engagement strategy for the libraries in the University of Ghana (UG). Data is collected from participants (digital librarians) who are key stakeholders of digital library service provision in the University of Ghana Library System (UGLS). The chapter reveals that digital library services included rare collections, e-journal, e-databases, e-books, micro-films, e-theses, e-newspapers, and e-past questions. Additionally, the research revealed that the digital library service patronage could be enhanced through outreach programmes, open access, exhibitions, social media, and conferences. Digital librarians recommend that to optimize digital library services, literacy programmes/instructions, social media platforms, IT equipment, software, and website must be deployed. In conclusion, a DES helps UGLS foster new relationships, connect with new audiences, and establish new or improved brand identity.

INTRODUCTION

Systematically and strategically, most organizations including higher learning institutions that consistently outperform their counterparts online have addressed digital media concerns. In an online environment, the audience is highly engaged with the services and offerings. Successful organizations have developed a solid digital engagement strategy to effectively communicate and engage their audience (Visser and Richardson, 2013). The rise of digital presence has had a positive impression on higher learning institutions including university libraries. It is evident that the web or digital presence reaches wider stakeholders

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connecting people from far and near (Barker, 2014). Unsurprisingly, digital services have made a great impact on the business environment; by changing the business operation (Ramsey and Vecchione, 2014), creating dynamic and complex markets with high levels of uncertainty and competition (Rubenking, 2015).

The digital library extends the breadth and scale of scholarly and cultural evidence and supports original research and lifelong learning. Thus, in developing a digital library service environment, the library becomes accountable for managing and securing access to a world of information, which it owns or manages only a part. In an attempt to aid the use of digital collections in universities, digital engagement strategy is clearly one of the alternatives (Xu, 2015).

Today, the emergence of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) tools such as social media, e-learning management systems, institutional repositories, e-books, e-lecture notes, e-course work, tutorials and the Internet in general, have changed the way academic institutions and libraries operate today. Pragmatic university libraries have undergone major transitions from manual systems to semi/full technologically-driven ones (Ogunsola, 2011). Especially when university libraries are considered as the heart of universities, the new trends in information access and provision, present university libraries with some challenges.

The progressive development as said by the university libraries in the Western world cannot be applied in Ghanaian university libraries at the moment. For instance, the University of Leicester has a clear framework for engaging digital users; which guides on using digital resources. Increasingly, user engagement has become critical in the rise of digital collections. It is observed that university libraries have invested in digital collections but have accordingly yet developed robust digital strategies to engage with the audience (Green, Wade, Cole, & Han, 2015). Meanwhile, Ghanaian university libraries lack a clear digital engagement strategy for engaging users of the library. Furthermore, the problem seems to emanate from the unpreparedness of the digital era in which the library operates in. The identified problem appears to have resulted in an unclear understanding of user needs and performance indicators of digital library usage. Indeed, the situation affects significantly the budget allocation towards the digital resources and unclear objectives for successful digital library services. Again, an observation by the author on the digital engagement strategy revealed none existing in UGLS.

Evidence shows that technology has created audiences that demand engagement from libraries (Briel, 2016). Libraries in higher learning institutions provide learning, teaching and research services. In the bid to investing and managing the digital resources, users need to access the digital resources at the point of their need, whether on campus or elsewhere (Proffitt, Michalko and Renspie, 2015). It must be underscored that, users have differing needs, therefore understanding them helps in satisfying and designing tailor-made library services (Proffitt, et al., 2015). In the context of this book chapter, university libraries must strategize to enable the full use of digital library services. This sets the premise for developing a digital engagement strategy (DES) for Ghanaian university libraries in the digital age.

Studying users/stakeholders at the University of Ghana Library System (UGLS) reveals a significant gap between what library services are rendered by librarians and the actual library services offered by the libraries and more so, the perception of librarians. In attempting to change and reshape library usage, there is a need for more visibility on existing library resources (physical and digital). The problem of the study is how does the university librarians best bridge the gap between the users and the library services, in the wake of diverse device interconnections?

Indeed, opportunities exist to explore new ways of engaging the university community. This may not be limited to ethnography and user-friendly language approaches to boost digital library visibility. Unlike previous empirical studies (Proffitt et al., 2015; Green, et al., 2015; Masrek and Samadi, 2017) in Europe,

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