Promoting Genealogy and Local History Collections using Social media in Uganda

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Abstract:

Academic libraries collect process and preserve and provide access to unique collections in support of teaching, learning and research. Digitisation of local history collections has been undertaken as a way to preserving fragile materials and promoting access. On the other had social networking tools provide new ways of providing access to various collections to a wider audience. The purpose of the study was to explore how local history collections are promoted using social media in Uganda. An environmental scan of cultural heritage institutions in Uganda with a social media initiative was conducted. A case study of History In Progress Uganda project is reported in the paper. The project is chosen based on the level of activity and ability to provide different approaches and practices in using social media platforms. Findings revealed varying levels of activity. Nevertheless, there still exist challenges of promoting access to local history collections. The paper offers insights into the nature and scope of activity in promoting local history collections in Uganda.

Keywords: Genealogy, Local history collections, Historical photographs, Social media.

1.0 Introduction

Genealogy and local history collections have become increasingly important as repositories of memory. Continuously, scholars are engaging in a dialogue about why culture and history matter, and the importance of social media in facilitating access to unique collections. Libraries and cultural institutions of genealogy and local history collections have invested in digitisation projects as means of preserving and providing access to fragile materials. Information literacy training programmes have been conducted in order to impart skills required for the utilisation of information.

Globally, more citizens are gaining access to mobile media for interaction and participation social and political debates. Technology has facilitated learning, knowledge sharing, and empowered communities to interact thus resulting in a global information society (Thomas and Thomas, 2012; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Social media holds many opportunities for building closer relationships between producers and consumers of information. The use of social media tools is steadily increasing in genealogy and local history institutions. It is therefore, envisaged that such tools will play an important role in service delivery in the future.

User-generated content is becoming a dominant attraction for new and traditional media. Social media serves as tools facilitating intra- and inter-organisational activities as well as marketing tools for brand management (Yates & Paquette, 2011; Laroche, Habib, & Solomou, 2013). Whinston (2012) identified benefits such as: communication, building reputations, and career opportunities. According to Hanna, Rohm & Crittenden (2011), social media provides a set of models which challenge the traditional business processes and operations. A study by Chu and Du, (2013) reported that social media tools facilitate information and knowledge sharing and enhance service delivery in academic libraries. However, limited resources, inadequate technical skills were some of the challenges hindering adoption and use of social media in academic libraries. Social media is associated with challenges and opportunities.

Institutions in Uganda are adopting social media as competitive tools of promoting businesses. On the other hand, academic institutions in Uganda are adopting social media tools for teaching and learning (Okello-Obura & Ssekitto, 2015). The study found out that lectures use web 2.0 technologies in creating learning materials; providing online distance learning; announcements to students and assessment of students. This is a clear indication that teachers are becoming leaders in promoting media and information literacy within the curriculum. Media production provides an avenue for students to become co-creators through the production of texts and images in a participatory environment.

1.1 Background

The history of photography in Uganda can be traced during the second half of the 19th century. Explorers, missionaries, and the colonial administration are among the early photographer in Uganda. Local photo-studies emerged in the early 20th century mostly operated by members of the Asian community. Cultural institutions, legal deposit centres and private collectors possess photographic archives depicting Uganda's history that vary in

nature and scope[1]. HIPUganda is a non-profit organization initiated in 2011 by a Dutch photographer Andrea Stultiens and Canon Rumanzi a Ugandan with an advertising background. The aim of the project is to open up possibilities to relate to, react to, and think about Uganda's history in photographs. The philosophy behind the project is that photographs are part of a dialogue between people with various histories and experiences. Sharing photographs, the right to relate to the past is more important than copy- or portrait rights.

The idea was born during the exhibition of The Kaddu Wasswa Archive. In 2012, visual anthropologist Richard Vokes joined the project, and started developing academic research projects about the collections. HIPUganda collects and publishes photographs from private collections and archives in and about Uganda. Some of the photographs include: colonial archives, traditional rulers of the time e.g. Kabakas of Buganda, Abakama of Bunyoro, Toro, and Ankole (including their tombs, palaces, drums and xylophone, musicians, executioners, medicine men and coronation ceremonies); various personalities; sceneries of various towns, mountains, and cathedrals; athletics groups, and various medical aspects – hospitals, patients.

Environmental conditions and inadequate storage facilities have posed challenges to the preservation of archival collections in Uganda. A study by Nakiganda & Kakai, (2009) pointed out that some of the film negatives were fading and nitrate films were threatening to explode due to continued exposure to high temperatures. In a move to preserve and provide access to the historic photographic collection in Uganda, HIPUganda has embarked on digitising and publishing the collections on social media sites.

2.0 Literature Review

According to Kaplan and Haenlain (2010), social media is a group of Internet-based applications built on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0. Such applications allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content". Tyagi (2012) acknowledges that Web 2.0 has transformed consumers into active users, creating and curating knowledge. This implies that users have control over the content and choices they make in relation to what is preserved and what is discarded (Morgan 2012). Nguyen, Partridge, and Edwards (2012) argued that Web 2.0 facilitates the users to take on new roles as co-creators, providers, and contributors of information.

Mutula (2013) noted that social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Google+ and RenRen have the potential to promote businesses. Brogan (2010) and Zarella (2010) viewed social media sites as highly accessible and scalable. This implies that a large audience can easily be reached. Social media sites enable people to interact, share and create content collectively (Cormode & Krishnamurthy, 2008; Hansen, Shneiderman, and Smith, 2011). Social media content comprises text, photographs, podcasts, videos, blogs, and wikis. The content is generated by millions of users and hence adding value to collections (Muniz & Schau, 2011).

Thomas and Thomas (2012) argued that ICTs are associated with various benefits such as: immediacy, reach and flexibility. Social media accelerates communication like conversation in contrast with conventional media which doesn't allow readers to participate

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[1] Stultiens has, in her capacity as founder of HIPUganda accessed collections at the National Archives in Entebbe, the National Theatre, the National Museum, and several school collections. This claim is based on those assessments.

in the creation of contents. ICTs have changed created a paradigm shift in teaching and learning (Grange 2013). Baker (2011) observed that the proliferation of social networking has accelerated sharing of information. Web 2.0 allows learners to collaborate, create, and control information (Hicks and Grabder 2010). Users have taken on roles as creators, distributors, and filters of relevant content and services.

3.0 Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative design with a case study approach using History In Progress Uganda. A case study approach was necessary to derive knowledge about the adoption of social media in promoting local history collections in Uganda. Gorman and Clayton (2005) define a case study as an investigation of an "entity on the assumption that it is possible to derive knowledge of the wider phenomenon from intensive investigation of a specific instance or case". A search for empirical studies in the existing literature was conducted in order to sharpen the focus of the study. It was important to establish the conceptual framework for the study in addition to indicating how the study fits into the broader debates (Fouché and Delport, 2012; Leedy and Ormrod, 2013). The combination of a review of the literature and the case study provided the researchers with sufficient evidence to draw conclusions and make recommendations on this emerging area of social media and promotion of genealogy collections.

4.0 Case study: History In Progress Uganda

Facebook

HIPUganda has uploaded photo albums of rare historic photographs depicting different perspectives of historic events and prominent people who shaped Uganda's history. Through the Facebook page, the project team interacts with users interested in genealogy collections. Useful comments are received from users regarding the photographs thus providing the needed documentation. Some users have been able to identify names, places and events of the posted photographs. Facebook has also been used to share events such as book launch, and exhibitions (https://www.facebook.com/HIPUganda/). A study by Mutula (2013) found out that Facebook is the major social media platform visited in Africa with over 17 million users. This explains why HIPUganda has many users on Facebook.

Blog

The blog is used to alert the public of new items to the collection in addition to providing a mechanism for feedback from users. Smith (2010) opines that blogs are ideal for keeping users updated on what's new. It is written on a weekly basis. The blog is also used to evaluate the social media activities and to think about the connections between collections and individual photographs digitised and shared. An evaluation of the most popular photograph shared is conducted on weekly basis as well as sharing ideas about another networked photograph (http://www.hipuganda.org/blog/).

Twitter

Currently, HIPUganda has 569 tweets, 163 followers. Twitter is a social networking tool used to distribute and re-distribute brief messages to users interested in genealogy collections. In

addition, twitter is used to share information about events such as exhibitions (https://twitter.com/HIPUganda).

Historic Videos

HIPUganda is using Vimeo to public a small number of videos relating to the history of Uganda. Availability of video cameras and video editing software makes it easier to produce short videos. Smith (2010) pointed out that cultural institutions might consider sharing historic videos relating to geographic area using video-sharing sites. Vimeo is a social networking site that enables sharing videos and tutorials. Social media allows instant transfers of video hence making content easily accessible (https://vimeo.com/hipuganda).

4.1 Successes

HIPUganda is a resource that Stultiens feeds on for her PhD research, her study looks at how specific historical and cultural context in Uganda defines how photographs have been and are produced and used. A co-published book series (Ebifananyi), is part of the artistic output of the research. Each book is based on one particular photocollection.

The long standing relationship between HIPUganda and Makerere University's art gallery, has resulted in five (5) exhibitions, three of them related to books in the Ebifananyi series. Photography exhibitions featuring works of prominent photographers create awareness of the unique collections available in archives depicting the history of Uganda. The Kaddu Wasswa Archive; Sketching a civilization; the photographer: Deo Kyagulanyi; Ebifananyi are some of the exhibitions that have been successfully carried out by HIPUganda. Some of collections are of great importance to researchers who use them to illustrate their publications (Kakai & Nakiganda, 2009).

Collaborators such as Makerere Institute of Heritage Conservation and Restoration; Makerere University Library and other Ugandan institutions have joined the HIPUganda project. It is envisaged that the collaborators will bring on board resources to broaden the scope of the project. For example Makerere University Library houses historic photographs and other genealogy collections in Africana/Special Collections Section (Nakiganda and Kakai, 2009). Digitisation of the photographic archives is on-going and such a collection will be a great addition to the genealogy collections online.

Facebook users have been instrumental in providing important tips on photographic archives available in Uganda. The sharing of photographs from the Schofield/Fisher collection is still in progress, but has so far already led to two of Schofield grandchildren sharing additional materials (both letters and prints) that are with them in Europe. HIPUganda was also contacted by the grandson of a former prime minister in the Tooro Kingdom, who has his grandfather's photocollection in his care. The collection includes vintage prints of some of Rev. Fisher's photographs. The oldest one dating back to 1895. The negatives of several of these prints are in the Makerere University Library collection. This is a clear indication that Fisher did give out prints of his photographs, which is interesting in considering the distribution of these materials and their presence in contemporary Uganda.

Documentation of the digitised photographs has been undertaken through the social exchange between the project team and the users. Through social media tools, it has been easy to share the digitised photographs in addition to adding context to the photographs. HIPUganda has been able to build a large audience on Facebook partly due to its flexible

social media strategy. An interview with Andrea Stultiens, revealed that she has been able to build her audience partly due to her social media strategy. She had this to say,

> *"I post at least one photograph on daily basis to keep the audience engaged. Facebook users have been instrumental in providing important tips on photographic archives available in Uganda. Such information has been helpful in building new genealogy collections and adding a particular geographic or ethnic focus to the existing collection".*

4.2 Challenges and way forward

Financial constraints are the biggest challenging facing the project. The project benefited from a one-time grant by the British Library's Endangered Archives programme. Since then, the project is solely funded by Stultiens as part of her PhD work. The available budget is inadequate to cover all the project activities. Financial constraints have greatly limited the scope of the project. Most of the digitised collections emanate from Buganda kingdom, Toro kingdom Ankole kingdom and a few others. It is hoped that the project will roll out to cover other regions in the country. With more collaborators coming on board, the financial situation is likely to improve.

Inadequate skilled manpower is still a challenge to the project. Currently, the project is managed by a small and dedicated team. This limits the scope of activities to be undertaken. For example the project website has not fully been developed to a searchable interactive database. Although users have indicated the availability of historic photographs held by cultural institutions and private individuals, the project team has not been able to follow-up. The numerous challenges are closely related to limited finances and partly due to the desire to keep the organisation small in order to preserve flexibility and limit bureacracy. Munuatosha, Muyinda and Lubega (2011) pointed out that inadequate technical support is one of the challenges associated with adoption of new technology. Collaboration with other cultural institutions and private individuals is likely to bridge manpower and other resources gap experienced by the project.

Some of the digitalised photographs have not been documented but it is hoped that through interactions with the wider audience, including the academic specialists. Stultiens hopes to focus on the possibilities of narratives based on biographical documentation in relation to the collective memory of Uganda in the artistic PhD research she is currently undertaking at Leiden University in the Netherlands.

Copyright infringement is challenge to the content deposited on social platforms. Some of the collections belong to private collections hence remain personal souvenirs and memories. Nevertheless, the public domain looks at the additional collective values the photographs hold. Although the images posted on social networks are of low resolution, some users exploit them for personal purposes that sometimes take on a political ideology not necessarily inherently connected to the photographs, sometimes lean towards a commercial use, disregarding copyright and lacking respect for sources and authorship. Prensky (2010) argued that issues of ownership and control are likely to become complicated as content is increasingly freely shared and being re-used worldwide. Mutula (2013) affirms that view by noting that users' trust and Internet security features are critical issues to social networking sites. Nevertheless, Ngai, Tao & Moon (2014) call upon organisations and individuals to embrace the challenges and opportunities associated with social media. More sensitisation of

users about copyright issues is an ongoing activity that should maybe be made more explicit than it currently is.

5.0 Conclusion

Documentation, preservation, and access to the historic photographs are critical issues both in leading new historical research and articulating the dynamics between the past and present with social networking tools. The rich experience of HIPUganda project could inspire cultural institutions to think of better ways of managing photographic archives.

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