Chapter 76

Raising Awareness About Public Archives in East and Southern Africa Through Social Media

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ABSTRACT

Archives serve as society’s collective memory because they provide evidence of the past as well as promoting accountability and transparency of past actions. Appreciation of the archives should therefore result in citizens linking these records with their identity, history, civic duty and cultural heritage. However, research in east and southern Africa seems to indicate that very few citizens are aware of and use the archives. Social media platforms have been utilized to raise awareness about the archival institutions elsewhere. This study sought to find out whether the National Archives in east and southern Africa used social media to raise awareness about archives. The study involved 12 national archives affiliated to the East and Southern Regional Branch of the International Council on Archives (ESARBICA) using a multi-method research strategy. The findings indicated that social media platforms were not a preferred option in outreach strategies, even though they were recognized as useful means to reach online information seekers.

INTRODUCTION

The public archival institutions of east and southern Africa keep precious records and archives that are of immense value to their societies (Ngulube, 2004). Bountouri (2017, p. 51) explains that “archives are and should always be an active part of our culture and society. They document the history of mankind, the financial and legal activities and cultural developments. They have to be open to our society”. Despite this fact, the public archival institutions are some of the least known and used cultural institutions in east and southern Africa. (Saurombe & Ngulube, 2018). This calls for more efforts towards raising awareness about the valuable holdings that these institutions keep (Kamatula, Mnkeni-Saurombe & Mosweu, 2013; Venson, Ngoepe & Ngulube, 2014; Ngulube, 2018; Saurombe, 2016; Mnjama, 2018).

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According to Bountouri (2017), public archival institutions in east and southern Africa should strive to be known and used by the communities they serve. These institutions can start public programming initiatives to make their activities known to the communities. Public programming initiatives refer to activities conducted by archival institutions with the aim of raising awareness about the archives in society (McCausland, 2017; Mnjama, 2018). The literature indicates that a number of public archives from east and southern Africa do conduct public programming initiatives. However, the number of users of these archiving services continues to decrease (Venson, Ngoepe & Ngulube, 2014; Sulej, 2014; Saurombe, 2016; Mnjama, 2018). Garaba (2015) argues that there is a need for change, and this means keeping up with trends to ensure that archival institutions can address the information needs of the communities they serve.

Keeping up with trends in the current information society includes using new technologies (Ngulube, 2004). The use of social media in society, especially by organisations, is becoming a common trend (Hood & Reid, 2018). Lately, more cultural organisations including archives use social media to do outreach and encourage more participation from the public (Theimer, 2011; Bountouri & Giannakopolous, 2014; Liew et al., 2015). Garaba (2015) is of the opinion that social media can enhance public programming initiatives and have a greater impact than traditional outreach methods such as tours in the archives or exhibitions. Bountouri and Giannakopolous (2014, p. 215) in line with Garaba’s (2015) argument state that archival services can benefit from using social media because it enables direct contact with archival users. In addition, social media provides archival institutions with the opportunity to improve their services and public image as well as facilitating greater visibility of the archival institution.

A number of archival institutions have successfully used different social media platforms to market their institutions. Hager (2015) and Williamson, Vieira and Williamson (2015) speak of social media platforms such as, Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Flickr, HistoryPin and Instagram among others which have been used to engage with their communities on cultural and historical content-related issues and maintain contact with their patrons.

Most accounts on using social media to promote cultural and heritage institutions such as archival repositories, museums and libraries originate from the western hemisphere. In this regard, research from Africa, especially east and southern Africa is scarce, yet social media usage is a worldwide trend. In light of this observation, the interest of this particular chapter lies in the use of social media in public programming initiatives by the National Archives of east and southern Africa.

**Overview of the National Archives Affiliated to ESARBICA**

The National Archives in east and southern Africa is affiliated to the East and Southern Africa Branch of the International Council on Archives (ESARBICA). The member states of this organisation are Kenya, South Africa, Mozambique, Angola, Malawi, Namibia, Swaziland, Botswana, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Lesotho and Tanzania (ESARBICA, 2014). These archival institutions offer a range of services that are related to these countries’ culture, identity and documentary heritage.

These institutions keep and preserve documents of enduring value that are of significance to personal, social, civic, governmental and business-related matters; though they are not commonly known as information providers in many communities (Kamatula, 2011; Ngoepe & Ngulube, 2011; Saurombe, 2016). This was also demonstrated in the choice of the main theme of 23rd ESARBICA Biennial Conference held in Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe in 2015. The conference theme was *Archives uses, abuses and under-utilisation* (ESARBICA, 2015). This proves the need for public archival institutions in this region to seek...
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