

PUBLISHING THE GHANA LIBRARY JOURNAL: TRENDS, CHALLENGES AND THE WAY FORWARD

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Abstract

Journals provide current and up to date information, which in turn promotes teaching, learning, and research in addition to knowledge dissemination. Major professional associations therefore consider publishing journals as one of their core functions. It is therefore worthy of note that the Ghana Library Association (GLA) has since its formation been publishing the Ghana Library Journal (GLJ). This paper documents and discusses the experience of the GLJ since its inception in 1963 from the management perspective. The role of the GLA as the publisher, the Editorial Board, the Editor-in-Chief and even the role of members of the Association in ensuring its sustainability are highlighted. It also examines the constraints and challenges facing the continuous publication of the journal. The paper ends with a number of recommendations. These include expanding the financial base of the journal, effectively marketing the journal and also empowering prospective authors through workshops and seminars on writing and research skills.

KEYWORDS: PUBLISHING, LIBRARY JOURNALS, GHANA LIBRARY ASSOCIATION

Introduction

Journals are the most important source of scholarly publications. They convey current information thereby facilitating teaching, learning, research and knowledge dissemination. Publishing journals is a serious business since it requires substantial resources to sustain the publication regularly, on a timely basis and periodically. The resources required to publish a journal include finance, quality manuscripts from authors and sound management practices on the part of the publisher and the editorial board.

Journals are published by various organizations such as professional associations, research institutes and educational institutions. There are therefore many library and information science (LIS) associations in West Africa including the Ghana

Library Association (GLA) that have launched and are publishing journals. Journal publishing, however, has its challenges, which have to be identified and overcome; the least that could be done is to minimize the effects of these challenges to facilitate prompt and timely publication on a sustainable basis.

Alemna (1993) has identified major obstacles that affect research and publications among librarians in Africa. According to him one of the major obstacles is the lack of current journals especially those published in Africa. This is largely due to the irregular publication of LIS journals in Africa. It appears publishers of such journals did not give a serious thought to their sustainability before they were established. A market survey needs to be conducted and a business plan formulated to determine the sustainability of journals before they are launched.

A study by Mabawonku (2001) revealed that LIS researchers in Africa overwhelmingly cited articles published in the United Kingdom and United States of America in respect of publications that were published by both countries from 1991-1995. One of the reasons for this may be due to the very high irregularity rate with which African journals are published. This state of affairs encourages researchers in Africa to publish their papers in European and American journals.

Aina (2003a) has also given an outline of the history of LIS journals in West Africa since 1954 when the first of such journals, **West African Libraries**, was published. It gave a gloomy picture of their viability as scholarly publications. Their characteristics may be summed up as follows: high mortality rate; lateness and lack of periodicity in publishing; lack of international visibility and limited distribution of journals (Aina, 1994; Apeji, 1990; Azubuiké, 1990 as cited in Aina, 2003a).

Aina (2003b) again offers insights into the problems, remedies and evaluative indicators in relation to journal publishing in Africa. Some of his indicators recommended that a journal should (1) be produced on schedule (2) meet its mission, goals, and objectives (3) attract sizeable individual subscribers so as to increase its revenue base; and (4) cover all aspects of the discipline in line with its stated policy. His evaluative indicators should be of interest to publishers and editors who are determined to produce quality journals.

The African Journal of Library, Archives and Information Science and INASP in Ibadan highlighted the importance of sustenance of library, archives and information science journals in West Africa during a training course that was organized in 2003 (Aina, 2003b). This was a useful course since the participants were taken through various aspects of managing a journal. Some of the topics covered included design and production management, promotion and distribution, and widening the financial base.

This paper documents the management practices of the **Ghana Library Journal** (GLJ) retrospectively and currently. It also professes suggestions to overcome or minimize the challenges facing the publication of this journal. The focus is on the role various stakeholders play in the production and management of the journal. It also identifies the negative factors adversely affecting the timely publication of the journal. It then proceeds to suggest ways to assist in publishing the journal on a sustainable basis.

Publishing trends

The first volume of **GLJ** was published in 1963 as a quarterly publication. Oddoye (1989) has provided background information with regards to the objectives of the **GLJ**. These include the following: (1) It should mirror the progress and setbacks of the library profession in Ghana; (2) it should serve as a link between all those concerned with libraries in any capacity, both within Ghana and throughout the world; and (3) it should appeal to and serve the interests of as many people as possible. The **GLJ** has over the years tried to keep faith with its stated objectives notwithstanding the several constraints it faces.

For a ten-year period from the first date of its publication to 1973, only five volumes had been produced. This translates into one volume per two years. In other words an annual publication had in reality turned into a biennial journal without any explicit announcement by the publishers, Ghana Library Association.

The journal went into hibernation for a period of fourteen years after the first issue of volume five came out in 1973. The journal resumed publication with volume six coming out in 1988 with only one issue that year even though in the Editorial (1988) of the said issue it was stated that it is "the policy of the Council of the Ghana Library Association that the journal should appear twice a year – one devoted to proceedings of congresses and the other to items of eminent and topical interest". Volume seven was published in November 1989. The journal then went into coma again for six years until it reappeared in 1996. Regrettably it was not published in 1998. The next issue of the journal then came out as volumes 10 & 11, 1999. This was to cover the gap created by the non-publication of the journal.

Since 2000 the journal has managed to appear annually even though its release has never been timely. For instance, the issues of Vol. 16, 2004 and Vol. 17, 2005 were released concurrently in November 2005 mainly because while the volume 17 contained the conference proceedings of 2004 it was very difficult to get quality papers for volume 16.

The role of the publisher

The GLA publishes the **Ghana Library Journal**. The Council of the Association therefore formulates policies of the journal. For example, when the journal resumed publication after fifteen years the policy of Council was that the journal

“should appear twice a year – one devoted to proceedings of congresses and the other to items of eminent and topical interest” (Editorial, 1988).

It is the publisher who should provide funds for the publication of the journal. Unfortunately the Council of GLA has not managed to fund the journal adequately. This will be expatiated on further when we later on discuss financing the journal.

Editorial Board

The Council of GLA appoints the editorial board. It consists of between three to seven members including the Editor-in-Chief. They serve for four years and may be reappointed at the discretion of Council.

Council first appoints the Editor-in-Chief. He is usually a member of the immediate (i.e.) previous editorial board of the **GLJ**. This ensures a smooth transition and also continuity of operations. This is definitely a sound management practice.

Council mandates the new Editor-in-Chief it has appointed to nominate the remaining members of the editorial board. After the Editor-in-Chief has presented his nominees to Council the latter then formally appoints them to the editorial board. Council thus gives the Editor-in-Chief the free hand to nominate people of his choice. This arrangement is to ensure the Editorial Board consists of people that are likely to work as a team. Teamwork is a necessary ingredient for the efficient management of any entity.

The editorial board and editorial consultants are set up with due consideration to their professional background of their members. The practice is to appoint members working in different types of libraries. This diversity is necessary as it ensures that the different aspects and perspectives of librarianship are well represented in the operations of the journal.

The Editor-in-Chief is the Chief Executive Officer who is in charge of the day-to-day matters pertaining to the management of the journal. He liaises with Council through its President. He also liaises with the other members of the editorial board. The Editor-in-Chief receives and sends all mails pertaining to the publication of the journal. Distinct lines of communication have thus been demarcated for the efficient management of the **GLJ**.

The editorial board does not have formal meetings mainly because of financial constraints. The Editor-in-Chief periodically communicates with the other members by letters and also on phone. They also hold informal discussions on issues concerning the journal when they happen to attend workshops, seminars and conferences that are organized by the GLA or other associations. It is worth

noting that there appears to be a great deal of ineffective interaction and this does not foster sound management of the journal.

One other function of the Editor-in-Chief is to submit an annual report to Council. This report is then presented to members of the Association during the annual general meeting, which usually takes place in December. The report gives details of work done by the board during the year, the challenges are highlighted and members offered the opportunity to make inputs to move the journal forward. This enables members to participate in the management of the journal. The involvement of members is important since they own the journal.

In addition to the editorial board, Council also appoints editorial consultants on the recommendation of the Editor-in-Chief. This again recognizes the key role of the Editor-in-Chief who has to work with people of his choice to produce results. The editorial consultants at the moment consist of five distinguished librarians with rich and varied experience. They are drawn from academia and academic and research libraries.

The editorial consultants assist in reviewing manuscripts for publication by the journal. They occasionally submit papers, which follow the same review process for publication in the journal. They also solicit manuscripts from potential authors for the journal.

Finance

The publication of the journal is financed solely by GLA. The main sources of finance for the Association are through the yearly membership fees paid by its members and through fees charged when it organizes conferences, workshops and seminars. A professional pays ₵240,000.00 (US\$26), para professional ₵120,000.00 (US\$13) while an institutional member pays ₵500,000.00 (US\$ 55) per year as membership fees. However, a significant number of members hardly pay their dues thereby depriving the Association of much needed revenue.

There are no foreign subscribers. There are also no regular local subscribers of the journal largely because of its irregular publication schedule.

Libraries in Ghana hardly make substantial purchases of books from local sources. This in part explains why the journal does not get advertisements from organizations such as publishers and bookshops in Ghana. The journal does not operate a separate account. It is the Council that directly funds its publication. The Editor-in-Chief, for example, is not given an imprest by Council to manage the journal. He rather uses his own money to pre-finance activities of the journal before he later requests for reimbursement with supporting receipts.

GLA's finances are meager and as such it does not pay any honorarium to members of the editorial board, editorial consultants and even the referees who assess manuscripts for the journal. It is possible that because of lack of financial incentives most of the referees delay considerably in assessing and returning manuscripts to the Editor-in-Chief.

Authors

The survival of the journal greatly depends on authors. The authors are in fact the valued partners of the journal. They submit manuscripts for processing, some of which are eventually published by the journal.

The authors come from varied backgrounds. Some are young and inexperienced librarians whose primary aim of getting published is to secure promotion. There are also the fairly experienced authors who occasionally submit manuscripts for consideration. The last categories of authors are the senior librarians who have reached or virtually reached the top of their profession either as practitioners or in academia.

Processing of manuscripts

The processing of manuscripts forms the core business of the editorial board. The bulk of manuscripts are received by the Editor-in -Chief through the mails. A few of the manuscripts are however, sent to the Editor -in-Chief personally by the authors, through friends or through other members of the editorial board.

We expect our reviewers to act on our requests and return the manuscripts promptly. This has been necessitated by the fact that motivation of the authors is key to the continued survival of the journal since it is only through timely publications that authors will continue to write for the journal.

Guidelines have been formulated, and these are strictly adhered to, as a means of ensuring that there is a fair basis for the acceptance or rejection of articles. This policy raises the credibility of the journal and it also assures authors that once they submit a good paper in line with the objectives of the journal, their articles shall surely be published.

Each paper is first reviewed by the Editor-in - Chief and, if it is found suitable for **GLJ**, it is then sent to two referees for double blind peer review. Based on their recommendations, the Editor-in - Chief then decides whether the paper should be accepted as is, revised or rejected. A few manuscripts received do fall outside the scope of the journal which publishes only articles "pertaining to the practice and research in librarianship in Ghana, including bibliographic articles, current bibliographies and articles on comparative librarianship". Such articles are promptly returned to their authors. In some cases, the Editor-in - Chief gives names of suitable journals he is conversant with which may consider such

manuscripts. The aim is to encourage but not discourage budding authors in their publishing efforts.

The editorial board of the journal has a policy aimed at ensuring that all articles sent for review are returned with the necessary comments within six weeks. Most of our reviewers however hardly respond to our requests on time. Their average response time is three months which is not good enough. This puts undue pressure on the Editor-in - Chief who has to send reminders to errant reviewers or has to answer queries from authors as to the delay in sending status reports on their manuscripts to them.

Once a manuscript is received by the Editor-in - Chief he acknowledges it in writing within one week. This enables the author to know that his manuscript has in fact got to the Editor-in - Chief and is receiving attention. Similarly, the Editor-in - Chief sends feedback to an author within a week of receiving a report from the reviewer. It is to be noted that communication, a key management function, between the Editor-in - Chief and authors is of vital importance to the credibility of the journal.

Each issue of the journal consists of a minimum of six or a maximum of eight articles in view of the paucity of quality papers it receives.

Production

The authors submit both print and diskette copies of their manuscripts to the Editor-in - Chief both at the initial and revised stages. The Editor-in - Chief vets the corrected versions of the papers to ensure they follow the suggestions made by the referees. He also checks for typographical and grammatical errors. After this he prints out a neat copy of all the papers that have been accepted for publication. This copy is then given to a professional librarian with a degree in English to do the proof reading.

The proofreader ensures that the papers are presented in Standard English. Because he is a librarian he understands the concepts and terminologies used in librarianship and information science. After this he returns the papers to the Editor-in - Chief.

The Editor-in - Chief again vets the corrections made by the proofreader before he assigns his typist to effect the necessary corrections on the diskette copies. Two sets of printed and diskette copies are produced by the Editor-in - Chief. He retains one set and forwards the second set to the President of the Ghana Library Association.

The Editor-in - Chief does not have a direct link with the printers. It is the Council of GLA, through its President, that awards the contract to the printer to produce the required copies. The number of copies produced per issue is two hundred only. Council assigns one of its members based in Accra to liaise with the printer

who is also in Accra to see to the final production of the journal. It is this person who also does the proof reading of the draft from the printer before the printer produces clean copies.

From the above it is clear that the editorial board does not manage the printing of the journal. This is one of the major drawbacks that affect the prompt publication of the journal. For example, Volume 16, 2004 and Volume 17, 2005 of the journal were sent to the President in January 2005 and March 2005 respectively but were printed and released in November 2005. This long delay was mainly attributed to the printer and the Council representative in Accra whose duty was to link up with the former.

Once the copies are produced and released to Council they are then marketed so that they become available to those who need them or are entitled to get copies.

Marketing

According to Aina (2003a), the research process is not considered as complete unless the results of research have been disseminated to the scholarly community. He also considers journals as the most important medium for keeping a scholarly community of a discipline current in that field of study. Marketing journals effectively promotes access to their contents. Unfortunately the marketing of the **GLJ** leaves much to be desired.

It is Council of GLA that does the marketing and distribution of copies of the issues as and when they are published. Free copies are given to all members of the editorial board, editorial consultants, authors who contributed articles for that particular issue and all personal and institutional paid up members of the Association. Most of the complimentary copies of the journal are distributed during GLA Congresses to reduce cost. The rest are sent to beneficiaries and benefactors either by post or through third parties. Most beneficiaries are paid up members who could not attend the Congress.

Some issues are deposited at the University of Ghana Bookshop and the Department of Information Studies, University of Ghana, Legon for sale. The Editor-in - Chief is not made aware of copies that are sold out.

It is important that back issues of the journal are kept for reference use and posterity. It is gratifying to note that this has been done since 1990. Some older issues (not all) are also available. The available back issues are at the Secretariat of the GLA at the Institute for Scientific and Technical Information, Accra. For efficiency it will be appropriate to assign the role of marketing the journal to the editorial board.

Challenges

The irregular and untimely publication of the journal has been of great concern to all stakeholders especially the publisher, editorial board, members of GLA, authors, readers and subscribers. Various reasons account for the delay in publishing the journal on a timely basis. Some of the reasons for the delay are the following bottlenecks: Low patronage of authors resulting in few manuscripts being submitted for consideration to the Editor-in - Chief; the unusual delay by most reviewers in assessing and returning manuscripts sent to them back to the Editor-in - Chief; the Editor -in - Chief not having any direct link with the printer; the printer unduly delaying in printing and delivering copies of the journal to the publisher; the publisher not effectively marketing the journals, thereby not making copies of the journal readily available to subscribers and readers.

One other major constraint is inadequate funding. The GLA's main source of revenue is through members' yearly subscription. The subscription, as already mentioned, is woefully inadequate and to worsen matters, most members of the association even do not pay their yearly subscriptions. This makes it hard for Council to adequately fund various programmes of the Association including the publication of the journal.

The way forward

Ghana Library Journal is the only LIS journal that is published in Ghana. It has got a chequered history. It has however survived over the years. All stakeholders should rededicate their efforts to revive it to ensure its sustainability. The following suggestions may help to improve the viability and continuous publication of the journal.

The publisher should engage a consultant to draw a business plan for the journal. It should then provide seed money for the operations of the editorial board. In addition to this there should be a separate account, which should be managed by the editorial board. An auditor to be appointed by GLA Council should audit this account. This will ensure proper accountability of funds.

Once financial autonomy is granted to the editorial board, Council should not directly get involved in the printing and distribution of the journal. The editorial board should look for a suitable printer to deal with in connection with the printing and marketing of copies of issues of the journal. Once the editorial board takes over the printing of the journal it should ensure that copies are effectively marketed. It should, for example, send the table of contents and abstracts promptly to relevant professional and related institutions in LIS. Subscription agents should also be made aware of the existence of the journal by sending a blurb of the journal.

Without receiving quality manuscripts from authors the journal cannot be published. GLA should periodically organize seminars and workshops on research and writing skills for its members. This may encourage some members to undertake research and have some of their findings published in the **GLJ**.

Most of the referees for the journal delay in assessing manuscripts sent to them. This may be due in part to the fact that they are not paid for their services. The editorial board should consider paying honoraria to the assessors to encourage them do their work on time or as an interim measure, referees should receive complimentary copies of issues that carry papers they review.

Conclusion

The **Ghana Library Journal** has for the past forty –two years faced a number of challenges. Despite a myriad of problems confronting its very existence it has refused to die. The Ghana Library Association and its members therefore have the onerous responsibility of ensuring the sustainability of the journal.

In ensuring its sustainability all stakeholders have to co-operate in overcoming or minimizing the challenges facing the journal. The various stakeholders include the publisher, editorial board, authors, the printer, subscribers and their readers whose patronage of the journal will sustain its regular publication.

There is the need to have a separate account for the journal to be managed by the editorial board. The editorial board should also intensify its efforts at soliciting for quality manuscripts from experienced as well as from and up and coming authors. This is because without a pool of quality manuscripts the journal cannot come out even if its financial constraint is completely overcome.

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