In so many words, the performance of UNCG’s Irma is disappointing. Jackson library saw a grand total of 1,277,512 non-unique visitors to its physical premises, as well as 19,862,369 non-unique visitors to its website, with 61,928 questions answered[[1]](#footnote-1). It’s Twitter account though? 573 followers[[2]](#footnote-2). That’s a mere 0.04% of Jackson’s yearly in-person traffic, as well as only 3.2% of UNCG’s entire student population (estimated to be 17,700)[[3]](#footnote-3). To call this a pathetic level of engagement would be an understatement.

For comparison, let’s look at Eastern Carolina’s Joyner Library. While there were no library usage statistics publicly available, the student population itself stands at 26,887[[4]](#footnote-4) while Joyner’s Twitter account holds a following of 906[[5]](#footnote-5), meaning Joyner rapidly outpaces Jackson at a whopping 3.4% of its student population. Neither percentage is particularly impressive, and both speak to a wider difficulty in library outreach and engagement, as well as the utilization of social media. This sadly is an issue to which entire conferences could be devoted and so here we will only be able to scratch at the surface of the issue. To begin with, let’s ignore the wider issue of outreach and simply look at the statistics between the two sides.

Perhaps the most striking element of UNCG’s Twitter account is that it is overwhelmingly patronized not by students, but rather by an assortment of non-UNCG commercial and non-commercial entities. You can see the breakdown below:

Of the student body, only 6% are outside of the LIS program. If we revisit our earlier statistics, this means that, in actuality, there are only approximately 172[[6]](#footnote-6) students out of 17,700—a mere 0.97%--actually utilizing UNCG’s Twitter account.

In comparison, ECU fares even worse, with an astounding 71% of its followers composed on non-ECU organizations and individuals.

Of its followers, only 15% are students, with the other 14% accounting for ECU-affiliated accounts and organizations. This means that, in total, only 136[[7]](#footnote-7) of ECU’s 26,887 students utilizes the Joyner Library Twitter account, which is 0.51% of the total student body. In other words, only a fraction of a percent. While on the surface Joyner’s numbers look far more impressive, once you take into account the size of the student body and the number of followers who are actually students, the numbers look far more dismal.

To sum up where we are so far:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | UNCG | ECU |
| Total Students: | 17,700 | 26,887 |
| Total Library Twitter Followers: | 573 | 906 |
| Number of Student Followers: | 172 | 136 |
| Percentage of Student Followers Compared to Student Body Total: | 0.97% | 0.51% |

Just looking at the visual representation of the data shows that neither UNCG nor ECU are doing particularly well on the Twitter front, but ECU seems to have the slightly shorter end of the stick, at least in terms of numerical student outreach. At the same time, ECU lacks an LIS program, and as UNCG’s data shows, the majority of student followers are accounted for by the LIS program. This is a tricky point to account for since one must ask the question: are these LIS students following the library solely because they are LIS students, or because they are already the sort of person who would follow a library Twitter account even were they not LIS students? It’s not something that can be easily answered given the data we have, but we can presume that LIS students have a higher bias toward following, meaning that if they were not present UNCG’s Jackson Twitter account could look positively dismal. Thus the comparison between UNCG and ECU is a bit murky, with clearer data needed to say anything definite—likely it would be better to compare UNCG with a university including a comparable LIS program.

Looking at other elements, UNCG and ECU set up their profiles within a year of each other, with UNCG starting in September of 2008 and ECU in November of 2007. Given this fact, there is an impressively small difference in the number of tweets between them, with UNCG at 1,381 and ECU at 1,451. That’s a difference of only 70 tweets despite the gap in origins, which would seem to indicate that UNCG’s Jackson account is, in fact, slightly more active than ECU’s Joyner account.

Where ECU and UNCG begin to diverge is in terms of how engaged their accounts are with others. While UNCG’s account does follow more accounts (345 to ECU’s 251), Joyner engages more heavily in favoriting (UNCG’s 9 to ECU’s 124) as well as the retweeting of other ECU organization and student tweets. Furthermore, our group found that UNCG’s tweets consisted almost exclusively of a mixture of purely informational tweets, photos of the day, and occasional pictures from around the library and the archives. These tweets tend to be extremely neutral in tone with only a few showing signs of personality, all of which leaves UNCG’s account feeling very dry and dull. While the idea of daily photos may be to try to draw Twitter users to other UNCG social media platforms, the fact that all a user sees is a link is itself an impediment to that very goal, as links are far from engaging. While browsing on a phone or even a desktop, being able to see those intriguing thumbnails can have quite the effect.

Conversely, our group found that ECU made it a point to give its tweets a sense of character and personality, such as this one: “Good morning ECU! Anybody else needs some caffeine today? #humpdayforreal.” This brings us to the issue of tone and how to mediate the issue of a professional appearance with a desire to engage and appear friendly with students, which itself returns us to the fundamental weakness in our data: comparing a non-LIS university with an LIS program university. Is ECU’s more jovial tone more effective since, although it’s total number of students is smaller, they’re following of their own choice rather than as a result of influencing factors of an LIS program (pressure to join, greater familiarity with the services, advertising of accounts in class, etc.), or is this tone actually a negative since UNCG’s account, despite being a much smaller university, has a greater number of student followers? It’s a question that can’t easily be answered with the limited data we have.

Perhaps the most striking element between these two accounts is precisely how integrated they are with the university at large. Looking at UNCG’s account, you find rarely any instances when the library’s tweets are retweeted by any other part of the university (it is, almost exclusively, by the “Dean of Students” who, at 444 followers[[8]](#footnote-8) has even less than the library), nor do you really see the library retweeting anything else from the university outside of the archives, which are a part of the library to begin with. In short, Jackson library feels very isolated from the rest of the university compared to Joyner whose page is covered in retweets from different corners of ECU. Oddly enough, the favor is not returned, with few if any of Joyner’s tweets being retweeted by other parts of the university. At the same time, Joyner’s tweets *are* retweeted by students, albeit usually only one or two per tweet.

This in turn leads us to the issue of focus. While Jackson *could* retweet information from other parts of the university, would followers actually want this, or would they find it to be so much clutter getting in the way of the information they actually want to see? Once again it’s hard to say precisely which side has the better approach here, as while ECU’s Joyner does feel much more connected and integrated into the university, it does make its Twitter feed feel less focused as the majority of tweets are, in fact, retweets consisting of campus news, sporting events, notices, trivia, and, in short, a lot of things that have nothing to do with Joyner Library and things that would quickly get redundant for Twitter-savvy students who would already be subscribed to these other ECU accounts. It almost turns integration into competition as a student really only needs to subscribe to one account to get the benefits of all the accounts, though this can actually be a benefit as each account retweets only the most important information from the others and thus allows students to choose precisely how they wish to integrate into the university’s social media, picking their primary feed while still getting bits and pieces of all of them. Once again this is an issue which cannot be easily resolved simply by looking at the data.

While one can easily find countless articles filled with librarians attempting to decode Twitter and Facebook with complex analytics and formulas and theories, all laden with buzzwords in a desperate attempt to still seem relevant and ahead of the curve when, in truth, they barely know what’s going on, the best advice comes from the level-headed Laura Solomon:

Social media forces libraries to act as if they exist as an individual, rather than as an institution. This is actually ideal because it encourages our libraries to use a more human voice. When patrons connect to us online, they often want to know more about the unique facets of our organization and the people who make them up. People might see the same staff at their library all the time, but how much do they know about those individuals? How much do our patrons know about what goes on behind the scenes? Libraries can convey this kind of information and much more with social media. Is it possible for an institution to have a collective sense of humor? Or to be entertaining? Absolutely. Libraries are so much more than story times and answered reference questions: They are made up of incredible, resourceful people who want to serve the library’s users. Social media gives us so many ways to highlight what makes libraries special. Sharing more about ourselves enables us to not only be more transparent to our patrons but forge stronger bonds with them as well.[[9]](#footnote-9)

In other words, one of the keys to social media is this: personality. People don’t want to follow a billboard belting out announcements—email is far more effective for that—they want to either be amused or enriched in some way and feel as though they’re connecting with an actual person. Think about how we as humans naturally tend to react to people. If they’re just bland, if they’re just there, then even if they have information we’re not going to be drawn to them, we aren’t going to interact with them beyond what’s necessary. But if someone is intelligent and communicates this, shares with us facts and theories that catch our imagination, we’re suddenly intrigued and will be much more willing to seek them out and listen to what they have to say. Likewise if someone proves themselves artistically adept then, whatever the medium, we find ourselves engaged with their creation and the emotions and thoughts that it evokes, and so we follow them and listen to see what they create next. And, while we might think it shallow, we also are drawn to those who amuse, who can apply a sharp wit or a creative mind to come up with the sort of things that make us laugh and give us a bit of relief from the stress of life. Look at YouTube and you find that the most popular sorts of channels are centered around these personality archetypes. Indeed, it could be argued that much of media consumption throughout history has fallen under these archetypes.

Much the same applies to Twitter, but one can’t merely lump all social media under one umbrella as people do legitimately use Twitter precisely to generate information feeds, following news organizations and the like simply to feel connected with what’s going on. The issue here, and the mistake that libraries often make, is that these people are creating these information feeds because *they’re already interested and invested[[10]](#footnote-10)*. It’s like the LIS student effect with UNCG’s twitter: these students aren’t following Jackson Library because its Twitter feed is well-designed or particularly effective, but because libraries—and especially their library—is something they’re already interested and invested in. As a result, it can’t exclusively be about just informing people, but rather making it feel like they belong, like they have a part in what’s going on not that they’re just listening to it all passively. Personality helps drastically here.

Solomon goes on to add:

Social media, when done well, is much more about relationship building than it is about promoting anything… But, to do well in social media, libraries must change how they view it. Social media is much more than just another advertising medium, and only using it this way will often cause followers to eventually tune out such messages and even disconnect entirely. Ultimately, this is the most important lesson that libraries must learn.[[11]](#footnote-11)

In short, the purpose of social media, of outreach in general, is not simply to passively “inform” people, but to find ways to get them invested, to make them care about the issues at the heart of librarianship: education, equality, community, and even enrichment and entertainment. It doesn’t mean the library’s Twitter needs to be a 24-hour comedy channel, but rather that it must decide what its purpose is, what it’s reaching out to people, and how it can most effectively do that in an engaging manner. It’s not about manipulation, it’s about being human, about making libraries a place where people feel like they belong and where they can better themselves and connect with others.

Returning to our two examples—UNCG and ECU—it’s clear to see that ECU is the channel with more personality. Has this truly paid off for it? It’s hard to tell given the limited amount of data and the issue of hidden factors such as UNCG’s LIS program. But the fact that it has student engagement, if only a tiny, tiny amount, shows that it is at least a step in the right direction. Neither account has truly succeeded by any metric, but then, this may simply be because neither has been able to make people care. When a person makes an account they want to connect with the people and the issues that they care about, that influence their lives. That so few people use these accounts compared to the actual library usage statistics gives the disturbing impression that neither library has convinced its student body that it truly matters in their lives. It’s just that place you go to study or use the computer, no different than the other buildings and labs on campus[[12]](#footnote-12).

Sadly this greater existential issue is one libraries in general are combatting with, with the issues of outreach and advocacy only just beginning to stir in the minds of librarians as they see their own livelihoods at stake. While solving this issue would be a wonderful thing, we must stay focused on our purpose here, and that is the particulars of the UNCG Twitter feed. To this end it is worth looking at the work of Katie Paine and her steps to establishing an effective social media presence[[13]](#footnote-13).

The first and most crucial step is to define a purpose. Paine states it thus:

The first and most important question to answer is: What’s the objective? Why are you starting that blog or Facebook page or on-line community? What problem are you trying to solve: What do you hope to accomplish? And more importantly, what does Senior Management expect social media to do for the organization?[[14]](#footnote-14)

It is perhaps all too often that people attempt to implement new technologies or new methods for no other reason than that they’re new, and new must be good (see: Second Life, Myspace). There is no greater purpose to their adoption beyond a desire to keep up with the evolving trends, and this in turn leads their efforts to fail. Instead, as Paine explains, one must ask themselves precisely why they’re even attempting to implement this new technology. What purpose is it serving, how does it fit into the library’s functioning? Is it actually solving a problem, and if so, how? To this end Paine lists three broad categories under which a purpose might be sorted, though of these only two are of interest for libraries: engagement and relationships[[15]](#footnote-15).

Going back to Solomon the clear choice would seem to be the improving of relationships—getting users involved and connected with the library—but this flows almost seamlessly into engagement for libraries and so it is of some benefit to view the two in tandem. Indeed, Paine even goes on to state that, “In many ways engagement is just another way to express the improvement in relationships and reputation that is the goal of any good communications program. Improved communications should lead to greater trust, improved satisfaction, and more commitment to the relationship.”[[16]](#footnote-16) So, looking at UNCG’s twitter account, we have to ask: what is its purpose? Simply going by the content it produces, it could be said that it does precisely what Solomon advises against, namely announcing events and pictures without any real character to them. Indeed, our analysis found that of the most recent 75 tweets, 39 of them were advertisements while another 30 of them were media distribution—namely pictures of the day—with one case each of such things as seeking comments, greeting people, expressing support, or simply answering questions. It simply informs and distributes, and passively at that.

The first step then is to re-assess its purpose. It cannot simply sit there and passively inform; it must engage, it must connect. To some degree it must make itself human and must make its patrons feel as though they belong, as though they’re a part of something, that the library isn’t just some building to go study in or where you can use the computer. While it can be humorous in tone—humor tends to be most effective in such a small format—it can also be educational and even artistic, showing followers what the library can be for them. In short, from the user’s perspective, there must be some reason, some value in following the account, and the value will be determined by the purpose laid out by the library.

It is often hard to show personality in the physical locale of a library, as while there are often one or two librarians who are very sociable and engaging, many would prefer to just be in the background. Social media then can become a prime way to define a library’s personality, and thus social media becomes less a lazy lure tossed out into the waters for kids and more an active component of the library. Once this becomes the case, there arises a benefit to actually advertising and promoting one’s social media. It can easily be appended to posters, to handouts, even to receipts. When people ask a question—and if they don’t seem to be in a terrible hurry—workers can even mention that they can find out more by following the library on Twitter. At the same time, this has to be balanced out and should never feel excessive to patrons. You want to make them aware of the account, you want to make it feel personal so they feel invited to join in on something, like they’re gaining something by doing so, but you don’t want it to begin to feel like you’re going door to door because you’d really like to tell people about @irmaUNCG. That starts to feel hollow, creepy, and more than a little counter-productive.

To further these ends, the library may find it beneficial to become more intimately networked with the university itself, with different departmental and organizational accounts that are part of the university retweeting each other’s most interesting (but certainly not all) tweets, creating a more inclusive environment while sharing followers and cross-promoting.

Once the base of followers begins to expand (which is no easy task), new methods can be employed to enhance that feeling of belonging and involvement. After all, people rarely appreciate a one-sided conversation and so the library ought to make more of an effort to actually ask questions and encourage opinions, and furthermore they need to actually get out there and engage with people, responding to tweets so they aren’t just this stern force in the distance but something personal and local. Another element of this is following student accounts, which adds a bit of that personal touch. Beyond simple asking question, one can also attempt to utilize games and other creative engagement methods as Sump-Crethar advises, some of these being six word stories and hashtag haikus which could be tied into library events (banned book week for example)[[17]](#footnote-17).

Lastly, the library can use the twitter account to enhance its existing services. The most prominent example of this is with reference services, with reference questions adapting nicely to the twitter format. Not only does this add a further personal touch to the account—people see that their questions are answered quickly and effectively—but these answers are then available for others to view and benefit from, a fact which is particularly useful when it comes to citation and formatting questions. A particularly good example of this is Koerner Library at the University of British Columbia, which has librarians use their personal accounts to answer questions[[18]](#footnote-18). Whether mimicking this method or keeping with the one centralized library account—or even creating a separate reference twitter—is best remains to be seen, but these are things well-worth experimenting with, as is the broader concept of thinking of how social media can enhance the purpose of the library, not merely advertise it.

In conclusion, UNCG’s Twitter account is in dire need of improvement. More than a few have expressed the opinion that the entire account could vanish and not even be missed. This does not need to be the way of things though, and it can be integrated into being an extremely effective part of the library’s operation. By transcending its current status as a mere information feed and engaging with students, creating a sense of personality along the way, it can help people to feel connected with the library, showing them that it can be more than a glorified computer lab and study lounge. It’s no easy task to be sure, but if pursued it can be extremely beneficial both to the library, and to the UNCG community as a whole.

1. http://library.uncg.edu/info/dashboard/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://twitter.com/IrmaUNCG> 9/20/14 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. http://admissions.uncg.edu/discover-about.php [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. ECU Student Fact Book 2013-2014, page 3 http://www.ecu.edu/cs-acad/ipar/customcf/DL/FB/FactBook13-14.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://twitter.com/joynerlibrary> 9/20/14 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Technically 171.9, but I felt bad for that .9 student. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. One again, there’s that .9 student showing up. Actual number: 135.9. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. https://twitter.com/UNCGDOS [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Laura Solomon, Using Social Media in Libraries, Foreword, vii http://books.google.com/books?id=zd5O79bK0QAC&lpg=PP1&pg=PR3#v=onepage&q&f=false [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Indeed, as opposed to the above archetypes, news and information rely on people already being invested in an issue, with them having a desire to feel connected and involved, or with them simply being desirous of something to distract or entertain them. To attempt to generate this interest or these feelings requires it to step back into one of these archetypes, which can create a rather murky ethical environment in the case of actual journalism. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Laura Solomon, Using Social Media in Libraries, Foreward, vii [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. I’ve even met one student who attended the university for a full year and worked right in the EUC but had no idea what or where Jackson Library was. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. While she is speaking more on how to *measure* social media success, elements of this nonetheless tie in heavily with how to effectively *run* a social media presence. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Katie Paine, The Social Media Measurement Manifesto Pg 7 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Katie Paine, The Social Media Measurement Manifesto Pg 9 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Sump-Crethar, A. N. (October 01, 2012). Making the Most of Twitter. *Reference Librarian, 53,* 4, 349-354. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Fields, E. (August 10, 2010). A unique Twitter use for reference services. *Library Hi Tech News, 27,* 14-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)