IMPORTANCE OF LIBRARY PORTALS AND WEBSITES

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ABSTRACT

Research and development (R&D) libraries have realized their responsibility towards making research output easily accessible to all the users. They are using their websites as a medium through which they are reaching the potential users. Since, the website of library is its reflection to the users, it ought to be seen as an integral part of the institution, rather than an external entity. Hence, all facets of the library and its functions should be appropriately reflected on the website. The library Web site can and by default does play a variety of roles. A library Web site often serves the role of a library workstation, both for the users and for the librarians serving them. In the role of library workstation, a library Web site serves as a delivery mechanism for databases, electronic texts and journals on different research areas, and often for the library catalogue. Additionally, a library Web site can become an agent for archiving and retaining information that appears on other sites, for the purpose of future research. In addition to the resources, website can play a key role in delivering electronic services to users within short span of time, as users in R&D will be having very less time to visit the library to use the services.

KEYWORDS

Communication technology, Website, Library Websites

RESEARCH PAPER

Introduction

Information and communication technology (ICT) is one of the important adages of today's information world. ICT is a product of information age and technology. It has been regarded as a vehicle for future development, opportunities, challenges and competition that enables information to be collected and used. ICT is a convergence of computers and communication technology, which makes processing, storage, and its retrieval very faster, instant and effective. On the other hand, it may be noted that the web technology (Hereafter web) is one of the most important and complex inventions of mankind. It is a powerful means of communication, dissemination, and retrieval of information. The importance of the ICT and web in libraries can no longer be questioned, as it has transformed the way with which functions are carried out in libraries. Web has been used by libraries for providing access to information and services and thereby they have proved their existence on the web. This has resulted in transformation in the role of library and librarians. Further, web has also changed the traditional users as more techno-savvy and they are demanding and expecting their libraries to go for completely web based services.

With the advent of the web, the availability and accessibility of information in different electronic formats in libraries and other types of organizations have been made even easier because of the web's graphic and interactive capabilities. These capabilities allow library users to search databases, view full text articles, including pictures and tables etc. This has resulted in higher acceptance of web as a tool from all types of organizations, not only for gaining access to information, but also as a means for disseminating information with a wide range of target groups, level of services, resources, etc.

In today's knowledge society, the value of having access to information is greater than having access to physical space. This brings up two important issues: the diverse needs of users for library resources and the importance of user awareness of library resources and services. Both of the issues have to be addressed in time and with higher rate of satisfaction. Library website is a tool which would help libraries to fulfill both of the objectives. As libraries shift services on to the web, the library website becomes a service in its own right. It becomes an important tool for showcasing collection details, services offered and new initiatives from the library. Thereby, websites may become a means to advertise or market. In addition, users of the library can be made aware of the collection and services in an easy manner, so that, they will have less reason to visit the library physically. Library website not only provides the basic details of the collection and services of the library, rather information on the inception and vision of the library, working hours, procedures, contact details and access to all e-resources. Homepage of the library website is a single point for marketing the resources and services of the library. In addition to the collection, details of the list of new arrivals and access to Online Public Access Catalogue (OPAC), Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feeds, access to blog also can add value to the library website. Providing access to OPAC will help users to search for availability of a specific resource not only in their library but also in other libraries of

the same research agency. This is possible with the effective implementation of union catalogues. With all these, library website makes it easy for the staff members to cater to the needs of the users of different levels i.e. researchers, faculty members, scientists, technical staff and students.

In addition to website, Web also provides a means for users to express themselves; it allows for freedom of speech and ideas, and allows users to meet and communicate who would not ordinarily ever have met. As long as the Web retains these qualities of freedom, it will also remain unmonitored and unregulated. This, therefore, leaves a large responsibility on users. It is up to the user to carefully and critically evaluate the Web sites which they use as information source. Some organizations and institutions are designing their own library websites. It has been observed that, despite the effort made by the in house expert or outside agency, most of the library websites are not updated regularly. At the same time, the contents and information available on the library websites are also not up to the mark (Bhattacharjee, Sinha & Manoj, 2006). Many libraries have created websites to serve their patrons and the general information community, but how useful are these websites beyond providing information about the library and its collections is yet to be fully explored because even a high quality library may have a low quality website and low quality library may have high quality website.

The design of library website is not a onetime process, it is dynamic and there have been instances where substantial changes are incorporated for a better quality. One such example relates to the Health Science and Human Services Library (HS/HSL) of the University of Maryland, Baltimore. "The library's original Website was developed in 1996. Although changes were made over the next three years to enhance the site, it became apparent through informal observations and comments from staff and library patrons that the time had come for the website to be completely restructured. Another example relates to the study conducted by "American Academic library websites in 2000 – 2010" by Aharony (2011). The study reveals that, the content of academic library websites of America in the years 2000 and 2010 has changed much over the ten years, presenting an increasing use of e-resources and Web 2.0 applications, as well as a focus on library users and great use of graphics in websites. Both the studies reveal the fact that, there will always be a need for a continuous evaluation of the library websites keeping users needs and emerging tools and technology, in view. Hence, design of a website requires a careful planning, considering several key design elements, visual and aesthetic appearance. The utility of the website, for e.g. how well it functions and its usability for e.g. how effectively users can navigate it are also key factors.

Nielsen (2000) determines that "people do not come to the Web for an "experience they come for information. This is especially true for the users of library Websites, where finding reliable information quickly and easily is
important." Keeping all these in view, library websites have to be developed by using the state of the art technologies.

Concept of Website

This is an age, in which information is being generated at a rampant rate and the World Wide Web acts as an electronic conduit for the dissemination of this information. This medium provides users with access to an endless variety of information including news, research, healthcare information, crime statistics, and multimedia. The Web has become a centralized entity in most parts of the society.

Libraries have long used technology to provide and improve access to their collections and services. From the earliest automated circulation systems and catalogs, through the rise of Internet based resources, to the explosion of the web, libraries have used technology for more effective delivery of content to their constituents. Libraries first used the web to provide access to their catalog of holdings and basic information about their organization. During the 1990's libraries began to use the web to deliver additional content including access to e-resources, information about specific collections and services.

Libraries often use the web for services as e-reference via e-mail, chat and instant messaging systems. The web has become a ubiquitous source of information for most of the primary audience of all kinds of libraries. A website, as defined generally, is a set of related Web Pages of information that are meaningfully linked together, electronically on the internet. The general rule of thumb is to consider all electronic documents on the web with addresses beginning with a unique hostname as belonging to one website. In order to locate and access a website, one needs to enter its file address or Uniform Resource Locator (URL) into appropriate space provided for by the browser. The URL is standard for specifying an object on the internet. Supposing one enters a hypothetical URL such as http://www.guglibrary.net/facilities.htm in a given web browser, no matter where in the world one may be or wherever that website may be hosted, the same page should pop up on the screen.

Importance of Library Websites

The library website represents an important component in the user experience, as library bookmarks and brochures may have seen a decline in use. The library website represents the "face" of the library and showcases its print and electronic resources and promotes services to users, such as circulation, reserves, reference, library instruction, library events, and interlibrary loan, access to e-resources and subject gateways. The library website displays information such as library hours, policy information, directions, the staff directory, and basic contact information. The library website is a living document, unlike a brochure, poster, or flyer.

The library website also represents a virtual space where information is collected, organized, and presented. When developing this virtual space, it is important to reflect the needs of the user properly. Website has to be developed in such a way that users must be able to locate the necessary information with ease (Manzari, 2006).

Although R&D libraries have extensive experience in providing computer-based information services, a great deal of effort has been invested in transforming useful information and services into Web based services. Research libraries have dynamically created Websites and improvements on the design and layout of the Websites have been made progressively. Since, users of the R&D library are researchers and technical staff and they are always in need for nascent information with timely services, it is vital for staff members to keep the website in line with the expectations of users.

Appraisal of website is a process which helps library staff to keep control on the quality of the website and make it always relevant to the user needs. With the changing expectations, content and design features have to be modified to make the website user-centered, current, relevant, uncluttered, and contain language that can be understood by the user. The library website should not only provide information, but also be a learning tool (House, 2007). Evaluation at a regular interval keeps the website up to date and makes it more useful for the user.

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