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Transforming the Library Website

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Transforming the library website

A library website is not just a marketing tool, it is an extension of the library. For some users, it is the library. Many of our patrons download e-books and locate scholarly articles, get reading recommendations and log in to online test prep courses, watch streaming videos and access data sets, all without setting foot in the library building. To once again revise Ranganathan^[1], library websites are for use. For this reason, we must make sure that they are usable.



Amy York
Associate Professor
Web Services Librarian
Middle Tennessee State University

To be honest, we librarians are sometimes our own worst enemies when it comes to creating usable websites. Too much technical jargon, confusing navigational structures, and generally bad design plague many library sites (including my own at various times), and as a result, we as a profession devote quite a lot of text and talk to usability studies and web design guidelines. But beyond our own shortcomings, there is a more insidious threat to website usability: campus IT. Or for public libraries, the council IT department. The level of control that an external IT department wields over your web presence impacts how well you can respond to the needs of your remote users.

Some of us in the library world, particularly those of us in academic libraries, are lucky enough to have our own internal IT departments. They maintain our public computers, they investigate new technology

part of that marketing effort is played out on the university website. Campus IT, usually in conjunction with a campus marketing department, is constantly reinventing the university web template to appeal to prospective students. We have seen header areas become larger and larger, packed with links for people who don't attend the school - prospective students, but also alumni who might be moved by all the attention to donate some money. A link to the library site, once a mainstay on university home pages, has by and large disappeared, relegated to the ghetto of the A-Z links list. I advise students in my library to "just Google us."

Another trend in university web design is the huge header image. To be fair, this is a trend across the web, and the newest generation of college students is highly visual, for sure, but the effect is that the main content is pushed so far down the page that the user must scroll to find it. Anyone who even dabbles in web design knows that

IT administrators set user permissions for the CMS, so if they don't want you editing header links or images, you won't be able to touch them, or even if you're allowed to change the image, it may still need to be a certain size and location. Some libraries have successfully played off the huge header trend by embedding library search boxes in header graphics, but these tend to be libraries that host their own websites, and thus have more control over layout.

There are other problems that arise from the limits imposed by someone else's CMS. You may not be able to use some server-side scripts (eg PHP), and you probably won't have access to the <head> section of your pages, so you won't be able to link javascripts there. This is not really a big problem and, in fact, many people recommend calling scripts at the bottom of a page so as not to slow down the load time, but a big problem can arise when scripts that you don't want have been placed in the <head> section. For instance,

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services, and they run the servers that house our websites. Everything that library IT does supports the mission of the library. They get us. They root for us. This is not always the case with an institutional IT department. If a library is not able to maintain its own servers, it will turn to campus IT for server space, and in most cases, this will mean joining the campus content management system (CMS) and enduring any limits native to it or built into it.

At many colleges and universities these days, the focus is on increasing enrolment^[2]. Competition for tuition dollars is fierce, so universities have deployed full-on marketing strategies for attracting students, and a large

getting important content "above the fold" is a big concern. Perhaps it's not the big deal that it was in the 1990s when the concept of scrolling was brand new, but according to usability expert Jakob Nielsen (2010), the content above the fold still captures 80% of our attention. Users will scroll, but they won't pay as much attention to the stuff further down. Our eyes will linger longest on information 300-400 pixels down the page^[3]. If a library is locked into a CMS template that buries its content below a large university header, will students find the library resources they seek, or will they give up and move on to the web?

The problem with these templates is that once you're in the CMS, you're locked in.

the director of a community college close to me was surprised when I told him that when I try to go to his library site from my iPhone, I get redirected to the college's mobile site, which does not include a link to the library. The javascript redirect is called between the <head> tags, which he can't alter on his library web pages.

Speaking of mobile sites, a library that does not have full website control has limited options for deploying a mobile friendly web presence. Will IT offer non-templated server space for a mobile site? When locked in a university CMS, libraries are especially incapable of employing a smart responsive



design strategy (ie without two screen lengths of campus material at the top), which some argue is the future of the web.

So what is a library to do? I believe that libraries should maintain as much control as possible over their websites, preferably by hosting them on their own servers. At my university, IT and the library have come to compromise. Until last year, we had a different look than the rest of the campus sites. They were adamant that we conform to university design standards -- a position that we understood, though we weren't thrilled with the real estate we would lose to university branding and recruitment at the top of the page. We even tried joining the campus CMS, but when it became clear that there were too many technical limits for our content, they agreed that we should stay on our own servers. We use the university's branding and template, but we maintain full control. Now my university has a new CMS, and there are rumours of a new design in the works. IT is once again talking to us about joining the CMS, and they have offered us a greater degree of control than most departments on campus receive ("we understand that libraries

are different", they say), but I don't know. I'm more than a little wary. It's not that IT folks are bad people, it's just that they have different priorities. And maybe the next template will have a 500 pixel height header graphic. And maybe someone higher up the administrative food chain will decide that we have too much freedom and reduce our permissions. I shudder at the idea of such helplessness.

So what do you do if you don't have a choice? Maybe you don't have your own library IT department, or maybe you don't have the space or the budget for a server room. What do you do? Do you completely submit your will? Nah, you talk to IT. You make a case for the features and functions you need. You find examples from other libraries. You promise not to break anything if they give you a little more freedom, and then you don't, under any circumstances, break anything!

In the spirit of co-operation, let me end with a happy tale. That community college director whose library site was redirected to the campus mobile page... guess what? He talked to someone in his IT department, and they offered to build the library a mobile site and

link it to theirs. Win! So to sum up, libraries can have a successful website partnership with campus IT, but it's nice to have the option not to have one at all.

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Email: Amy.York@mtsu.edu