What makes a good library website?

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April 2019

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IPLI
iSCHOOL PUBLIC LIBRARIES INITIATIVE

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Who is this Article For?

This article is designed to be an entry point for librarians, information professionals, and students thinking about their library's web presence. While this article uses state library websites for examples and context, this paper is broad enough to apply to libraries of all shapes, sizes, audiences, resources, technical abilities, and budgets. It is meant to start a conversation in the library community about topics such as accessibility and user experience, and hopefully be a catalyst for positive change.

Foreword

In 2018, the Syracuse University iSchool launched a new home for public library research called the iSchool Public Libraries Initiative (IPLI), directed by Associate Professor of Practice Jill Hurst-Wahl. The IPLI predominantly focuses on public library innovation. In researching and disseminating information about public library innovation across the United States, the IPLI hopes to give libraries more opportunities to innovate and learn from one another about innovations happening across the country. In shedding light on these unsung innovations, the IPLI hopes to increase their capacity to continue doing so.

Additionally, the IPLI gives Library and Information Science graduate students a place to conduct research and create work relevant to their studies and interests. This report was created as a result of research conducted by the IPLI in the fall of 2018. It originally began as a research project about public library funding, and to compile public library statistics about library types by state. We looked for this information in many places, including state library websites.

This article idea was inspired by the fact that no two state library websites look the same, and their functionality and usability vary greatly as a consequence. Some state libraries have excellent websites. This article predominantly focuses on what they do well in the hopes that this will help improve not only other state library websites, but the websites of libraries of all sizes and types.

How to Cite

Unrein, Sabrina. (2019). "What Makes a Good Library Website?" Syracuse, NY: iSchool Public Libraries Initiative at Syracuse University.

License

Keywords

Accessibility, library websites, user experience, online information services, website usability

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Sabrina Unrein is a Master's of Library and Information Science graduate student at Syracuse University, expected to graduate in 2020. She researches at the iSchool Public Libraries Initiative. Before her Master's program, Sabrina worked as a software developer in Boulder, Colorado. She worked primarily in Ruby on Rails, HTML, CSS, and JavaScript. Sabrina is passionate about the advancement of technology and technical literacy within librarianship, and hopes to champion growth and evolution in those fields as an information professional.

Introduction

What are the consequences of having a poorly designed library website, particularly for one with as diverse a user population as a state library?

Why is there such a lack of consistency in library websites?

What makes certain websites more successful than others?

These questions were recently sparked during a course of research that included using each of the fifty state library websites. While the research was specifically focused on finding statistical data about public libraries, the experience of using the websites, and noting their differences, inspired these inquiries.

This report was developed in attempt to answer those questions. It explores features that contribute to a website's user-friendliness and includes specific examples of each feature in action, taking into consideration best practices of web design. Assembling this report involved looking at each of the fifty state library websites and determining what specific aspects of each website worked well and how easy they were to use.

This report discusses the following topics:

- Security
- Modern site design
- Accessibility
- Finding contact information
- Unique features to consider

An important note: while only state library websites are discussed in this report, these design principles can easily be applied to websites of other library types. Consider checking your library's site to see how well it is doing these things. The features and potential changes examined in this paper were chosen intentionally as they are realistically implementable no matter the size, budget, or scope of your library.

Security

There are many reasons why you want your website to be secure, and this expectation goes beyond just government — i.e., state library — websites. However, with government websites in particular, citizens should feel assured in the veracity of the web content they are accessing, as well as the security of any data they may be sharing. There are many facets of web security, but for the sake of brevity, and for

those who may be new to the concepts of web security, this report focuses on the importance of HTTPS.

What is HTTPS?

HTTPS, which stands for Hypertext Transfer Protocol Secure, ensures the data you're giving and receiving from a website in encrypted. The old way, HTTP, transferred data in plaintext. While you may assume your data inputs are innocuous, think you data you put online, like your credit card number or passwords when you login to a website. You do not want those to be plaintext, especially if someone on the same WiFi network as you is monitoring your activity and may want to do something malicious with it. This is known as Man in the Middle attack, and is not uncommon, especially on unsecured, public networks being accessed by a lot of people simultaneously, such as at an airport.

Or a library.

What Does HTTPS Have to do with Libraries?

> "Existing ALA policies affirm that confidentiality is crucial to freedom of inquiry." - from "Privacy," American Library Association

Patrons may not be putting their credit card number on your library website, but you do want their reference questions and inquiries to remain private, as they would be if asked in person. The privacy expectations as defined by the ALA should extend to data exchanged between your patrons and your library's website.

If you want to know more about web security, specifically more information on HTTPS, there are many resources that explain the concept and technical specifics in more detail. Several have been included in this report's references, such as the article from Google called Why HTTPS Matters. It explains why secure domains should be a priority of your website. One of its key points states:

> "You should always protect all of your websites with HTTPS, even if they don't handle sensitive communications. Aside from providing critical security and data integrity for both your websites and your users' personal information, HTTPS is a requirement for many new browser features, particularly those required for progressive web apps."

HTTPS is a signal that is easy for any user to detect or interpret. Browsers like Google Chrome will alert you to whether or not a website is secure, based on whether or not

HTTPS is used. It may even actively dissuade you from visiting a website that it has deemed "not secure." With these measures in place, users may never even make it to your website, or feel they cannot trust it.
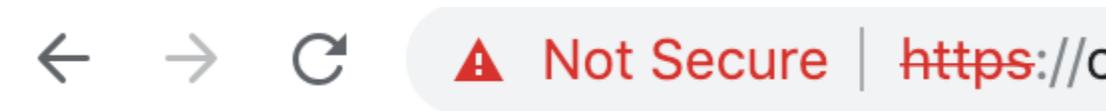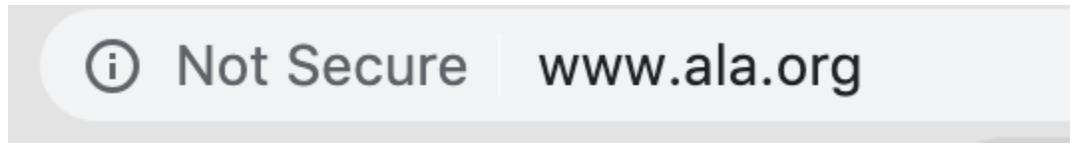
Two screenshots from Google Chrome, demonstrating what a "not secure" warning looks like. As of the writing of this article, ALA's website does not use HTTPS.

If you remain unconvinced, know that HTTPS impacts search engine optimization (SEO). This means if your website is not secure, search engines like Google will suppress your website in search results, making your website more difficult for your patrons to find.

There are certainly many other measures that web developers can take in order to further secure their websites, but using HTTPS is a good start, and a signal to your users that you take their security seriously. If you want more information or instructions to get HTTPS on your domain, see the additional resources included in this report, specifically https://doesmysiteneedhttps.com/.

Please note: Google is frequently used as an example in this report because it is one of the strongest proponents of HTTPS, and one of the first to modify their products to reflect their value of HTTPS. However, that does not mean that these principles do not apply to other browsers and search engines.

Modern Website Design

The design of your website is the first thing your patrons see.

While it may seem superficial, users will make assumptions about your library based on website design, consciously or unconsciously. This is particularly true for younger users in assessing a website's authority (Subramaniam, Taylor, St. Jean, Follman, Kodama, Casciotti 2015). A modern-looking website signals legitimacy. It makes sense that a user would assume a modern-looking website is more actively maintained, and therefore, the information is more trustworthy.

Outdated features indicate inactivity.

If the design is outdated, why should anyone assume the content is consistently maintained? Furthermore, modern websites are much more likely to have responsive design, meaning they are designed to function and look good on any screen, including smartphones and tablets.

Three good examples of modern design are the websites of the Indiana State Library, the Georgia State Library, and the California State Library. They incorporate several tenets of modern website design, including the ones listed below.

Minimalism and Simplicity

Designs are that are minimalist have only a few elements visible on screen at any one time, with a lot of whitespace between elements. This helps with user-friendliness, because users aren't overwhelmed by too many things to look at concurrently. They can focus on what you're actually trying to show them. There are other elements that help with this, such as

- large images
- a limited color palette
- typography that is easy to read
- navigation that doesn't get in the way of the site's content.

Additionally, many of these features make your website more accessible (which is discussed in more detail below). These principles are not just about making your website aesthetically pleasing, but also ensure ease of use for everyone.

Conversely, an older looking website may have one or more of these features

- many competing, bright colors
- text that is too small
- text in a font that is difficult to read
- a cluttered flow with several elements competing for the user's attention, like a rotating series of banner images next to an events calendar

Poor design can make it difficult to navigate or find the right information, and the legitimacy of the information presented on the page may appear suspect. Modern design does not guarantee accuracy, but it does lend you more credibility at the outset. Additionally, it sets expectations for your patrons. Users are more likely to think a modern website is secure and legitimate, which is important to feel when on any government website, including those belonging to state libraries.

Good design may still seem superficial. However, strong design and ease of use are powerful indicators of the library's commitment to providing information services. If there are barriers in place, such as a website that is difficult to use or seems suspect, web designers and librarians are doing an active disservice to their patrons. There should never be a question of authority or legitimacy. These are goals that librarians have already designated as guiding pillars of the profession in the form of shared library values. Librarians and libraries even express these values publicly in the form of mission and vision statements on their websites.

For instance, the California State Library's mission and vision statements include:

"providing credible information services to all Californians"

"important source of trusted information to Californians and their libraries."

Similarly, Delaware State Library's mission states:

"libraries are essential in a democracy to ensure that citizens have equal access to information they need to form sound opinions and make informed decisions about their government."

Assuming most state libraries share similar goals that include equitable access and credible information services, these principles of usability and design should apply to libraries of all types. In addition, while these statements applied exclusively to physical spaces when they were conceived, that should not remain the case now. Patrons should have confidence in the accuracy and equity of resources both in the physical library as well as online, as library services have evolved to extend into digital spaces. Therefore, state library websites should be easy to use, up to date, and trustworthy.

Users *will* make determinations about information they find online based, at least in part, on web design. Outdated, clunky websites will only discourage people from using them. As technology and the internet continue to develop, the lack of a solid web presence becomes less acceptable. If libraries are unable to keep up with their websites (not to mention social media), users may choose to rely less on library services, or question the modern relevance of libraries as institutions.

We in the library community know the value of our services, but a great website will help convince our stakeholders of that value, too. Librarians need to join the conversation happening in the software and web design worlds and claim our space as technologically and socially relevant spaces on the internet.

Accessibility

"Serve all who cannot read standard print."
- Washington State Library Strategic Goals

"Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion are fundamental values of the association and its members…" - American Library Association

Diversity is one of the Key Action Areas of the ALA, and should subsequently be a priority for libraries across the country. It is often demonstrated in library missions, goals, and values.

We expect libraries to be equitable spaces, and this inclusion should extend to the library's web presence. If you wouldn't turn away a patron with a disability from the doors of your library, why is it acceptable to turn them away from your website? This is particularly important for state collections that include talking book libraries and/or braille collections, and thus should ensure the patrons that need those resources can easily access the catalogs online.

Accessibility has recently become a core value in web development, and designers have improved their websites accordingly. This has been influenced, at least in part, by the Americans with Disabilities Act, also known as ADA. ADA became law in 1990, and was amended in 2009.

What is the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)?

ADA is civil rights law that prohibits discrimination against those with disabilities. Title II of ADA applies to state and public libraries as it "prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability in all services, programs, and activities provided to the public by State and local governments" (ada.gov). You may have heard of ADA compliance checks in physical libraries, such as accessible stacks, but these protections extend to online spaces, too. Websites that are not ADA compliant may be subject to lawsuits. However even without the threat of legal action, websites should be accessible as a matter of equity and respect to all patrons.

For more information on ADA and equity, see the Next Steps/Additional Resources section at the end of this paper.

Older websites are more likely to be inaccessible and not ADA compliant because they may have features such as:

- Images without alternative text

- Fonts that are too small
- Text in unreadable colors
- Unnavigable dropdown menus

If the design looks old, it probably is old, which means it is likely inaccessible, too. These are the key tenets of web accessibility that should be considered in equitable design discussed in this paper:

- Contrasting colors
- Keyboard access
- Meaningful link text
- Alt-text

Contrasting Colors

The color of text on your page should contrast with the background color to make it clear and easy to read for everyone. Here is an example of good contrast:
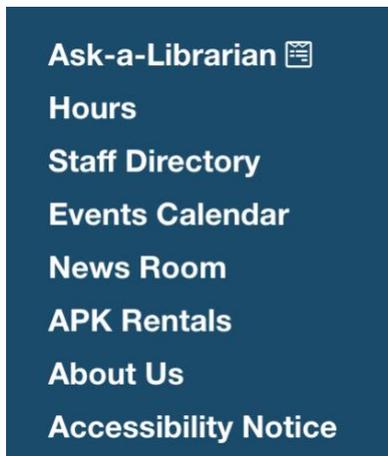
The text is clear, readable, and distinct. It really stands out from the background, and is more likely to be readable by everyone, including those with visual impairments.

Keyboard Access

Many users use only the keyboard to navigate a web page, not a trackpad or a mouse. Is your site navigable without the use of those tools? You should be able to navigate through every element on a page using the tab button on the keyboard, including dropdowns. If you cannot tab through all of the options on a dropdown, your site has accessibility issues. Go ahead and test this yourself on your state's library website, or even your local library's page.

Meaningful Link Text

When linking to another page, the link text should state or otherwise indicate where that link goes to. This is particularly important for people using screen readers, who may have only the context of the link text to know what the link leads to. Link text should be short and readable, and should avoid language like "click here."

- [Find a book?](#)
- [Download an audiobook or ebook with my library card?](#)
- [Get a library card?](#)
- [Learn a new language?](#)
- [Research my genealogy?](#)
- [Ask for help?](#)
- [Find reading kits for my infant or toddler?](#)

Alt-text

Alternative text, or alt-text, is written copy that represents an image. If an image fails to load properly, or if a person is using a screen reader, users still deserve to know what the images are meant to represent. By providing alt-text, that context is provided for them. Alt-text that just reads "image" is not helpful because it lacks the description needed to know what the image is meant to convey. Try to capture the essence of the image in a handful of words that get the point across without being exhaustively detailed.

How do you know if an image has alt-text or not? There's an easy way to check: Using Google Chrome, right-click on any image and select "Inspect." It will open the developer tools where you can see the source code for the website. This can be a little daunting or overwhelming if you have never done it before, but do not let this deter you. If you "inspected" the image, the developer tools should open to where the image is within the HTML code. You'll know you're looking at the right attribute if it is within an <img src=> tag. You can even try it on this very report if you are accessing it digitally, as it has included alt-text for all images. Within the image tag, you should see an attribute called "alt." That shows you what alt-text is shown to someone using a

screen reader. Is what you find helpful? If not, encourage your webmaster to put alt-text on all images. Maybe even go as far to suggest what that text should be.

```
" class>
<img src="/images/main slides/4.jpg" alt="Inauguration of James
Rolph, Governor of California, 1931" title="Inauguration of James
Rolph, Governor of California, 1931" id="rslides1_s3" style=
"display: none; float: none; position: absolute;" class>
```

What You Can Do

These are just a handful of basic accessibility checks, and is not intended to be an exhaustive list. There are many resources online, such as the W3 Web Accessibility Initiative, that can help you determine if your website is accessible and explain how to make those necessary improvements. If you need an example of a state library website that does all of the things mentioned in this article well, check out the Alaska State Library. They even link to accessibility services on the footer of their website, which includes resources for patrons with disabilities. It includes this statement, which succinctly captures what all state libraries should be striving toward:

> "we continue to improve our content and services to make our websites more accessible for everyone. We want our content and services to be easy to access, use and understand."

But what if you aren't directly responsible for the design and maintenance of your library's website? Start by testing it out with the steps listed above. Then, advocate for change by talking to your webmaster or library administration about making updates to address any problems you encounter. Walking through these checks is a great start, but you might also consider a more in-depth accessibility audit of your web services. Having a website that is compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) is particularly important for both your library and your patrons, not only for equity, but also because ADA violations have the potential to result in a lawsuit.

Can Your Patrons Reach You?

A state library is more than a community space, it is a major government institution. It is expected in our democracy that government institutions remain transparent and accessible to its citizens. This expectation extends to the state library.

> "If a free society is to survive, it must ensure the preservation of its records and provide free and open access to this information to all its citizens. It must ensure that citizens have the resources to develop the information literacy skills necessary to participate in the democratic process." - American Library Association, Democracy Statement

Patrons of the state library include residents from across the state. They may not have access to the physical space, but they still deserve access to the state library as a resource. Additionally, the library is a democratic institution, and it is one of the ALA's core values for libraries to promote intellectual freedom and freedom of information. Two key aspects of that are transparency and accessibility of resources.

> "Equity extends beyond equality—fairness and universal access—to deliberate and intentional efforts to create service delivery models that will make sure that community members have the resources they need."
> - American Library Association, Access to Library Resources and Services

Librarians could be considered as some of those resources, or to be a patron's gateway to those resources. Therefore, it should be easy for citizens to be able to contact you.

Ask A Librarian Service

If you're worried about privacy or getting barraged with patron questions, setting up a dedicated Ask a Librarian email, or an email associated exclusively with your job's title (rather than your name), is a good way to assuage those fears. This account can be managed by multiple staff members and kept anonymous, and can be the first point of contact for patron questions.

This is the very least a library website should have. Phone and fax numbers are no longer sufficient. Most patrons do not have access to fax machines. Patrons with phone phobia or who are deaf or hard of hearing may not be able to call. Without email contact, they have no way to reach you. Email helps patrons maintain their own privacy, and asynchronous communication is very common.

A Contact Page

The state library website should have a contact page. It is understandable to want to protect your identity online, and no one should expect personal contact information to

be public. However, work email and phone numbers associated with your position should be easy to find, even if your name is not. When it comes to finding the email of the state librarian or library staff, it should be easy to discern who your patron should be emailing. Staff members' titles should be easy to find. Below is a screenshot from the Washington State Library, which is an example of a readable and convenient staff registry page.

Library Staff Directory

All employee email addresses begin with first name.last name @ sos.wa.gov (john.smith@sos.wa.gov)

-

State Librarian

Cindy Aden - State Librarian	
Crystal Lentz Rowe - Deputy State Librarian	
Staci Phillips - Executive Assistant	

From the Washington State Library's website

Preferably, users should be able to find the email addresses along with the titles of the staff they are contacting. Some websites prompt users to fill out a web form in order to submit a query or message, which keeps the email address of the point of contact concealed. This is inadequate, as it is less secure than emailing directly through a dedicated email application, and it leaves users with no record of the email sent.

Why is this a problem? It makes it difficult to follow up, because the patron cannot refer to their sent message. It feels very much like sending an email into some unknown abyss. This approach is outdated and negatively impacts user experience and security. It unnecessarily complicates your patron's ability to contact you and is likely a barrier to entry for patrons who do not understand the web form and how it relates to their email. Employees have job-specific email addresses for a reason. Being responsive with email reference is a part of providing good service. Do not make it more difficult or opaque than it needs to be. Transparency is paramount for a government institution such as the state library.

Unique Features

Some state library websites have unique, standout features that are distinct and helpful. Here are some highlights of what sticks out and what libraries of all shapes and sizes

could consider as additions to their web content. These additions can strengthen your library's web presence once you've covered the basics.

Voter Registry and Voting Information

Many people do not know how to register to vote or where their nearest polling place is. Libraries certainly know the impact they have as a resource for voter information and may even serve as a polling place. Why not make the resources easily accessible directly from the library's website? The California State Library has links to this information on their page. Being on the page's footer, it is not immediately apparent, but it is inspiring to see that the library is working toward having an informed populace and was passively working against voter suppression.

| Back to Top | Conditions of Use | Privacy Policy | Accessibility | Contact Us | Register to Vote |

From the California State Library's website

Ask for Feedback

Are you serving the needs of your patrons? You can learn where there might be gaps in functionality or services on your website by soliciting patron feedback. There are risks of spam or abuse, but a quick questionnaire with a built-in character limit and restrictions on the frequency of submissions can provide a straightforward connection between the library and its patrons and may reveal useful information on improvements that can be made to better service your constituency. A great example of this is the form found on the Oregon State Library's page.

Social Media

Many libraries actively engage on social media. This is one of the best ways to advertise library services and legitimize library relevance in digital spaces. As this is an issue that libraries across the country face, library engagement on social media is a change that can help market library services and change the minds of those that find libraries obsolete.

From sharing facets of special library collections to librarian book recommendations, there are many easy and innovative uses of the myriad of platforms available, including Pinterest, Instagram, Tumblr, Twitter, and Facebook. If you do not know where to start with social media for your library, do not be afraid to emulate content that seems successful in other libraries or cultural heritage institutions.

Don't forget to link to social media on your website in a prominent place on your website. The exemplar below was found on the Indiana State Library website.
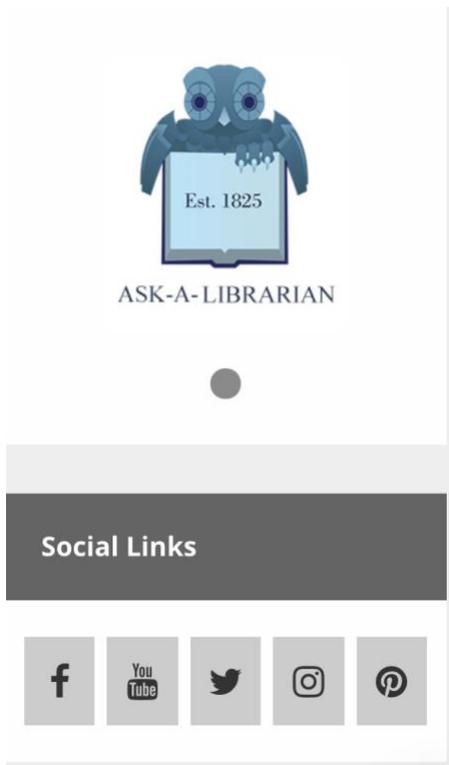
Library Statistics

Providing statistics about things such as the library's circulation, library visits, and program attendance help to demonstrate how actively the library is used and what services are in demand, which communicates library value and the library's importance to the community. The image below was taken from the California State Library's homepage.

Providing data like this may not be possible for a small library, and it may not communicate the same message as the image above does. However, if you are in a larger institution that collects this sort of data, don't be afraid to show it off!

In Conclusion

The internet, as a whole, needs to improve in its accessibility and user-friendliness. Library websites are particularly good places to start with this endeavor because of the core values of librarianship: libraries strive to provide the best service to their communities and to ensure their patrons feel respected by ensuring their needs are met. These are values that should carry over to our online spaces from our physical ones.

What Does This Mean for Your Library?

Remember that updating your website is an iterative process, just like any successful library program or service.

Start by testing out your website against some of these measures. Be in contact with your webmaster and act as the liaison between them and your library and patrons' needs. Security and accessibility are pressing issues that need to be fixed as soon as possible, and you should advocate for those changes.

It doesn't all need to change immediately, but keep checking back in and working to make your website better. Don't be afraid to take inspiration from design elements you admire from other websites or social media platforms, and adapt them for your needs.

Having a website is more than just an obligatory measure: it's an extension of your library. It represents your library, and should be a valued part of the services you offer to your community.

Next Steps and Additional Resources

More information on HTTPS

MDN web docs: Web Security

How to Geek: What Is HTTPS and Why Should I Care?

Google: Why HTTPS Matters

What every Web Developer should know about HTTPS

https://doesmysiteneedhttps.com/ - includes links to instructions on how to get HTTPS on your domain

More information on Accessibility

https://www.ada.gov

Websites need to be more accessible for disabled people

ALA's ADA Article

American Libraries Magazine: Library Websites for All

Library of Congress' Web Accessibility Notice

W3C Web Accessibility Initiative

My favorite state library websites (for inspiration):

Alaska: https://library.alaska.gov/

Georgia: https://georgialibraries.org/

Indiana: https://www.in.gov/library/

Michigan: https://www.michigan.gov/libraryofmichigan

North Carolina: https://statelibrary.ncdcr.gov/

Utah: https://library.utah.gov/

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