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Malaysian University Library Web Sites: Content and Functionality

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Abstract: *The web sites of thirteen Malaysian university libraries are examined to determine their purpose and identify core similarities in terms of content and functionality. It is found that the general purpose of a university library web site is to serve as a tool for information, reference, and research. Most library web sites do not offer instructions about library use or information seeking skills. Many libraries have not maximized their site's functionality in terms of providing interactive forms and site search engines.*

Abstrak: *Sebanyak tigabelas laman web perpustakaan universiti di Malaysia telah dikaji untuk mengenal pasti tujuan dan persamaan laman-laman ini dari segi kandungan dan peranannya. Di dapati bahawa sesebuah laman web perpustakaan berperanan sebagai sumber maklumat, rujukan dan penyelidikan. Kebanyakan laman web ini tidak menyediakan bantuan dari segi penggunaan sumber perpustakaan ataupun kemahiran mencari maklumat. Malahan, hampir kesemua laman web perpustakaan universiti masih belum mencapai tahap yang memuaskan dari segi fungsi interaktif penggunaan borang dan enjin pencarian.*

Academic libraries provide services and access to resources to meet the teaching, learning and research needs of the academic staff and students. These libraries support their parent institutions through book and journal collections; catalogs and indexes that provide access to these collections; document delivery; reference and instructional services. Now the emphasis is on developing electronic information services such as CD-ROMs, and online information services and offering these via the campus network. The World Wide Web provides libraries with a new method of offering a higher level of service through electronic tools, online communication, and Internet-based databases. A university library web site may be created to support this role. This study examines the web sites of thirteen public and private university libraries in

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Malaysia (Table 1) to determine their purpose and identify the core similarities in terms of content. According to Cohen and Still (1999), the purposes served by academic web sites are manifested by their content, the functionalities offered instructional. Next, each library web site was examined according to the established criteria. The sites were reviewed from October 2000 to December 2000. Any changes made after that date were ignored. The data was tabulated using simple averages.

Table 1: Library Web Sites of Public and Private Universities in Malaysia

Universities in Malaysia	Main Library and URL
Universiti Malaya (UM)	Universiti Malaya Library http://www.umlib.um.edu.my
Universiti Islam Antarabangsa (UIA)	International Islamic University Malaysia Library http://lib.iiu.edu.my
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM)	Perpustakaan Tun Sri Lanang, UKM http://www.library.ukm.my
Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM)	Universiti Putra Malaysia Library http://lib.upm.edu.my
Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM)	Perpustakaan Universiti Sains Malaysia http://www.lib.usm.my
Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM)	Perpustakaan Sultanah Zanariah http://www.psz.utm.my
Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM)	UUM Sultanah Bahiyah Library http://www.lib.uum.edu.my
Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS)	Perpustakaan Universiti Malaysia Sabah http://www.ums.edu.my/library
Multimedia University (MMU)	Siti Hasmah Digital Library Multimedia University http://library.unitele.edu.my
University Teknologi MARA (UiTM)	Perpustakaan Tun Abdul Razak http://www.itm.edu.my/acactr/ptar
Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS)	Centre for Academic Information Services Universiti Malaysia Sarawak http://www.unimas.my/html/ cais.html
Universiti Tun Abdul Razak (UNITAR)	UNITAR Virtual Library http://vlib.unitarklj1.edu.my
Universiti Tenaga Nasional(UNITEN)	Universiti Tenaga Nasional Library http://www.uniten.edu.my/go/library/default.htm

and the structure of the sites. This study examines the content and functionality of the library sites. Content is viewed in relation to the library's role as a tool for information, reference, research and instruction.

Methodology

Data was gathered from the web sites of thirteen public and private university libraries in Malaysia. A worksheet was created in which the items reviewed were grouped by content and functionality. Content was further sub-divided into information, reference, research and

Content

According to Cohen and Still (1999), "in addressing the purpose of a library web site as identifiable by its content, the following four questions arise:

Is the library site an information tool?
Is the library site a reference tool?
Is the library site a research tool?
Is the library site an instructional tool?"

It may be assumed that the audiences of a library web site are the library patrons, who view the library as an effective and efficient information provider. When the site is on the

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Internet, the audience will include users or researchers who are not able to access the library physically. Being a 'library' web site, presumably created and maintained by librarians, users expect the same standard of service to be maintained. There are two categories of information a user would seek. First, is general information about the library itself, such as a physical address, mission statement, library policies, description of divisions or departments and staff directory. This information rarely needs amendments or updating. Then there are the news updates of library activities and particularly the revision date of the web site, which is indicative of the currency of the information given. A Webmaster's e-mail link is also very useful if there is no other feedback facility on the site. It also serves as an authority feature for the site.

A site's role as a reference tool may be indicated with the presence of links to reference sources such as bibliographical information, dictionaries, and encyclopedias. Links to the library's OPAC and other OPACs, links to local information, web-based search engines and directories are also crucial.

As a research tool, each site was checked for links to subject resources on the Internet. It was noted if these links were compiled by librarians or were mere pointers to links provided by another site. Web links to free periodicals were also noted and counted. Finally, the subscribed databases were examined in numbers and access mode.

Most libraries play a role in offering instructional help, for example information seeking skills classes, guides to project writing and searching the Internet. A library web page may offer tutorials on the use of the library materials and the Internet, such as how to use an index, a guide to database search strategies, documentation styles and compilation of a bibliography.

Functionalities

Each library web site was assessed for its functionality based on the criterion of whether a site search engine and interactive request forms have been provided. A site search engine allows users to locate specific information quickly without having to navigate the entire site. A site map may be of considerable use too when a site search engine is not available. Interactive forms enable users to submit requests for interlibrary loans or acquisitions and even suggestions or feedback about the library's services.

Results and Discussion

Content

All thirteen library web sites provided general information about the library such as description of departments (including their policies and services provided), rules and regulations, membership, services offered, opening hours, etc.

None of the library web sites offered a web page statement. What was present was the introduction to the library system or the mission statement of the library. Thus they allow the audience to assume that the web site has the same purpose as the library. Only one library site failed to give any information about its mission or purpose.

A total of 11 (84.6%) libraries included a revision date. Most of the sites had been updated within the last six months except for 2 sites that had not been updated for the last two years, and one having its last update three years ago. This is a good indication that the majority of the university library web sites provide current information.

This supports Lee's (2000) findings that '*the contents of web sites are updated or refreshed on a regular basis*' is a criterion of highest importance to the information professionals and library users when evaluating a web site. Eleven of the libraries put up a staff directory, which included the telephone numbers and/or e-mail of the professional staff. One library listed its staff by departments. It was noted that the staff directory was commonly placed on the main page to help users identify library staff easily. Only 9 (69.2%) of the libraries provided either information of its Webmaster or contact e-mail link. A complete mailing address of the institution was present in only 9 (69.2%), whereas 2 libraries failed to provide a Webmaster e-mail or a physical address.

This authoritative feature must be supplied so that the users can confidently rely on the information provided by the site. The least prevalent item was a link to news/events in the library. Only 5 (38.5%) of the libraries used the web to disseminate information about their activities, products, or services. Malaysian university libraries seem to be unaware of the web's potential as a marketing tool to promote their libraries over the Internet. A link such as *News* or *What's New* at the library helps to attract users to visit the site in search of new developments.

The most prevalent feature was links to the library's own OPAC. Eleven (84.6%) of the library sites offered this. Though 6 (46.2%) of them did provide links to other academic libraries in Malaysia, only 4 (30.8%) sites offered direct links to other OPACs. This feature is helpful in locating items in another library catalogue if not found in the parent library. Another very common item found was links to general reference sources on the Internet. Eleven (84.6%) of the sites provided these links. Library web sites tend to provide links to dictionaries, almanacs, encyclopedias, etc. Ten (76.9%) of the library sites had links to web search engines, meta search engines and web directories, four (30.8%) of which separated these according to categories, whereas the others compiled one major listing.

Nine (69.2%) library sites had links to local or regional information. Popular ones were Malaysian sites on politics and government, finance, business and education. One library has compiled a searchable online directory of Malaysian Internet resources, conferences database and new Malaysiana books online.

Reference is supported through annotations of the links. Since the librarian is not present and to save users' time, it is important to supply a descriptive or evaluative annotation about the linked-to site. Many of the libraries did not seem to have a policy on this aspect. Some links were annotated whereas others were not. Users are left to browse the links without the benefit of a librarian's assessment of these sites.

All except two of the libraries offered access to subscribed databases, such as Science Direct, Springer LINK, Proquest Direct, Emerald, Ei, and OVID. Libraries have taken this opportunity to provide a wider and more sophisticated means of supplying information to its users. Three of the libraries allow access only through ID verification, while the other 9 (69.2%) libraries allow users to link to the site offering the database before it prompts for login information. Users are also allowed to browse the on-trial databases. Also present were links to free online periodicals. The World Wide Web offers a wide range of free journals and magazines. Three (23.1%) university libraries did not take advantage of this feature. Of the remainder 10 libraries, 1 library linked its free journals to a publishers' list. Four libraries arranged these journals according to subject areas, whereas the other 5 listed the journal titles alphabetically. This initiative may prove very useful to non-members of the library.

Eight (61.5%) libraries have created subject based listings of Internet resources. These listings were either alphabetically arranged or categorized according to type such as general reference, journal or indexes and abstracts. All but one of these libraries covered more than 10 subject areas. Three libraries had further sub-divided the main subjects into nearly a hundred more sub-categories. One library only provided resources for two chosen subjects. Another library linked its subject resources to subject directories available on the Internet. This is a powerful tool through which one can display the librarian's ability to package and display information in a manner best suited to the library's clients. Although all 7 libraries aimed to provide some kind of annotation, again none were consistent in their effort.

Among the library web sites examined, 5 (38.5%) have made it possible to access their internal databases through the library web site. Of these, only 3 (23.1%) allow access without ID verification. Examination papers and staff publications are popular items being offered.

Twelve university libraries offered some kind of information skills instruction through their

web site. Two (15.4%) libraries are formally involved in the teaching of library skills to the students, and another 6 (46.2%) offer tutorials by request. But none of these libraries mounted any online help for these tutorials. All that was available was the outline and registration information of the tutorials conducted at the library. Two libraries have made an effort to include links to library use tutorials offered by others on the web. One even included an explanation of classification scheme. The availability of these tutorials can benefit students and staff who miss out on the formal library

orientation or instruction. Another effort by the library in support of teaching and learning was links to web sites that offered bibliographic help as well as literature search methodology, including citation styles. Seven (53.8%) libraries offered some kind of instruction in this aspect.

Functionalities

Interactive request forms were present in only 5 (38.5%) of the library sites. Found in almost equal numbers were forms for inter-library loans, acquisition requests, reference queries, and comments. A site search engine was present in only one library web page.

Table 2: Count and Percentage of Library Web Sites Containing Resources

Feature	Total of Library Web Sites	Percentage (%)
Library Information		
Web page statement	0	0
Contact e-mail	9	69.2
Physical address	9	69.2
Revision date	11	84.6
Staff directory	11	84.6
News	5	38.5
Description of departments	13	100
Reference		
Link to library's OPAC	11	84.6
Links to other library OPACs	6	46.2
Links to search engines/directories	10	76.9
Links to local information	9	69.2
General Reference	11	84.6
Research		
Links to subscribed databases	11	84.6
Links to free periodicals	10	76.9
Links to Internet subject resources	8	61.5
Internal Databases	5	38.5
Instruction		
Library use tutorials/guides	2	15.4
Bibliographical guides	7	53.8
Functionalities		
Request forms	5	38.5
Site search engine	1	7.7

Conclusion

The main reason for examining these thirteen university library web sites was to discover the purpose of these web sites as manifested by their content. The general purpose of a university library web site is to serve as a tool for information, reference, and research, although each individual site may not portray all features. The library web sites do not seem to place emphasis on its role as an instructional tool. Less than half offer some kind of instructions such as bibliographical help or help in a conducting a research project, but useful online tutorials are absent. Even links to related information on the Internet are scarce.

Malaysian university library web sites have not maximized their functionality in terms of providing interactive forms and site search engines. This may be due to lack of funding for the hardware and software required or it could be because the librarians are simply not aware of the viability of this service through the Internet. However, a number of the libraries do allow renewals via the OPAC.

Only five libraries have provided online access to their internal databases, mostly comprising thesis abstracts, university publications, examination papers or public lectures. More libraries should take advantage of the hyperlinking nature of the web to link to external resources. Materials or information not found physically at the library may still be made accessible virtually. Eleven (84.6%) of the libraries offer a variety of subscription databases in various related fields. The number of databases may be limited by the expenses incurred, therefore the libraries should use the World Wide Web's free offerings to build subject specific links. So far only 8 of the library sites have made this effort. Below are some of the core elements, in terms of content, found in Malaysian university library web sites:

- Description of departments/ services/ policies.
- Revision date
- Staff directory
- Link to library's OPAC
- Links to general references
- Links to search engines
- Links to subscribed databases
- Physical address
- Contact e-mail

Malaysian university library web sites are satisfactory in content but there is a need for creativeness in web design to attract viewers to use library services or participate in library activities via these web sites.

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