The virtual library is a “user-centered virtual community” (Maness, 2006) providing access to resources and research assistance as well as creating a community feel that users have come to expect in their library.

Introduction

At many colleges and universities, the library is considered the heart of the campus. The academic library provides space for researchers to access information, find assistance in their research, study and/or work collaboratively, and take part in workshops and events to expand their knowledge. Historically, access to the collections, library space, and services meant having to be physically in the library. With the emergence of the internet and other technology tools in the 1990s, and now with the pervasiveness of technology and user expectation that resources be available online, academic libraries have an increasingly virtual presence in addition to their physical one. As libraries strive to connect their work to educational outcomes, the virtual library has taken on increased importance. The virtual library space is often included in a library’s strategic plan and its branding and marketing efforts. Where library sites used to serve primarily as communication tools (Blummer, 2007, p. 46), virtual spaces are looking a lot like online, or digital, branches of the library. Users increasingly expect to have a similar experience in the online library as they might have in the physical library space.

The transition of academic library websites from static to dynamic, informational to interactive, has been referred to as “Library 2.0” (Maness, 2006). Library 2.0 is defined by Maness as “the application of interactive, collaborative, and multimedia web-based technologies to web-based library services and collections” (2006). Again, according to Maness, Library 2.0 is where the virtual library space provides access to resources and library services but also invites the user to interact with the content (2006). Academic libraries are adapting their virtual spaces to become digital branches, creating the Academic Library 2.0 (Xu et al., 2009, p. 330). An analysis in 2011 showed that, in the decade between 2000 and 2010, academic library sites have made strides to incorporate technology that makes their sites dynamic and interactive (Aharony, 2012, p. 771) and are increasingly focused on their users "trying to facilitate their work in the library by offering them different tools such as: ask the librarian, site search and frequently asked questions" (Aharony, 2012, p. 774).

Recently, the global COVID-19 pandemic made it very clear that academic libraries must be positioned to respond to the research needs of their community regardless of whether or not they are on campus. While many libraries were able to make the transition to online operations with relative ease, the experience has raised awareness of the gaps in service and resources that were not apparent when library staff and users had access to the physical library. In most cases, the virtual library branch is not expected to replace the physical library but, instead, the virtual branch should be an extension of the physical space, working in concert with access to the physical library. In most cases, the virtual library branch is not expected to replace the physical library but, instead, the virtual branch should be an extension of the physical space, working in concert with the library as a whole to provide a cohesive library experience to all users.

Rubric

Because of the importance of the virtual library to an academic library’s services, assessment of the virtual library space and level of service is needed. There are a number of rubrics available to provide a framework for this assessment. The one used in this project uses elements from the theory of Human-Centered Design (HCD) and the characteristics of Library 2.0 to assess the elements necessary to have a dynamic, interactive, and engaging virtual library space.

Human-Centered Design (HCD) is a design approach that places importance on the interactions between humans and online systems. Systems, such as websites, that follow HCD are user-centered and user-friendly, interactive, and meet the needs of users (Cooley, 1999, p. 65). Taken together, Library 2.0 characteristics and the elements of HCD provide the framework for engaging, interactive, and user-centered virtual library spaces.

The characteristics included in the rubric were taken from Maness’ Library 2.0 theory (Maness, 2006) and Xu et al.’s Academic Library 2.0 theory which begins with Library 2.0 and applies the theory to academic libraries in particular (Xu et al., 2009). The rubric is organized with Library 2.0 elements in bold text and HCD elements which are the evidence supporting the existence of Library 2.0 elements.

The components of each theory work in concert to demonstrate whether the virtual branch is meeting the requirements of a user-centered, socially rich, communally innovative site with multi-media.

Equitable Access

“Our reliance on the internet during coronavirus has recast how we will behave after the crisis has passed. The big lesson is that we have incorporated the internet as a critical part of our personal and professional lives. This is not going to change” (Wheeler, 2020).

A well-designed virtual library can help improve and increase access to library services and resources but there obstacles to access remain. The pandemic laid bare a major one: access to the internet. As this map from the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) shows, there are portions of the United States that do not have access to affordable, reliable, and fast internet service. Even where broadband access is available, many households struggle to be able to afford it. According to the Pew Research Center, those with household incomes of less than $30,000/year have difficulty affording internet access. A step towards more equitable access to library services and resources is ensuring that everyone has access to affordable and reliable internet service. As outlined in this Brookings Institution report (Wheeler, 2020), our current infrastructure is outdated and needs to be built anew to support universal broadband access.

References