Editorial

The web-based library:
challenges and opportunities

> Google can give you 100,000 answers, but
> the librarian can provide the right one.
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The growing use information and communication technology, especially the internet, has etched deep transformations in many fields of life that affect not only the ways in which people and institutions relate and communicate, but also consumer and leisure habits, workplace practices and the delivery of public services.

The convenience and speed of the internet are determining factors in earning the wide acceptance it enjoys in the general population that chooses to do its everyday business online rather than going in person to purchase, for example, an airline ticket or perform a bank transfer. Of course, checking a website to see what is playing at the movies is now old hat. While the internet has not completely supplanted analogue media, an increasing number of companies and institutions exploit the internet to provide a platform for establishing a presence in the marketplace to offer products or services. In the world of the information society, where millions of people are connected online, the internet has become the best, most widely visible display case for companies and institutions to gather users and clients. The products and services offered on line have expanded exponentially in recent years, driving fierce competition among suppliers who constantly strive to improve the operability of their platforms and websites, while adapting to the

tastes and preference of their target populations.

Libraries are no exception to this trend, and early on they endeavored to carve out a place the World Wide Web, first by offering information about the library services, and later, in accord with applicable restrictions, by making collection catalogues and digitized versions of bibliography available to online consultation. More recently, libraries have begun offering other online services, such as virtual reference, loan renewals and user training. Because each library is different in terms of budget and available technology, this deployment of online services has not development along a regular front. The trend, however, is clear enough, and libraries everywhere are striving to exploit the internet as much as possible.

As previously mentioned, competition on the internet is increasing every day, and the dominant role of the library as supplier of information has begun to slip as digital supports and new search engines improve and consolidate. Today one no longer needs to go to the library to search for information about a topic or author. A simple web search can quickly and with little effort bring up literally millions of document hits. In the context the digital world, the question of just what libraries can still offer becomes relevant. Obviously, it can still offer users access to its physical collections, since much of this material is not available in any other way, at least not without considerable cost. Library collections, moreover, offer the advantage of quality, in that they have been rigorously selected. These advantages notwithstanding, the library must offer still more in the form of services in conjunction with the capacity to adapt to the needs and preferences of users.

Since the physical library is not simply a place for holding books, but rather an institution that provides a series of services to users that aid their access to information and documents, web-based libraries similarly cannot limit their scope to simply serving as repositories of collections and also must offer an array of services that provide value and serve to differentiate it from any competitors.

Many of the services provided on site in libraries can be adapted and offered online as well, for example, the array of reference services that has been implemented in many libraries.

Inter-library lending of digitized documents can also be done almost instantaneously. On the other hand, the web opens a broad array of possibilities for disseminating materials owned by the library to users interacting with the library through diverse channels. This allows the deployment of personalized services, allowing users to establish their own spaces for storing and tagging documents, and receiving alerts.

The success or failure of these services shall depend ultimately on the users, who from the many options available select those they believe best suit their needs and requirements. For this reason, it is important not only to provide high quality services and contents, but also a user-friendly, user-oriented interface,[1] since users accustomed to the features of other competing information services and systems will demand similar features, which they have come to consider desirable or indispensable.

When designing and implementing online library services, one should keep in mind the diverse models that have been developed for explaining user behavior in using and appropriating technology in general and for the internet specifically. In the 1980s, Davis proposed the Technology Acceptance Model,[2] according to which the factors that most heavily determine the acceptance and use of a given technology are the user's perceptions of the technology's utility and the ease of its use. This pioneering model has undergone further development and modification in order to adapt it to diverse contexts. In addition to the two factors identified by Davis, two additional factors have been identified for the case of libraries: functionality of services, which is associated to the variety and quality of services offered, and the functionality of tasks, referring to the array of options offered on the web site to users, such as instant messag-

1   A. Pant. "Usability evaluation of an academic library website: experience with the Central Science Library, University of Delhi." *The Electronic Library* 33 (5) (2015): 896-915.
2   F. D. Davis. "Perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, and user acceptance of information technology." *MIS Quarterly* 13 (3) (1989): 319-339; F. D. Davis, R. P. Bagozzi y P. R. Warshaw. "User acceptance of computer technology: A comparison of two theoretical models." *Management Science* 35 (8) (1989): 982-1003.

ing, search options or management of retrieved information.[3] As mentioned throughout this text, the challenges faced by online library services initiatives are substantial. It is not enough to have a presence on the internet in order win over users. Online libraries must offer quality and competitive services that meets user expectations, while keeping in mind that user expectations undergo change with the march of technology.[4] As such, it is important to remain abreast of these developments, while learning about the strengths and weaknesses of other information systems, and sustaining efforts to understand our current and potential users.

Even though the outlook for libraries is fraught with challenges, it is also filled with promise. The overabundance and chaotic nature of information on the internet has become a serious problem that calls out to the expertise and experience of libraries, which are the institution best suited for helping users make effective use of the information available.

Online libraries services should be of a very high quality, thereby differentiated added value against those offered by competing system in terms of reliability. If libraries can take advantage of these opportunities, they will attain higher levels of visibility, reputation and institutional prestige, while also favoring the physical use of library facilities and services, and enhancing the value of the professional librarian.

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3   J. H. Heinrichs, K. S. Lim, J. S. Lim y M. A. Spangenberg. "Determining factors of academic library web site usage." *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 58 (14) (2007):2325-2334

4   A. Benson y R. Favini. "Evolving web, evolving librarian." *Library Hi Tech News* 23 (7) (2006): 18-21.