

Academic libraries web-sites in Poland and their users.

Żaneta SZERKSZNIS

Poznan University Library, Poznan, Poland

szerman@amu.edu.pl

INFORUM 2005: 11th Conference on Professional Information Resources

Prague, May 24-26, 2005

Abstract. *The author describes the methods of communication with Web-site's users analyzing Polish university libraries. Three forms of communication are identified: static, dynamic and supportive multimedia courses (the so-called " help-yourself guides"). The second edition of the "Best Academic Library Web-Site" competition organized by the Polish Librarians Association last year selected the best web-site in 2004. The Wroclaw University Library web page in its new shape was initiated in July 2003 and is an example of information an service gateway offering remote assistance and use in some of services offered.*

Web-sites evolve towards indirect communication with the help of the "ask the librarian" form and through assistance instructions though they still lack guidelines for undergraduates and postgraduates writing their MA and PhD theses.

The paper discusses the already existing solutions in remote communication as against the relevant statistical data from Poland that refer to Polish internet structure and users. Most Polish web sites are static and offer indirect communication.

Academic libraries web-sites have become part of information environment architecture with different results. Because of their supplementary character in the whole educational process, libraries of higher institutions of learning, including university libraries, have strictly defined groups of recipients with varied expectations. Evidently, the target group for services provided by university and academic libraries comprises students, future undergraduates, research workers, and other university staff, but also other users like, for instance, secondary schools students.

The needs of the above-mentioned groups are different just as are the requirements set by them to be met by a library web-page. It is generally accepted that a web-site, being a primary source of information on a given library, should be useful, communicative and user-friendly which may be facilitated by a user-friendly interface, available searching tools as well as programs assisting the user in their work with the service. Library web-page is a gateway providing all necessary organizational information and links and is a focal point of e-service exchange and the place of access to electronic media for the user. However, in many libraries, the development and the work on the improvement of service is still focused on providing information on particular services offered still in a traditional way. The huge rise in the interest of the service offered via the Internet dates back to 1999 and has been steadily on the rise ever since. Here in Poland, the steady development of university library web pages is additionally enhanced by a competition held every year and organized by the Commission on Electronic Publications (Komisja Wydawnictw Elektronicznych), the Commission on Automation of the Polish Librarians Association, (Komisja Automatyzacji Stowarzyszenia Polskich Bibliotekarzy), and the editorial board of the electronic journal EBIB (Electronic Bulletin for Librarians). The competition for "The best Internet web-pages of Polish libraries" falls within different categories, including those of university libraries, research and central institute libraries, public libraries and school libraries. The aim of the competition is to disseminate and popularize standards relevant to web-sites. The web-sites in question are then graded according to various criteria: authorship, up-to-dateness, layout and the structure, completeness and the usefulness of included material, editing and language correctness plus additional bonus scores for the inclusion of elements of a gateway, portal or educational tools.

For purposes of this article, below you will find a simplified division of communication into the so-called static and dynamic (interactive) (after Bao), as well as multimedia guides. A closer look at the way of communication with different groups of recipients of remote service and information will probably make it possible to outline the directions in the development of web-sites in this country.

Static communication of web-sites

(e-content, auxiliary tools FAQ, Quick Links, Help, A - Z Index)

Electronic sources, e-journals and online bibliographies are, from the point of view of the communication with the user, far from being interactive as they establish only one-way

communication. This kind of service provides the user with instant information very quickly and the group of recipients is mainly composed of research workers and students writing their PhD theses. The relevant statistical data for Poland inform us that there are nearly 59,000 research workers and over 32,000 postgraduates pursuing doctoral studies plus students, i.e. about 1,051,000 people ready to make use of full-text electronic journals. Electronic information services is accessible either via a university's intranet or remotely with the creation of user accounts and passwords (EBSCO Service, H&H or RAS software), thus being accessible from home through cable internet service or modem. However, according to statistics, only 22 per cent of the Poles have access to the Internet at home. The ways of providing this service is not thus uniform and varies as to the structure of interfaces or availability preconditions. The important citation resources such as SCI-ISI and Science Direct e-journals service are accessible on university intranets via all-Poland portal of the Virtual Science Library accessible within academic intranets, while the other channel of resources supply is provided by individual web-sites of academic libraries through automatically-verified one pass process. Despite this non-unified access to resources, it is worth noticing that, in 2002, there were 1,900,000 articles retrieved from Science Direct via the Virtual Science Library from ICM UW. Additionally, one has to include what students and other users have access to through the services within libraries networks which will make about 2,640,000 article retrievals assuming that, on average, one user makes about 30 article downloads in a year (after Hollender). Fully internet-compliant electronic service with the possibility of creating new user accounts to EBSCO services is to be found at BUW and BUO.

Academic libraries, the most relevant and accessible to academic users, provide links to e-content resources, hence the growing significance of the interfaces and the structures of academic libraries web-sites. Plain and clear structure of the start page and the navigation along the sub-pages of a web-site have a direct influence on the communication with the user. Polish libraries have already begun to limit the number of modules of their web-sites to 6 – 8. It is customary that the logo of the institution is usually placed in the top left corner. The logo is distinctively marked typographically and stands out of the rest of the design of the page, while the description of an institution is placed below (BG UMCS, BUWr). For a remote user, very helpful are navigating or searching tools usually placed in the site map of service. *A-Z index*, alphabetical list of the site, usually in the tool bar at the top of the start page, is still missing on the www pages of Polish libraries. *Quick Links* Button is used for selecting most important sections of the page such as: online catalogue, trial runs of databases, list of current journals, requests for books to reading rooms.

Other helpful tools characteristic for static communication offered to the user by the service offered in Polish libraries include:

- Help with system and complex online catalogue queries (VTLS),
- Short online manuals – partly interactive and referring the user to a particular relevant page of the web-site with a particular question (BUŚ K),
- Help – to assist library patrons with searches for a particular book or article (in printed and online form (BUP – new interface),
- manuals on how to use electronic content (BUP)
- guides on information sources downloadable from the WWW page (BUŚ K),
- instructions on transliteration (BUŚ K),
- dictionaries of terms to be of some help with using the library holdings (BUJ).

Some libraries provide their basic service such as performing searches and online book lending through electronic online catalogues (relevant to VTLS-based systems) electronically. Registration (enrolling), updating of users accounts and domestic interlibrary loans are carried out with the help of electronic forms to be filled in and sent to libraries from a given web-page.

Most of academic libraries in Poland offer their basic services covering the procedures only partially in the electronic way, i.e., for example, the form is to be retrieved from the library web-page (request form for chargeable survey of library holdings – BU UMK, interlibrary loan forms – BUJ, request form for access to Remote Access Service, EBSCOhost - BUW, BGO). Web-sites of BUW, BUWr, BUB also include the internet shopping outlets that offer a purchase of digitalized material (old and rare books). There is also a possibility to buy online a book for the library. "Book with recommendation" option makes it possible for users to submit a proposition of a book acquisition by

typing in a title of a given book and registering it with a list of recommended books to be purchased by the library. This page also includes a list of books recommended for purchase by the library.

According to the latest report published by the European Commission on eGovernment services of the type G2C in Poland (after eGovernment in Poland, 3rd edition), only BUWr partly meets the requirements set by the European Union standards, i.e., provides the following services:

- online registration,
- online publication loans,
- online purchase of a publication,
- survey of the library holdings.

Dynamic interactive communication with the user (e-mail, chat, discussion groups, courses)

Additional online services are offered by a system of specific forms sent via e-mail to the contact librarian. Interactive communication in real time of the type Instant Librarian in Polish academic libraries has not yet been introduced. Information on library resources is still much more often given by telephone than with the help of relevant chat groups. Right from the start page one can ask a question to a librarian on duty in almost all of the libraries (Ask a Librarian). The user can also find e-mail or phone contact details of people responsible for particular matters under the so-called Contact option (BG UGd, BU Wr, BG UMCS).

Also, no permanent discussion groups are available though temporary moderated discussion groups have been introduced for communication with students and staff to keep them informed of new acquisitions, new sources of electronic content and to remind them of those already accessible. Some characteristic features of dynamic communication are to be found at Poznan University Library as there is a possibility, through a returnable form, to ask a question or propose a suggestion concerning e-journals which is then send back to recipients to their mail boxes, or to obtain information sent to e-mail accounts on trail runs of new databases asking for giving the users' opinion as to the value of a particular source (bibliographies, journal collections).

Library services have been broadened by training sessions and Internet use training, i.e., e-learning. Within the 4th Framework EU Telematics for Libraries programme, a project called DEDICATE was launched in 1994-1998. Librarians from UMK participated in the project and it was clearly noticed then that users pursuing information related to science and technology were very much in need of broadening their knowledge on relevant sources of information and on the ways of their effective use. Eventually, the Toruń group decided to run an online course for students from the Faculty of Physics (after Bednarek-Michalska). Later, a chargeable course for librarians BIBWEB with downloadable course booking form and course content for self training was introduced.

Nowadays many academic libraries web-pages include many interactive courses for first year students such as training in the use of library resources to be taken as an online test in a remote mode (BUW, BG UMCS, BUP), instructive films for students (23-minute film, BUL), or chargeable librarian courses BIBWEB (BUW, EBIB). They all have supportive role in the educational process of the institution just like the so-called electronic student libraries that give access to some of university text books (cf. the web-page of BUWr. In other regions, university textbooks are placed within regional digital libraries such as Wielkopolska Biblioteka Cyfrowa (Digital Library of Wielkopolska) and BUP.

The above-mentioned information services simulate direct contact between the librarian and the user and give additional support to traditional surveys on the library's holdings as well as to information guides. Moreover, online guides complement traditional training sessions under the guidance of a librarian held in classrooms, and the fact that they are easily accessible on the Net, makes it easier that they will find their way to more people interested. Multimedia animations allow the users to repeatedly go over a given task which means they are much more effective. Simplicity is an asset here, just as the intuitive interface and the short time of individual sequences (5 mins). To use the services means to think intuitively, which is so important where the pace of information processing process is getting faster and faster, and the simulations allow the librarian to make a given situation as real as possible to that encountered in a library. Regrettably, no short guides of this type have been

introduced on Polish libraries web pages yet and that is something that still remains to be done on the part of academic librarians.

Summing up, it has to be said that the immediate perspective of servicing library's users online is not much promising and that the pace of the development, as it is now, is too slow. It is information that is primarily offered to users by libraries. It is rare to be in position to handle the registration online (if one wishes to enroll the library). In view of the new scale set up by the European Commission in relation to internet services, the average number of online services offered by Polish libraries account for only 4 per cent. According to the Report, the analyses show that decidedly the bulk of the services will not be available electronically in the near future and that public libraries, including academic and research libraries are lagging behind as compared to other libraries. The average level of the development of the services included in the group of returnable and social services up and running in Poland is 26 per cent and is nearly 2.5 times smaller than that for Western European countries. We are still below the baseline of one-way interaction with dynamic interaction as far as the services of the G2C type are concerned. Apparently, it is effected by the relatively low number of computers with access to the Internet in Polish households.

References

Bao, X.: A study of web-based interactive reference services via academic library home pages. *References & User Services Quarterly*, 2003, vol.42, No. 3, pp 250-256

Bednarek-Michalska, B.: Internet course for students. Media education at research library. EBIB, 1999:04 (July/August), available at : <http://ebib.oss.wroc.pl/arc/e004-06.html>

DEDICATE Project - available at: <http://www.bu.uni.torun.pl/DEDECATE/dedindex.htm>

eGovernment in Poland (3rd edition) effected by eEurope Ministry of Science and the introduction of information technology, 8th July 2004, available at: http://www.mnii.gov.pl/_gAllery/10/66/1066.pdf

Hollender, H.: Biblioteki cyfrowe w Polsce i BWA (Digital libraries in Poland and the Virtual Library). Conference Proceedings of the conference on Polish academic libraries in the EU. Lodz, June 23-25, 2004, venue: Main Library of Lodz University of Technology.

Najlepsze witryny internetowe bibliotek polskich – II edycja. The competition for "The best Internet web-pages of Polish libraries – II ed.", July 2004, available at: http://ebib.oss.wroc.pl/sbp/konkurs_www_2004.html

Appendix. Academic and research libraries – abbreviations used

BUWr – Wrocław University Library
BUW – Warsaw University Library
BUO – Olsztyn University Library
BGUMSC – M. Curie Skłodowska University Library, Lublin
BUMK – Torun University Library
BGUGd – Gdansk University Library
BUŚK – Silesian University Library, Katowice
BUŁ – Lodz University Library
BUB – Białystok University Library
BUJ – Jagiellonian University Library
BUP – Poznan University Library