So We're Publishers Now

First, a disclaimer: I'm not Jessamyn West. My name is Donna Ekart, and I'm a librarian and the communications coordinator at K-State Libraries in Manhattan, Kan. I like to think and talk about how libraries deliver technology to their patrons, and Jessamyn is being kind enough to share her space with me now and then this year.

Although it's not typically how your average person conceives of libraries, I think libraries have acted as publishers, or at least content creators, for a very long time. Librarians have always been bibliographers, collecting, listing, and annotating for their patrons, and instructional content is likely as old as the first open stacks. Library publishing is becoming more and more obvious now, as librarians can publish to the web to their hearts' content. In this month's Tech Tips, I'd like to focus on the publication of subject guides (or research guides or study guides—call them what you will), and how you might use a few simple tools to make them more dynamic and useful for your patrons.

In academic libraries, guides are usually discipline-specific and research-intensive, while public libraries might trend more toward community information and general interest topics such as gardening or music. Regardless of their intended uses, subject guides can be invaluable places for people to begin to gather information from a variety of sources. There are many tools to help you build great guides. However, some of the best tools aren't simple or inexpensive to implement. So if your budget or tech skills (or both!) are on the low end, what are your options?

You may have heard the phrase "the democratization of the tools of production." It was made popular by the buzz surrounding Chris Anderson's long tail writings. One can point to things such as YouTube, blogs, and wikis as proof that many once-rarefied arts—video production, web publishing—are now available to the masses. To apply this concept to subject guides, we'll want to figure out what makes the expensive or complex software's end products appealing and then find ways to mimic those features with easy and free tools.

Ithaca College Library's SubjectsPlus installation includes "Try These First" pop-ups to get basic researchers straight to simple resources.

You Can Pay to Publish Their Way

Two of the best software packages out there for subject guides are LibGuides and SubjectsPlus. LibGuides is hosted and more or less ready to go, but you're going to have to pay for it. SubjectsPlus is free, open source software, but you'll likely need a programmer to do the install and to help with customizations. Both packages have common features, though, and selling points include the abilities to organize any type of multimedia including videos, podcasts, and images; to include dynamic content such as RSS feeds, "canned" database searches,

and new book lists; and to move traditional reference services online through instant messaging. They also tend to humanize online research by putting staff photos and contact information front and center. Let's check out some ways to replicate these features with easy and free tools.

Or You Can Publish Your Way

Subject guides fail because they are relegated to dusty lists of links, they are seldom updated, and they are left to become obsolete. Broken links and outdated information don't encourage your patrons to trust that you are engaged with their interests. However, there are simple things you can do with a basic web-based subject guide to make it more interesting and dynamic and, therefore, more useful to your patrons. The inclusion of RSS feeds, chat widgets, and simple forms can transform a subject guide without necessitating employing a programmer or spending a lot of money. At my library,

Resources Discussed

LibGuides
www.springshare.com/libguides

SubjectsPlus
http://ithacalibrary.com/subsplus

Ithaca College Library Research by Subject
http://ithacalibrary.com/subjects

K-State Libraries Kinesiology Subject Guide
www.lib.k-state.edu/subguides/kinesiology/index.html

Feed2JS
http://feed2js.org/index.php?s=build

Meebo
www.meebo.com/meebome

Zoho Creator
http://creator.zoho.com

Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library Subject Guides
http://tscpl.org/guides

some of the librarians who are first to claim they don't have strong tech skills also have the most interesting subject guides from a technology viewpoint. The kinesiology guide created by Tara Coleman, for example, includes an RSS feed of sports medicine news, an instant messaging (IM) widget for chatting with the science librarian, and a feedback form in addition to the normal database lists and links to library and research tools. Let's take it apart piece by piece to see what democratized tools are at work.

This subject guide uses a variety of simple, free tools to create great content for kinesiology students.

The sports medicine news headlines are from the website Science News Daily. To include the headlines' RSS feed on the page, an online tool called Feed2JS was employed. This tool takes a regular RSS feed, such as the ones you'd normally read in a reader, and allows you to set parameters—how many headlines to show, how much of the description to display, etc.—and then gives you back a little snippet of code that you cut and paste onto your webpage. Once it's set up, it's totally hands free; new content is delivered to and displayed on your page whenever it's made available in the RSS feed.

The instant messaging widget uses Meebo. Aside from being a great IM service that allows people to chat across various accounts (Google, MSN, Yahoo!, etc.), Meebo also provides customizable widgets that you can embed on a webpage. This way, your patrons can IM you without having to know your screen name—or even without having IM accounts of their own. The widget displays your status, so patrons can see at a glance if you're available to answer their questions. It also has custom color and font options, so you can make it blend well with your page.

The feedback form is created with Zoho Creator, an online platform for creating small, simple, web-based database applications. Using Zoho Creator, you can either build your own application from scratch or search Zoho's database of freely downloadable applications created by other developers. Creating your own form is a simple matter of dragging and dropping elements you'd like to include from the field choices on to a blank form canvas and assigning actions to the fields. You have the choice of receiving email alerts that include the form data each time the form is used, or you can use Zoho's interface to view the data whenever you'd like. If you want to get fancy, you can choose layout styles and color themes to match your webpage. Then,

Zoho Creator's form builder uses a simple drag-and-drop interface.

Fill out a simple Feed2JS form and turn your favorite RSS feed into embeddable code for your webpage.

just save the form and grab the code to embed it on your page—you're ready to go.

Conclusion

Cool subject guides aren't limited to academic libraries either. Just down the road from me at Topeka Shawnee County Public Library, the subject guides take on a familiar bloggish form. Frequent posts, with links to resources on the side, keep patrons updated on topics such as business and investing, genealogy, travel, and parenting. You could do the same thing with any blog platform. The key here is not what specific tool is being used but how it's used to reconceptualize subject guides as dynamic and frequently updated content, rather than staid and quickly stale lists of links. The message conveyed is that librarians are invested and involved in creating something useful.

So now the tools of production are in your hands. What can you publish for your patrons today? ∎

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