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Making Room for TBD: Adapting Library Websites During a Pandemic

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DUE TO CAMPUS CLOSURES AND A MOVE TO REMOTE INSTRUCTION, OUR WEBSITES SUDDENLY BECAME THE SOLE PRESENCE FOR THE LIBRARY.

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Library websites play an important role in connecting our users to materials and services. Critically, they are the access point to our catalogs and online resources. But they also perform a wide range of functions, such as providing information about hours and locations and providing access to library offerings.

While library websites are important in the best of times, the COVID-19 pandemic has shined a light on just how critical they are. Due to campus closures and a move to remote instruction, our websites suddenly became the sole presence for the library. In the early stages of the pandemic, when everything was unpredictable and changing rapidly, it was sometimes a struggle for those of us who are responsible for our library websites to ensure that accurate and up-to-date information would be presented to library users. It was only after the dust settled that we were able to reflect on what we had done.

This article describes two different academic libraries' responses to the pandemic through their websites, as their site administrators reflect on the changes that occurred

during an evolving emergency situation and an anything-but-normal start to a new academic year. In reflecting on our processes, we discovered there were common themes running through our changes. While this article details the specific decisions of two college libraries, we imagine that others made similar changes when faced with the same circumstances.

Institutional Background

The City College of New York (CCNY) and the Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC) are two of the 25 colleges that make up the City University of New York (CUNY) system—the largest urban university system in the country. While several aspects of the technical side of library operations are coordinated through CUNY-wide committees and other centralized structures, each library in CUNY manages its own website. Both BMCC and CCNY are fortunate in that they currently have a high degree of local control over their websites. In each case, a librarian has primary responsibility for maintaining and updating the sites. At BMCC, this is the web and systems librarian; at CCNY, it is the head of reference.

Communicating Through Chaos (March–April 2020)

During the week of March 9, 2020, the situation in the New York City area was rapidly deteriorating, as an increasing number of COVID-19 cases were confirmed. At the start of the week, it felt like a move to remote work would be likely, and by the end of the week, it became reality. On the afternoon of March 11, Governor Andrew Cuomo made an announcement that all CUNY and SUNY (State University of New York) classes would be moving online after a brief pause. This news came before individual campuses had a chance to develop a plan or communicate what it meant. Would the library be open? Would we be allowed to work from home? What services could we still offer with differing levels of staffing and building access? How long would the situation last?

As things were constantly shifting around us, the first two priorities were assuring our users that we were there

Figure 1: Warning boxes

for them and making sure we could continue providing services. At that point, we had no idea if this situation would continue for a few weeks or several months, so we were working on developing contingency plans for several scenarios. As things continued to evolve, we had to roll with the punches.

Alert!

Once it became clear that hours and services would be impacted by campus closures, we needed to put that information in as many places as possible. On both the BMCC and CCNY library sites, warning boxes were inserted on homepages, internal pages, and research guides and database lists (see Figure 1).

For both libraries, the goal was to keep the alert brief, while conveying important information. This was to make it more likely that site visitors would read it, as well as to stop it from pushing the regular content (such as catalog and database information) too far down the page. Three pieces of information stayed consistent throughout: the status of library operations, where to get more information on services, and ways to get help from the library.

While it was entirely possible that users would succumb to banner blindness (a situation in which important information blends into the background when it's always present), we came to the same conclusion: The alerts were worth the real estate on our pages.

Subject to Change

In early March, the CCNY Libraries began discussing how to best notify users of any potential service changes. The primary concern was ensuring that the most current information was prominent and easy to find. Instead of posting separate blog updates as services changed, we decided it would be better to keep everything in one place and created a COVID-19 Services page. This page became the primary location for all library service information and was continually updated as new information was made available.

Meanwhile, the BMCC Library created an informational blog post, initially titled "We're Here to Support You, In Person and Online!" Similar to CCNY's, this post served as a status page, and it was updated continuously. For both libraries, these regularly updated pages were added to provide information to students and faculty members, but they also had a role in keeping librarians and library staffers (now all working remotely) in the loop about our shifting services and offerings.

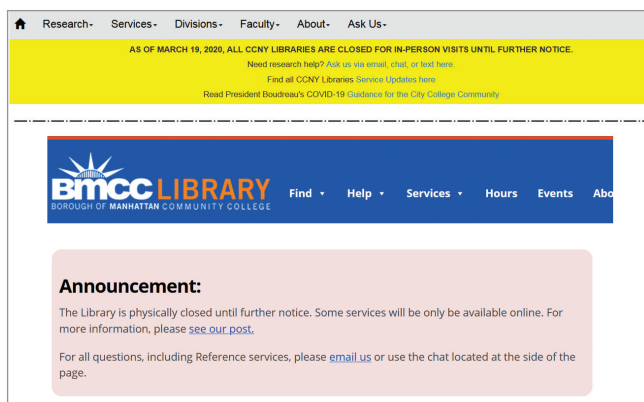> THE WHIRLWIND SHIFT TO REMOTE EVERYTHING NECESSITATED ALMOST DAILY UPDATES. ...
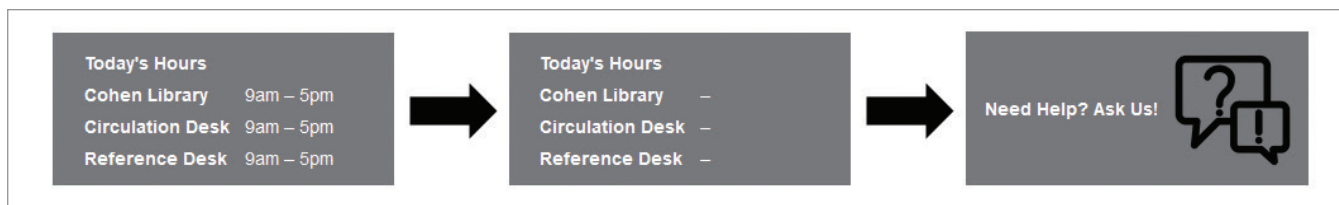
Figure 2: The City College of New York's hours widget display

Posting Our Hours

Both websites have prominent hours widgets that use Springshare's LibCal to power their displays. For CCNY, the widget was embedded in the site's header. With things in flux in mid-March, the widget remained prominent on the CCNY page. There was hesitation in changing the hours to Closed. Instead, hours were removed in LibCal, resulting in blank spaces instead of hours (see Figure 2). Unsurprisingly, this confused users, and in late March, CCNY removed the hours information entirely and replaced it with a reference icon and link to reference services.

Figure 3: Borough of Manhattan Community College's hours display

On the BMCC site, weekly hours are displayed on the side of every page (Figure 3), with the display designed to show the main library hours. When in-person services were suspended, BMCC added a separate location to LibCal, which was labeled "Online Help." This showed the hours that reference chat was available. While this cluttered the display, BMCC felt it was important to emphasize when users could get online help while the physical space was closed.

Enter Chat

Beyond providing clear service information, we also looked to continue to provide many of our regular services remotely. While some other libraries in the CUNY system were actively using chat reference prior to the pandemic shutdowns, neither BMCC nor CCNY were. At the start of March 2020, we suddenly found ourselves launching chat services from a distance.

BMCC Library had previously attempted to provide chat reference (which was eventually discontinued), and CCNY Libraries never had chat reference, lacking the staffers to support it. Fortunately for both libraries, LibChat was there as part of our respective Springshare LibApps subscriptions. Our position on March 10—"We have this thing that we can turn on if we need"—became a project on March 12 and 13 to configure chat, integrate it, and create training

for librarians. There was no time for a soft launch. We both went from zero reference chat to 100% reference chat in a matter of days, and by March 16, it was fully implemented on both sites.

At BMCC, the web librarian worked in consultation with the chief librarian and head of reference. While it required some tweaking to get things the way they wanted, chat was ultimately embedded into all pages of the website, as well as all libguides. A box proactively pops out after 30 seconds, asking if the user needs help (Figure 4). In off hours, the box instead prompts users to put in a ticket, which is then answered during normal hours.

At CCNY, since the head of reference also maintains the website, decisions about the service fell mostly to one person. Initially, the library decided to limit the number of pages on which chat was embedded due to a lack of staffers to cover it. Additionally, several CCNY sub-libraries wanted their own chat and wanted to monitor it themselves. Maintaining multiple chat options meant work was unnecessarily duplicated, and monitoring the chat was inequitably divided. Eventually, CCNY changed course. In August, it implemented a combined chat in which librarians and staffers from all sub-libraries pitched in, providing better user support.

Preparing for a Remote Fall

During the rapidly changing spring semester, the focus was on immediate changes that needed to be made. As the fall semester neared, it was clear things would continue remotely.
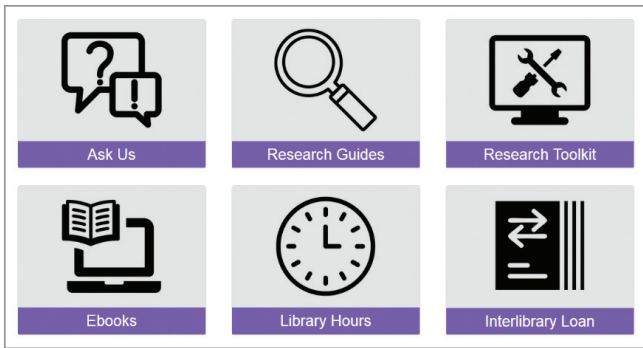

Figure 4: Chat pop-up

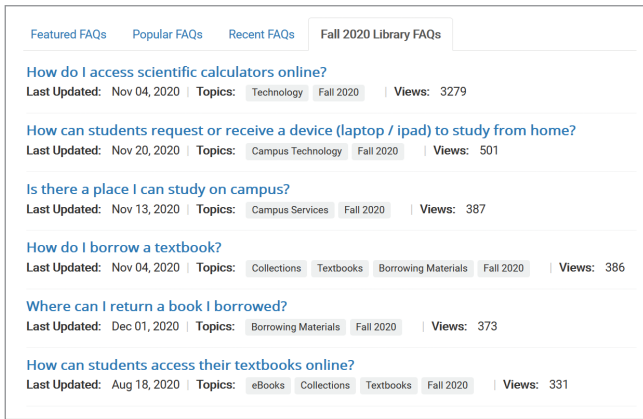Figure 5: Highlighting remote resources

Figure 6: FAQs

While in March, changes were made on-the-fly, we now had some time to plan for August. Although students that were with us in the spring were aware of the shift to remote services, we were worried that new students might be confused if they saw things on our sites that were not available. It was time to go through our sites and make more strategic changes and find things that had fallen through the cracks.

Providing Current Information

One of the simplest changes made on both sites was to hide pages, or sections of pages, that provided information about in-person services. For both libraries, nearly all pages that referenced physical services were hidden, including those for study rooms, print reserves, and computer access. Other pages were revised to emphasize digital content or to direct users to services that were available remotely, including document delivery and remote reference and instruction services. Additionally, CCNY reconfigured a main part of its homepage. In order to provide easy access to important services, the six Quick Links below the library's catalog search box were updated to emphasize remote resources, as shown in Figure 5.

Meanwhile, BMCC continued building its FAQ section, which had expanded significantly in the spring. Moving into fall, BMCC decided that it was a good time to make sure everything was current. At the same time, a custom tab was added to pull anything tagged with the topic "Fall 2020" into a single place. Figure 6 shows this layout, with

a sampling of FAQ entries. At this point, it was decided that instead of maintaining the service update post, users would be directed to the FAQs instead.

Conclusion

In the midst of constantly shifting health guidance and policy changes, keeping our library websites up-to-date was at times a challenge. The whirlwind shift to remote everything necessitated almost daily updates and made us evaluate how best to deliver important information. Despite our best efforts to keep up with changes as they happened, some things inevitably slipped through the cracks, only to be changed when brought to our attention later.

We have had to accept that while not all decisions made early on were good, they were the best we could do at the time. The ability to admit where we went wrong, adjust, and move forward has been key to our ongoing process of ensuring that our community's needs are being met. Finally, the necessity for rapid and responsive changes reminded us of the importance of library control over our websites. We have no doubt that our local control was key to our ability to provide both timely and relevant updates to our user community.

After a period of rapid change and almost daily updates, our websites are now more stable and have been meeting user needs. As site administrators, we're now confident in our ability to contend with future major service disruptions, should they occur. ■

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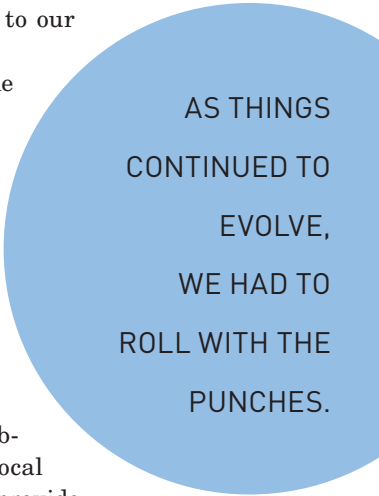
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