An Evaluation of the Accessibility of E-resources from Theological Library Websites

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Abstract

This study examines the accessibility of e-resources from the websites of theological libraries to discover if theological libraries are addressing the digital needs of their students by providing direct access to e-journals, recommended religious Internet resources, and digital libraries. Qualitative content analysis was used to evaluate the placement and terminology of e-resources on twenty-five theological library websites of faith-based institutions with primarily graduate/professional students. Findings revealed slightly more than half of these websites make e-resources available and are easily accessible through a quick navigational pathway. Terminology used was found to be diverse and varied. These findings suggest that theological library websites are attempting to meet the digital needs of their students. Further study is recommended to understand the impact, if any, these findings have on students.
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Introduction

Theological library websites act as the virtual front door to information for students, researchers, and faculty. The amount of information available in electronic form for theological and religious studies is growing. Many theological libraries, though, do not have adequate funding for the technical support and infrastructure necessary to increase access to e-resources. This paper reports the findings of an investigation into the accessibility of e-resources from theological library websites (TLW). Results are discussed and implications for practice and further research are suggested.

The accessibility of theological and religious studies e-resources concerns the following issues: website design and usability testing; availability of e-resources; and the barriers facing theological libraries. The study builds upon the literature of theological librarianship and seeks to fill a gap in the literature, namely qualitative analysis of TLW.

A library’s website is the virtual front door to a library’s resources. As more and more library users seek information online it has become increasingly important for libraries to not simply have a website, but to have a meaningful and usable website. In a collection of essays addressing theological librarianship and the Internet, Stover (2001) wrote specifically about the need for theological libraries to design websites that reflect their mission, purpose, and role within religious, academic communities. Keck (2001), in the same volume, expressed the importance of ‘opening the front door’ by providing a website that is easy to navigate and rich with information. These articles are rich in theory and provide guidance to theological librarians for designing websites.
Several studies have investigated the impact of design on website usability at academic libraries. Still (2001) studied the content of library websites in English speaking countries in hopes of devising a template for libraries designing websites. Her study found that the most common elements across all sites were links to the local OPAC and at least one database. Similarly Bower (2004) examined the websites of 41 health sciences libraries (HSL), but with an emphasis on best practice for navigational design. Bower’s study was motivated by the shared information seeking behavior of patrons of HSL. Bower’s research recommended the following navigational elements for all HSL home pages: bibliographic databases listed by title, e-books, e-journals, hours of operation, instruction or tutorials, news, and services.

Eliasen, McKinstry, Fraser, and Babbiitt (1997) conducted an experiment at the University of Washington library in order to better design the navigational menu of their networked system. Librarians had frequently reported that students had difficulty determining where to search for books and articles. Results showed that more descriptive text is necessary for undergraduates to navigate effectively and grouping resources by content therein positively affects navigation.

Bevilacqua’s 2005 case study examined the impact of e-journal organization on the discovery and use of e-journals by users in the humanities. The study concluded that providing multiple access strategies such as direct access via OPAC, and subject and A-Z listings from websites maximizes the navigational promotion of e-journals. Despite the library staff’s preference for the OPAC for discovery, no interview respondent mentioned finding links to e-journals from the OPAC.

Also of importance to this study is Dewey’s (1999) analysis of the ‘findability’ of links on the websites of university consortium member libraries. Dewey found that most library
services were hard to find because the links were embedded in their sites and descriptive terminology was confusing.

*Library Terms that Users Understand* (2006) is a clearinghouse site maintained by John Kupersmith for library website usability testing. Data collected here specifically addresses terminology used on library websites. Narrative descriptions from these studies suggest that terminology is a major factor in users’ ability to successfully access resources. Findings show natural language phrases, such as Find articles, effectively lead users to the correct resources.

While many people have broadly noted an increase in the number of new e-resources mounted on the web (Wilson, 2004; Griffiths, 2000), little attention has been given to the rise in religious and theological studies e-resources. In 1997 Gorton investigated the availability of theological information on the Internet. After conducting literature searches, Internet searches, and collecting data from questionnaires distributed to theological libraries in the United Kingdom, Gorton found that a large number of OPACs were available, special collections were inaccessible, and the amount of theological information available via the WWW was great. Gorton found that the greatest barrier to providing electronic access to information was funding.

Eidson also noted in 2001, after surveying the state of electronic journals in religious studies, that the cost to purchase, mount, maintain, or create e-resources has been a barrier to theological libraries. While there has been a recent boom, if not full acceptance, of e-journals and digital libraries, many scholars in the theological field have been slow to embrace these new formats (Eidson, 2001).

At this point it is necessary to define the term e-resources. The Online Dictionary of Library and Information Science defines e-resource as
material consisting of data and/or computer program(s) encoded for reading and manipulation by a computer by the use of a peripheral device directly connected to the computer, such as a CD-ROM drive, or remotely via a network, such as the Internet (AACR2). The category includes software applications, electronic texts, bibliographic databases, etc.

For the purposes of this paper e-resources will refer to Open Access Journals, electronic journals, external websites, and digital libraries. Three research questions guided this study of the accessibility of e-resources from TLW:

What is the navigational pathway to the e-resources?
What terminology is used to describe the e-resources?
How much library added value is provided, if any?

In order to answer these questions, TLW were individually evaluated using a research instrument created by the researcher.

Method

In order to determine the accessibility of e-resources from individual TLW qualitative content analysis was used. A research instrument was developed to record the navigational pathway to the e-resources, what terminology was used, and descriptive information about the resources.

A sample of 25 TLWs representing faith-based institutions with primarily graduate/professional students was selected for this study. A representative sample was initially created by selecting institutions with the Carnegie Basic class: Specialized/Faith: Special Focus Institutions--Theological seminaries, Bible colleges, and other faith-related institutions, focusing on institutions with an Enrollment Profile of exclusively graduate/professional. This
representative sample of 120 was then separated into American Theological Library Association (ATLA) member and non-member libraries. Random sampling was then used to select the final sample group.

Half of the sample libraries were ATLA members. The full-time equivalent enrollment ranged from 29 FTE to 1314 FTE. The average enrollment size was 264 FTE. The median was 158 FTE. Sixteen (64%) of the TLWs are members in a local, denominational, or school consortium.

Each TLW was evaluated during the course of one week in the month of July 2006. The research instrument consisted of five sections: demographics, navigation, terminology, library added value, and researcher’s notes or observations. Demographic information was culled from the Carnegie classification website, the Association of Theological Schools database, and the TLW. This data has already been used to describe the study sample.

Section two addressed the accessibility of e-resources. A modified breadcrumb trail adopted from Dunsmore’s 2002 study was used to record the pathway to e-resources. The term breadcrumb trail developed from the familiar tale of Hansel and Gretel who left a trail of bread so that they could remember where they had been. On the Internet a breadcrumb trail is sometimes visually represented to users as they navigate through a website. Beyond simply recording the path to the resources, the breadcrumb trail was used to tally the ‘distance’ from the TLWs homepage to the e-resource thus providing a metric measurement of accessibility.

Section three allowed for the study of the terminology employed. All terms used to describe the e-resources were recorded. The data collected in this section was used to further describe the accessibility of these resources.
Section four analyzed the amount of additional information provided by the TLW to describe the resource. This additional information is described as ‘library added value’ because it increases the implied content value of the resource. Any additional information about a resource may prove useful to the user where terminology is confusing or unclear. To facilitate analysis of the amount of information provided four descriptive categories were devised: no added information, short annotations such as dates and coverage, content review, and search help.

The final section provided the researcher the opportunity to record any data that did not fully fit within the other sections of the research instrument. This section was frequently used to record the name of a consortium, an obvious omittance of material (such as an OPAC), or record a unique resource not otherwise accounted for in this study.

Results

Evaluation of twenty-five TLW found that more than half (56%) of the TLW provided access to e-journals. Ease of navigation, defined as the average number of links, to any electronically accessible journal was found to be 2.77. Internet sites and digital libraries were as accessible as journals, frequently requiring only 3 links (averaging only 2.5 links).

Over a third (36%) of the evaluated libraries provided unique access to freely available open access journals from their websites. Navigation to these journals averaged 2.7 links, often only requiring 2. Interestingly just under half of the TLW with access to e-journals provided this access only through their Web-PAC. Most (72%) TLW provided access to electronic journals through a subscription service.

A greater number of TLW (60%) provided access to recommended Internet sites. The average number of links to these sites was 2.6. Navigation to these recommended sites most often required 3 links. Only one TLW provided access to an internally developed digital library.
The second focus of the study was on the terminology used to describe the e-resources. Of the various words, terms, and phrases used to describe electronically available journals, full text, online, and variations of ‘e-journal’ were the most common. Links to Internet sites were most often described as Internet resources, while there was no consistency in the naming of digital libraries.

The majority of TLW (83%) provided some amount of additional information regarding e-journals, primarily short descriptions of the content provided, e.g. dates covered. In comparison, 88% of TLW provided additional information about Internet sites and digital libraries. Although the majority of these were short descriptions, Internet sites and digital libraries were three times more likely to have extensive reviews of their content than e-journals.

Discussion

Slightly over half of the TLW provide access to e-journals. In light of the increasing student demand for e-journals and the amount of energy and funding being devoted to digitization of print journals this figure could be interpreted as low.

On the other hand, when e-journals are made available the navigational pathway is short, thereby increasing ease of access. The same is true for access to recommended Internet sites and digital libraries. Yet here again only a small majority of TLW provide access to these resources.

Bevilacqua in his study of e-journal organization found that multiple access strategies encouraged access to e-journals. This finding suggests that TLW only providing access to e-journals through the Web-PAC are not maximizing the navigational promotion of these resources. TLW should provide more than one access point to e-resources to encourage their finding by students.
The data suggests that TLW continue to emphasis print materials over electronically accessible materials. Great efforts are underway to increase the availability of e-resources for theological and religious studies, e.g. ATLASerials database, ATAL database of images, but still they remain under-represented on TLW. Perhaps greater outreach from ATLA to non-member libraries is necessary or perhaps libraries simply lack the funding or technological expertise to promote these materials.

The diversity of terminology used to describe the e-resources implies a hindrance to these materials. Many TLW provided additional information about the e-resources. Adding additional information increases the likelihood that users will find the information that they seek, thus increasing accessibility (Kupersmith, 2006). User usability studies should be pursued to substantiate or rebuff this hypothesis.

Eidson in his article on Electronic Journals in Religious Studies (2001) noted that e-journal accessibility would most likely be determined by the economic means of institutions. This study determined economic means by an institutions membership in ATLA. Only one member library provided no access to e-journals, whereas four non-member libraries did not. Further data would need to be gathered to fully support Eidson’s claim, such as ATLA membership costs and consortia membership costs.

Library websites will continue to play a large role in the promotion of library services especially electronic services. As the availability of these resources will continue to grow library websites need to play a greater role in their discovery. This study concludes that TLW, while providing some access to e-resources, should be encouraged to expand their promotion of e-resources. It is hoped that this study will contribute to the literature and application of theory in theological libraries.
References


Appendix

Research Instrument for Evaluating the Accessibility of E-resources from Theological Library Websites
### 1. Demographics:
Name of Institution: ________________________________
URL: _______________________________________________
Enrollment Size: ________________ Location: ________________
ATLA Member: ___________ Consortium Member: ___________

### 2. Navigation:
2a. E-journals: ________________________________
   OA journals: _________________________________________
   Subscription journals: _________________________________
2b. External Religious Internet Sites: ____________________________
2c. Internal digital libraries: _________________________________
2d. External digital libraries: _________________________________

### 3. Terminology:
3a. E-journals: ________________________________
3b. Open Access Journals: _____________________________
3c. Subscription Journals: _______________________________
3d. External Religious Internet Sites: ____________________________
3e. Internal digital libraries: _________________________________
3f. External digital libraries: _________________________________

### 4. Library Added Value:
4a. E-journals
   No added information
   Short annotations describing the content provided
   Review of content found in the resource
   How-to-use or search tips
4b. Other e-resources
   No added information
   Short annotations describing the content provided
   Review of content found in the resource
   How-to-use or search tips

### 5. Researcher’s Notes or Observation:
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An Evaluation of the Accessibility 15