

# Public Libraries in the Service of Culture

## Providing Cultural Information on the Websites of Major Hungarian Public Libraries

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### Abstract

It is clear to see that a library built for the general population is expected to serve new roles in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The most likely role taken up by the library is to live on as a cultural centre. The paper reviews the compliance of the websites of major Hungarian public libraries (county libraries) with expectations for cultural websites. While the paper takes more recent trends into consideration, the Minerva Quality principles served as a good starting point. The paper evaluates the websites in question after testing them in practice. The focus of the research is on the technical aspects of a functional cultural site, as well as considering what type of information is in the contents apart from information on the library's services. The focus is on evaluating the sites from the users' side. While local differences are always present, it is clear to see that most county libraries made efforts to suite the new requirements. The paper discusses major trends and anomalies as well, for the latter possible explanations and solutions are also mentioned.

### Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the current state of the websites of major Hungarian public libraries (county libraries) focusing on the provision of cultural information online. Naturally, libraries have long taken up the role of hosting cultural and social events. However, it is less taken for granted that the online presence of the public library should also contribute towards the dissemination of culture. It can be generally stated that the library websites are designed primarily to inform users of the library itself. In addition to this, other functions may include the advertisement of new documents in the library, the promotion of books and audio-visual documents, as well as the promotion of events occurring in the library.

The roles of the sites are not properly defined, perhaps it should not be defined. In the changing environment of online presence, flexibility in both form and content should be the most important point. The guidelines for a cultural website of the Minerva Editorial Board (2003, 03 30) are as follow:

- be *transparent*, clearly stating the identity and purpose of the website, as well as the organisation responsible for its management
- select, digitise, author, present and validate content to create an *effective* website for users
- implement quality of service policy guidelines to ensure that the website is *maintained* and updated at an appropriate level
- be *accessible* to all users, irrespective of the technology they use or their disabilities, including navigation, content, and interactive elements

- be *user-centred*, taking into account the needs of users, ensuring relevance and ease of use through responding to evaluation and feedback
- be *responsive*, enabling users to contact the site and receive an appropriate reply. Where appropriate, encourage questions, information sharing and discussions with and between users
- be aware of the importance of *multi-linguality* by providing a minimum level of access in more than one language
- be committed to being *interoperable* within cultural networks to enable users to easily locate the content and services that meet their needs
- be *managed* to respect legal issues such as IPR and privacy and clearly state the terms and conditions on which the website and its contents may be used
- adopt strategies and standards to ensure that the website and its content can be *preserved* for the long-term

These guidelines have been translated into a number of languages, including Hungarian and attempts have been made to popularize them, and apply them for the standardization of major cultural institute websites. Examples of studies concerning this are Szalóky, 2006 and Vida, 2006. The paper uses these guidelines as a starting point, it does not rely on them entirely, nor does it attempt to examine county library websites to minute detail. The overview given below is about a constantly changing world, with changing roles and opportunities. When reviewing and evaluating websites one must always consider the rapid developments and the appearance/disappearance of Internet phenomena.

### **Why county libraries?**

In the present paper a narrow selection of cultural institutions are placed into focus. The special position of county libraries comes from the fact that these are generally large enough to be able both financially and in questions of human resources to build and maintain a website. Also, the users of these libraries are more balanced with respect to demographical spread and population density. Since the capital city of Budapest is the most densely populated area, while it is also counts as a highly significant centre for culture and education, I have also included the metropolitan library on the same level with county libraries. Altogether the sample consists of 19+1 institutions from the 19 counties and the capital.

The functions of the Hungarian public library system is established by the CXL Act of 1997 (also called the Library Act). It establishes the role and functions of public libraries as well as the financial basis for them. This paper is concerned with the underlying principles that can be achieved by the properly set up public library system. These would be:

1. Free access to information for all Hungarian citizens
2. Accessibility for everyone
3. Ability to participate in a world wide information network

County libraries could build this latter network by adding information that focuses on their region, while providing general library services for the public. The metropolitan library has a special field of collection, sociology, while maintains Budapest information resources as well.

On the whole, county libraries (and the metropolitan library) provide the researcher with an analyzable set of data, that can be used in comparison. The issue of scattered public libraries of either specialized fields or restricted by the size of the city/town/village they service cannot be well measured by a common scale.

## Methods

During the research, I have viewed the library websites from the point of view of the ordinary user. The most widespread operation system is Microsoft Windows, while the most frequently used browsers in both personal and public computers are Internet Explorer and Mozilla Firefox, therefore these were the basis of testing during my research. For both I have attempted accessing the sites from both a regularly updated personal computer and less frequently maintained public computers. The only major difference turned out to be the lack of the flash plug-in in the latter.

The focus of my attention was on both form and content as it would appear for the visitor of the library's website. As the loose basis for my study I used the points set up by the Minerva 5 Working Group for cultural websites, however, as the exact application of the guidelines would not be practical in the span of the current paper, the formulation of my questions does not follow the points. The guidebook provided major points, which I have applied as well as it was possible for my current purposes. In certain elements the it is no longer properly applicable, e.g. the avoidance of stylesheets is unnecessary, or even impossible and is disregarded by the institutes discussed.

I have focused on the two important elements of an effective website: form and content. The results were measured in table format. In the questions on form, the subjective aspect of aesthetics have only been considered when it affected positively or negatively the usability of the given site. The questions divide into two subgroups:

- Usability
  - technical requirements (browsers, plug-ins, operation systems)
  - loading speed and the balance of graphical solutions and contents
  - flexibility (cross-browser compatibility, conforming to user settings)
  - ease of navigation (systematic, well-defined navigation system for the average user)

For the 1<sup>st</sup> only two options given: normal/[name of requirement]. The 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> were measured on a scale from 1(poor) to 3(good). The fourth was measured on a scale from 1(poor) to 4(excellent).

- Accessibility
  - For the visually impaired
  - For users not acquainted with Hungarian language

The results for the 1<sup>st</sup> concerned the presence of a special surface usable for those with visual imparities. This includes the possibility of the use of reading software (i.e. text-based interface, with clearly distinguished segments) and strong contrast for better viewing. However, in the previous section I have also considered the use of explanatory texts (alt texts) in addition to graphics as a form of alternative to the special site. The 2<sup>nd</sup> question is concerned with the alternative languages used on the site. Each language can be further subdivided by the type of information provided in it to: basic, advanced and full. However, as we will see, only the first two are actually used, although additional information would be ideal, these sites are in accordance with the Minerva guideline expectations.

The contents of the site were considered without the expected information generally present on library websites, that is, opening hours, fees, information about the library's history and present structure. However, seemingly obvious questions, like the promotion of real-life cultural events were actually checked. The following points are to be discussed under contents:

- IRL (in real life) event promotion
- Portal functions (i.e. links section)
- E-library (digitalized publications of full-text documents)
- Other (databases, bibliographies, etc)

The first three questions are answered in yes/no pairs, while the in the 4<sup>th</sup> the found data is listed. While in a closer look the 1<sup>st</sup> question may seem irrelevant, the regularity of updates can very well be measured by it, as well as the involvement of the library in the promotion of culture (though there is no exclusivity, other resources may compensate for occasional lacks in function)

In addition to this, two more points were raised, with regards to interactions between the library and its users, concerning two-way or open discussion opportunities.

- The presence of forum/guestbook
- E-mail addresses

As expected, the latter is always present. The effectiveness of the mailing function is not evaluated in this paper, however research has recently been published. In the case of the 1<sup>st</sup> question, the type of open discussion ground is named.

## **Findings**

### *Form*

Based on the data located in Table 1, the following can be said about the library websites. With a single exception, there are no special technical requirements. The sites are built using stylesheets and basic javascript. Although discouraged by the Minerva guidelines, stylesheets have become so widespread, every browser shows these sites without issues, while the same can be said about the javascript based menus, that are, in their current form, easily handled, without any additional plug-ins or software. The only exception among the libraries uses flash-based menu, which does require a plug-in, usually found in browsers, however, public computers are not always regularly updated, and the plug-in may be missing. This was the case with the computer I have attempted to open the site with. Also, the sites are compatible with both Mozilla Firefox and Internet Explorer, with the exception of certain features of stylesheets (for example the customizable scrollbar feature in IE not present in Firefox). The sites can be properly used in both.

Partly due to the spreading of broadband Internet connection, there were no issues at all with loading speed. The other reason behind this was the fact that the public library websites do not have heavy graphics contents, or audio-visual applications beyond basic aesthetic points. This enhances the visibility of the real contents, while produces an overall good impression as the sites are easy to load and ready for use.

On the other hand, what may cause problems is the navigation system. Unlike the unequivocal functionality revealed by the results for the first three questions, the 4<sup>th</sup> produced more mixed results. According to the Minerva guidelines, navigation on the site should be obvious, clear and informative, with respect to the current position of the viewer as well as the location of the homepage. From the 20 libraries, 4 had no issues at all, providing stabile menu, possibility to return to the homepage, while also being well-structured and aesthetically appealing. 8 proved overall good enough for average use, also being informative, although less easy to see through, not being well ordered or concise.

While there were no unusable navigation systems, the rest had more functionality lacking. In most cases the problem was the difficulty to find any information not directly located on the homepage. The complexity of the site should in these cases be counterbalanced by an easy to use sitemap. Unfortunately, in the case of the library website that needs it the most, the metropolitan library, the sitemap is hard to use, and mixes pages only accessible to library personnel with pages for the library user.

The issue of providing access to the visually impaired is far from being solved yet. Two of the libraries offer special sites for this group. The metropolitan library's site is well set up, often it is even easier to handle than the standard graphical site, and also includes a detailed navigation guide for the use of reading software Jaws for Windows. Both sites offer special catalogue search. What they both lack are event promotions and other, not strictly library contents. As a substitute, almost every library uses mostly text-based sites or at least contains alt texts for the graphics. Although this is not always sufficient, I did not have the opportunity to test these using the appropriate software, thus it awaits for further studies.

Language problems are hard to test. There are no available statistics concerning the visitors of the library websites focusing on their spoken languages. However, as part of an international information system, library sites should be available not only in Hungarian. When there are other available languages, they do contain information about services. As expected, the most frequently used language is English, with 7 libraries. Among these, 3 also provide information in German. Of the 3, 2 also have French versions. Other languages are not used. It is interesting to note that the metropolitan library only has English version, though it also provides the best alternative to the Hungarian site.

A problematic point brought up during the research was the question of terminology. Hungarian computer terminology is not yet stable, thus, expressions referring especially to the links section are extremely varied. This may cause problems while the average user is trying to find it.

### *Content*

The questions concerning contents can be seen in Table 2. Promotion of events physically hosted by the library or otherwise associated with it are also generally present, with only two exceptions, where one contains links to sites promoting such events. Also, nearly every library functions as a portal, leading to informative sites, primarily:

- Other library sites, shared catalogues
- Search engines
- Public interest sites (travelling information, phone books, etc)
- Local interest sites (local authorities, educational institutes, portals, etc.)
- Other cultural sites (theatres, arts sites, digital libraries, bookshops, etc.)

The majority of the sites (12) also contains digitalized works. These contain uncopyrighted, text-based documents, full-text journals (especially historical, no longer under copyright) and graphical documents, such as postcards, pictures that contain local references. The metropolitan library has a special field of collection, serving as the national special library of sociology. The digital collection contains documents for this function of the library.

There are also elements of the sites that cannot be properly categorized. 16 sites also contain other sections, that are relevant for the current paper. 8 of these contain specific information on the region the library belongs to, historical, cultural data, links, documents, selected

bibliographies, etc. Surprisingly few libraries offer information that concern the different ethnic minorities (3), while only one provides minorities with a well-built subsection, containing specifically selected information and links. Other, interesting tasks undertaken by the library website's maintainers include:

- Digital archives of an audio magazine
- Maintenance of regional, cultural and ethnic websites not part of the library
- The biographical database of the scientists of the region
- Visual arts link collection for the famous Szentendre artists
- A blog, offering not only offering information on library events and documents, but also providing a forum of open discussion for the users and the librarians.

While there are patterns that show the importance of local information collection, it is not solely dominant. The levels of information provision are highly variable, ranging from links and local relevance bibliographies to regional portals and digital document collections.

The communication between the library and the users is based on personal communication<sup>1</sup>, offering in every case e-mail addresses for departments. On the other hand, only 5 guestbooks, 2 forums and a blog serves as a community ground for users and librarians. It is also important to note, that the users' habits are also responsible for the low number of such attempts. The existing ones are not too much used, although the forum of the metropolitan library seems to show more activity from both sides.

## Discussion

While the information on the formal parts of library websites is rather obvious, the contents are more in need of improvements. The form as such is, in the majority of cases, rather acceptable, though the clarification of navigation elements, the addition of descriptive texts to graphics are always to be kept in mind. Perhaps the reason behind the successful sitebuilding is that this task does not require too much financial input, with the possibility to use open source software in all tasks, while the general guidelines are clear on the subject. The usual "dos" and "do nots" of website design apply and are, in most cases, kept in mind. Where the real difficulties begin is the point design meets contents.

The occasional confusion caused by navigational elements is to be sought in the lack of proper ordering, more than in the actual design issues. There should be a clear set of guidelines followed concerning terminology, arrangement and subdivisions for menu points. This may or may not be centrally unified, however, it is better to have one set of rules than expecting the user to have the experience to figure out the ways each site functions.

Also, it would be a desirable addition if special sites were set up for the visually impaired, also containing additional information also provided on the graphical site. The additional use of foreign languages may be another improvement, however, it would be worth to first conduct a research about the type of information to be provided and the languages needed. The creation of pages for minorities in their mothertongues may also be worth the consideration.

The contents of the library websites stand well on their own, while it is not always clear how they could be discussed as a group or network. Special contents are always improving.

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<sup>1</sup> A study discussing e-mail information providing for users, also dealing with the same set of libraries can be found in Takács, 2006 (in Hungarian).

Digitalizing works with expired copyrights is happening gradually, and are added to current collections. Part of these belong to the collections of libraries, and are featured on the sites.

What could be focused on more actively is the building of regional information sites, historical, and current. The present data on the observed sites show promising starts in this direction. As the library is an important cultural institution, it is more than relevant to use the library website for promoting and providing access to, information belonging to the diverse field of culture.

### Conclusion

While the presentation of county library websites is far from being complete, this largely preliminary study can be set as the background for further discussions. As the Internet is developing and building up its set of rules, so are the cultural institutions changing in their online presence. Thus, every research shows only one stage in a development instead of the stagnant, fixed existence of these pages. Constant progress and improvement are the requirements for a successful information providing site, together with cooperation between the concerned institutions as well as the involvement of the ordinary user in the development process.

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- Takács, D. (2006, 3). Megyei könyvtárak információszolgáltatása. Könyvtári Levelező/lap. Retrieved November 15, 2007, from <http://www.vein.hu/library/iksz/serv/klf/full0603/03-07.pdf>

### County libraries

- Budapest. From: <http://fszek.hu/>
- Bács-Kiskun – Kecskemét. From: <http://www.kjmk.hu/>
- Baranya – Pécs. From: <http://www.baralib.hu/baralib/index.php>
- Békés – Békéscsaba. From: <http://www.bmk.iif.hu/>
- Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén – Miskolc. From: <http://www.rfmllib.hu/>
- Csongrád – Szeged. From: <http://www.sk-szeged.hu/>
- Fejér – Székesfehérvár. From: <http://www.vmmk.hu/>
- Győr-Moson-Sopron – Győr. From: <http://www.kkkmk.hu/>
- Hajdú-Bihar – Debrecen. From: <http://www.hbmk.hu/>
- Heves – Eger. From: <http://www.brody.iif.hu/>
- Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok – Szolnok. From: <http://www.vfmk.hu/>
- Komárom-Esztergom – Tatabánya. From: <http://www.jamk.hu/>
- Nógrád – Salgótarján. From: <http://www.bbmk.hu/>

Pest megye – Szentendre. From: <http://www.pmk.hu/>  
 Somogy megye – Kaposvár. From: <http://www.mvkkvar.hu/>  
 Szabolcs-Szatmár – Nyíregyháza. From: <http://www.mzsk.hu/>  
 Tolna megye – Szekszárd. From: <http://www.igyuk.hu/>  
 Vas megye – Szombathely. From: <http://www.bdmk.hu/>  
 Veszprém megye – Veszprém. From: <http://www.ekmk.hu/>  
 Zala megye – Zalaegerszeg. From: <http://www.dfmk.hu/>

Table 1.

Library by county name	Usability				Accessibility	
	Requirements	Load	Flexibility	Naviga-tion	Visually impaired	Language
<i>Budapest</i>	Normal	3	3	2 (com-plexity)	Yes (inform)	English (advanced)
<i>Bács-Kiskun</i>	Normal	3	3	3	None	English, German, French, (advanced)
<i>Baranya</i>	Normal	3	3	3	None	English (basic)
<i>Békés</i>	Normal	3	3	2 (popup)	None	None
<i>Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén</i>	Normal	3	3	4	None	None
<i>Csongrád</i>	Normal	3	3	2 (no alt texts)	None	English, German, French, (basic)
<i>Fejér</i>	Normal	3	3	2	None	None
<i>Győr-Moson-Sopron</i>	Normal	3	3	3	None	None
<i>Hajdú-Bihar</i>	Normal	3	3	4	None	English (basic)
<i>Heves</i>	Normal	3	3	3	None	English (v. basic)
<i>Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok</i>	Normal	3	3	2 (hard to handle)	None	None
<i>Komárom-Esztergom</i>	Normal	3	3	2 (hard to handle)	Yes (basic)	None
<i>Nógrád</i>	Normal	3	3	3	None	None
<i>Pest</i>	Flash	3	2	2	None	None
<i>Somogy</i>	Normal	3	3	3	None	None
<i>Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg</i>	Normal	3	3	3	None	None
<i>Tolna</i>	Normal	3	3	3	None	None
<i>Vas</i>	Normal	3	3 (minor viewin g issue)	2	None	English, German, (basic)
<i>Veszprém</i>	Normal	3	3	4	None	None
<i>Zala</i>	Normal	3	3	4	None	None



Table 2.

Library By county name	Contents				Interaction	
	"IRL"	Portal	E-library	Other	Forum / guestbook	E-mail
<i>Budapest</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes (Sociology)	Databases	Forum	+
<i>Bács-Kiskun</i>	Yes	Yes	No	Minorities, Local interests	Guestbook	+
<i>Baranya</i>	Yes	Yes	No	PDF info & bibliography	Guestbook	+
<i>Békés</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes (Local)	Minorities, Local interests	No	+
<i>Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes (Local)	Local interests	Guestbook	+
<i>Csongrád</i>	Yes	No	Yes (Local)	No	No	+
<i>Fejér</i>	No	Yes	No	Local Interests	No	+
<i>Győr-Moson-Sopron</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes (Local)	Databases	Guestbook	+
<i>Hajdú-Bihar</i>	Yes	Yes	No	Arts & humanities information	Guestbook	+
<i>Heves</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes (Local)	None	No	+
<i>Jász-Nagykunszolnok</i>	Yes	No	Yes	Blog	Blog	+
<i>Komárom-Esztergom</i>	Yes	Yes	No	Very basic, for minorities	No	+
<i>Nógrád</i>	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	+
<i>Pest</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes (Mostly local)	Artists (local)	No	+
<i>Somogy</i>	Yes	Yes	No	None	No	+
<i>Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg</i>	Yes	Yes	No	Archive of Online Audio Magazine	Forum	+
<i>Tolna</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes (few)	Maintaining other sites	No	+ also Skype
<i>Vas</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes (Local)	Regional Scientific Who Is Who	No	+
<i>Veszprém</i>	No (links)	Yes	No	Local (data, bibliogr.)	No	+
<i>Zala</i>	Yes	Yes	No	Bibliographies, Local interests	No	+