Proper Use of Web Design for Small Archives
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Introduction
Today, it does seem as if most archives have their own website. This development is important in that it provides archives, especially those related to a more niche topic, a greater possibility to have their information found by the public. However, many of these websites can be enhanced. Web design when used correctly can make websites for smaller archives more inviting, drawing more people to intact with both the website and the institution it represents. At the same, time design can allow people who might not be able to access a website through conventional means the ability to reach the information that archives possess. Still, in undertaking this process the person in charge of making design enhancements must be aware that making changes in the wrong way can damage a website more than help it.

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Advantages of Good Web Design

• Draws in and engages users through slightly noticeable changes
• Makes information on the website about the institution easier to find and access.

Web design could seem like a daunting thing, especially when used in reference to a website for an institution that is not focused on technology. However, using programing in moderation through the use of things like Cascading Style Sheets (CSS), can help an institution make sure that the website for its archive does everything it can to present its story both effectively and compellingly, while also making sure that the data they wish to present is unaffected.

For instance, programing inserted into CSS can create slightly noticeable changes, which engage the user without overwhelming them. An example of this could be a slow scroll through various pictures from a collection. The Frances E. Willard House Museum and Archive used such a feature to both engage their users and expose them to a greater range of what is available in the archive on their website: [https://franceswillardhouse.org](https://franceswillardhouse.org). Additional features were also added. On the side bar their website presents buttons to donate and volunteer. Further down on the left side the website connects to the @franceswillard Twitter page, an account run by a member which humorously connects the thoughts and activities of
Frances Willard to the modern day and also details events that are going on at the Frances E. Willard House. All of these features give the website dynamism, and allow the user multiple ways to interact, while also showing potential visitors what the institutions is about and the items it holds. These elements give the website a welcoming feel and allows people of all interest levels, whether they are academics or not, an ability to interact with the material, which is the ultimate goal of an archive.

The main page both draws the user in and clearly identifies what the archive does and how the public can interact with them. Once this has occurred, the tabs at the top of the page give the user clear directions so that they can continue to delve into the information that the website holds in whatever way they please.

All of the web design decisions that were discussed were both easy to implement and helped the Frances E. Willard House forward their mission to tell the story of an extraordinary woman. Other small archives can use similar tactics with tweaks that correspond to the information held by their archive to further their message and make the users more aware of what is available and how they as the public can participate with said institution.

More examples of how one can use CSS to enhance the design of their website can be found at http://www.w3schools.com/w3css/default.asp if so desired.

Ways to Use Design to Increase Accessibility

All types of people want to use archives and find information, including those with various disabilities. Since the goal of an archive is to increase the spread of information it should therefore be anticipated that people of various distinct needs will visit these sites, and accommodations should be planned accordingly.

For instance many people who have problems with various sight issues, which can be easily compensated for through conscientious web design. In the case of many archives the people visiting their website will be older patrons who are interested in information. Given that eyes deteriorate over time, an elder visitor to the site will have a difficult time reading smaller print. When using CSS, it is easy to change both font size and style allowing for writing on ones website to be presented in a way that is easier to read both aesthetically and in terms of size. Resources like Google fonts (https://fonts.google.com) or the W3 school (http://www.w3schools.com/cssref/css_websafe_fonts.asp) display various web safe fonts that can be used across browsers. These sites provide an easy way for one to see both how their font will look and make sure that is will be widely compatible before it is put onto a site. Relatively quick steps like these make it simple to make a site accessible to many people.

Additionally, there are sites such as http://paletton.com/
which provide the ability to check if the colors that have been chosen for a website are problematic for color blind people. Taking precautions like this before entering color decisions into CSS will prevent any people with color visibility issues from having a problem interacting with the site.

Even more complex problems for people with disabilities such as the inability to hear or see can also be addressed. The insertion of an alternate text into a CSS along with each image for instance, provides someone using an electronic reader to experience a site the chance to understand the message that is being conveyed through these images. Doing so gives seeing-impaired people the opportunity to more fully interact with the information that is presented, further exposing what the archive has to offer. Similarly, the inclusion of transcripts of any audio files that may be included in a site will give those who cannot hear the ability to discover the information these files present. Such transcripts can also be helpful to hearing people who want to further dissect what is heard in an audio file.

All of the changes detailed in this section are easy to implement through the use of CSS. On the website, http://www.karlgroves.com/2013/09/05/the-6-simplest-web-accessibility-tests-anyone-can-do Karl Groves gives examples of easy ways to test to make sure that a website will be accessible. Doing tests like these and taking a few extra, simple steps can vastly increase the accessibility of a website and allow an archive to further facilitate the spread of information.

To learn more about making your website accessible I would highly recommend looking at http://www.w3.org/standards/webdesign/accessibility, which describes the best practices people can follow in this regard.

Potential Problems Created Through Bad Design

• Design becomes too busy and jarring to the user and causing them to disengage.
• Website is not compatible with various types of servers.
• Gives users little indication of how things connect or how to utilize the website.

Just as good design can engage people with a site and the information it presents, bad design can do the opposite. One of the biggest things to avoid when designing a site is to over design it. Using Cascading Style Sheets does make it easy to put things into your website, but that does not mean that someone should just put in everything that they can with impunity. Remember that the key to engaging a user is slightly noticeable changes. Going overboard with multiple design elements can be both distracting and jarring to the user. Instead of drawing the user in, you push them away. This is detrimental as it both
prevents people from interacting with the archive whether that is through research, donation or volunteering. In the end the information being preserved at an archive is of little use if it is not being used, so bad web design is essential to avoid so that smaller archives do not discourage users from interacting with their institution. With this in mind, a web designer must make sure that everything that is put in a website has a purpose. Moderation is the name of the game in web design.

Additional problems can be created through the under designing of a website. A major issue that can occur is that design decisions will only work on some browsers and not others. For instance some types of fonts will work on Safari but not Firefox. Issues like these limit how many people can easily access the information in the way that it was intended to be seen. As stated before, using sources like Google fonts can help assure that the fonts chosen are compatible along all servers negating this issue. Accessibility of this kind is not what naturally comes to mind when people from non-technology based fields go about creating a website. But if these things are not thought about as a website is put together it can cause problems.

Another issue that can arise is that aspects of the website are not made distinct enough to direct the user to the information that they want or show them how to engage with it. The W3 schools at http://www.w3.org/WAI/demos/bad/ shows examples of how this can effect the usability of a website. The eye is not given a visible hierarchy and so it cannot process what to click on or how things connect. The site therefore becomes un navigable and the information that you are trying to forward gets lost because it is not clear what the user should do in order to find the information that they want.

All of these potential issues must be kept in mind when a website is being created in order for it to work as intended.

Conclusion

Websites can be a great thing for smaller archives, helping them get their message out and spread information, which is their ultimate goal. The person in control of web design has to understand what message they want to portray and what data should be stressed to the public. With this in mind design elements used in moderation with the help of things like Cascading Style Sheets and minimal programming can elevate an archive’s web presence relatively easily. As long as the person in control of the web design keeps the end user in mind, a great asset can be developed. I would highly recommend that any small archive look into improving the web design of their institution’s website. Doing so will create a more welcoming first impression to potential visitors and open up opportunities for more people to explore the information found in these spaces.


“Paletton Live Colorizer.” Paletton, http://paletton.com/#uid=1000u0kllllaFw0g0qFqFg0w0aF. Accessed 3 December 2016.

