

# What Is a Digital Branch, Anyway?

## Abstract

*In order to build a digital branch, we first need to know what a digital branch is. How does it differ from a website? This chapter of “Building the Digital Branch: Guidelines for Transforming Your Library Website” gives a brief history of library websites and discusses how library websites and the traditional physical library combine to form the concept of a digital branch.*

## The Purpose of This Report

Library websites have been around for about fifteen years. During that time, library websites and the nature of the Internet itself have changed considerably. These sites started to appear in the mid-nineties. Dan Lester, librarian emeritus at Boise State University, described those early days: “Boise State University Library had a website in the spring of 1994. . . . It ran under Windows 3.1 on my desktop on a 486, 24/7, and was able to easily handle the load in those days.”<sup>1</sup> I also started building websites around that time.

The list of what has changed in the past fifteen years could fill a library. For starters, coding languages have multiplied. Back then, I learned HTML. Now, Web developers also learn CSS, JavaScript, PHP, Ajax, and Ruby on Rails (and those are just a few).

Interaction has also changed. The “old Web” is described in the definition of *World Wide Web* on Wikipedia as a place where “one can view Web pages that may contain text, images, videos, and other multimedia and navigate between them using hyperlinks.”<sup>2</sup> The old Web was primarily about finding information and navigating to other webpages. Hence, it was fondly referred to as the Information Superhighway.

Today, people driving down that road have discovered communities along the way. With the emergence of Web 2.0, people can not only find information, they can also often interact directly with the person who provided that information. They can add their own thoughts to the content created by that person. They can remix that original content into something else entirely. The superhighway has become more like the old, winding Route 66, with many points of interest. Someone might want to pull off the road and poke around or chat for a while. The new Web allows that type of interaction.

That’s where the idea of a digital branch comes into play. A modern library can exist in two places—in a building and online. When this idea is taken to the next step, people can now hold conversations with librarians in the building and online. People can hold meetings in the physical library and in the online library.

If you would like your digital branch to become more of a destination, read on—we’ll take that journey together. In this issue of *Library Technology Reports*, you will find the following:

The concept of a digital branch library is defined and explained in this chapter, “What Is a Digital Branch, Anyway?” In chapter 2, “Gathering Information,” I discuss how my library, Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library, gathered information from customers and staff about what they thought a digital branch library should do. Next, in the third chapter, we examine “The Planning Process.”

The process of building the site is discussed in chapter 4, “Building the Branch.” Chapter 5, “What to Do Once Your Site Is Built,” discusses how to work with staff on content for the digital branch. Your patrons will want to add their voices to the conversation, and that’s the focus of chapter 6, “Creating Community at the Digital Branch.”

Finally, chapter 7, “Planning for the Next Phase,” focuses on our next steps in Topeka and relates them to potential next steps for your library. You’ll also find a resources section that lists tools in a variety of different media to help you get started.

## The Digital Branch Defined

In order to build a digital branch, we first need to know what a digital branch is. How does it differ from a website? In this chapter, we’ll discuss library websites and the traditional physical library, then mix the two together to arrive at a description of a digital branch.

## What’s a Website?

Traditionally, a library website has been, well, traditional (which is weird to say about a website, isn’t it?). Think about it—many library websites, both visually and structurally, were built last century. Their model was based on what is now a dated, almost “traditional” structural and visual model of website design.

Those older model websites focused on providing information *about* the library rather than on providing actual online services (see figure 1). There wasn’t a lot of interaction on the average website in the nineties. Many library sites had catalog links, pointers to other websites, and information about the library—its history, what services it offered, and when it was open. In fact, most of the tools we currently use to interact online with people and websites were not yet available.

Some library websites are still operating under that older, more traditional model of Web design and structure (see figure 2). There’s no online collection on the website. No meetings, chat, or other types of interaction happen online. There is rarely a staff person or staff group whose main job is to oversee the site. There certainly aren’t “digital branch workers,” which we’ll discuss later. The traditional library website exists primarily to guide people to the physical building and to the services that can be found inside the library.

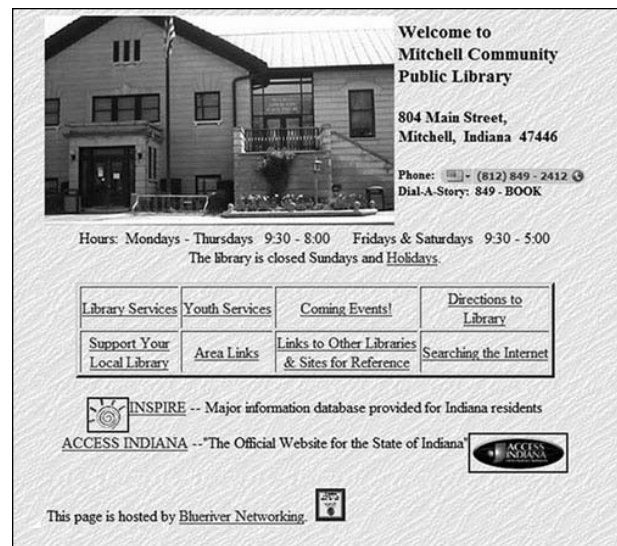
## Traditional Libraries

Traditionally, the “real stuff” a library does happens at that library’s physical locations—the main buildings and branch libraries. Let’s turn our gaze to the branch library. As you probably know, a traditional physical library consists of at least four things: a building, a staff, a collection, and a community. Bear with me as we briefly touch on each of these aspects. While much of this information will

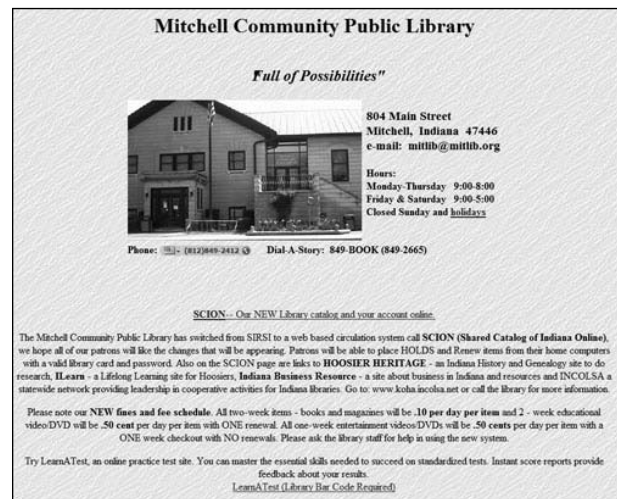
not be new to you, it will provide a valuable model when we consider the digital branch.

## Building

In order to have a library, you generally need a permanent building (see figure 3). With that building comes a great deal of maintenance and upkeep. Anyone who has ever owned a house knows that, right? If the roof develops a leak, you have to fix it. If the carpet gets dirty, you have to clean it. A library building of any size is a complex creature. There are few library classes (if any) that teach budding librarians how to install new shelving, how to hire a plumber, how to pick appropriate carpet for a multipurpose room, or how to create useful signage.



**Figure 1**  
Library website from 1999.



**Figure 2**  
Library website from 2009.



**Figure 3**  
The author in front of a library building.

### Budget

Of course, even the smallest library needs some money and a plan for how to spend it in order to function. You need money allocated to acquisitions, utilities, and salaries, to name just a few things. As we'll discuss later in this report, one of the nice things about a library website is that it can be done inexpensively, even if the library is unable to devote significant financial resources to it.

### Staff

A traditional library of any size will need a diverse staff (see figure 4), including graduate-degree-holding librarians and maintenance workers who actually know how to keep the building in working order. There are one or more administrators who are responsible for the big pic-



**Figure 4**  
Library staff.



**Figure 5**  
Library collection.

ture. A library needs people who can keep collections on the shelves, as well as front-line staffers—people who can keep patrons happy. These staffers answer questions at a busy reference desk while kids are screaming, the printer's jammed, and someone just spilled coffee on the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

### Collection

Most library collections (see figure 5) are fairly complex. At the public library where I work, we have everything from comic books to price guides about those comic books, novels, great nonfiction books, databases, and magazines. We have a vast array multimedia content, including videos in many formats and music galore. If a public library in a medium-sized American city has this much variety, one can only imagine just how complex a collection can get.

### Community

Many libraries offer meeting facilities, either formally or informally (see figure 6). For example, at Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library, you can visit the library café and have a fine latte with a friend. Staff members interact with customers, involving themselves in the local community. Customers interact with us by asking questions or attending an event or program. We're a major meeting facility in Topeka, so local organizations hold thousands of meetings every year at our facility.



**Figure 6**  
Patrons using a meeting room at the Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library.

## What Is a Digital Branch?

Now that we know what a traditional library website is and have a description of a physical branch library, we can ask this question: just what is a *digital branch*? When I talk about digital branches, I like to remind people that the “digital” part is somewhat arbitrary. A branch is a branch and must have certain properties, whether it is physical or virtual. A digital branch is a branch library, delivered digitally, on the Web. It offers much more than a traditional library website in many ways, because a digital branch has real staff, a real building, a real collection, and real community happening on and around it.

### Real Staff

Obviously, the digital branch needs some type of Web staff. There must be someone to build and maintain the site and public services staff to interact with customers. These people do typical public service librarian jobs, such as answering questions, but they do it using instant messaging, e-mail, and other means of online communication.

Someone needs to respond to comments made on a library’s blog or to the library’s Twitter account. Someone also needs to oversee the online library community (much as a branch manager would oversee the physical library community).

### Real Collection

A digital branch also has an actual collection that patrons can interact with. A branch is a branch only if it contains materials for patrons to use. With a digital branch, patrons can go beyond mere reading and can interact with reading materials. For example, they can check out and reserve books from the catalog. They can read e-books online. They can listen to and download audiobooks. They can read, browse, and search for periodical articles.

But we don’t need to stop with the whole reading thing, do we? After all, this is the Web! These days, our libraries can offer librarian-created content such as blogs, videos, and podcasts. This content is important for four reasons:

1. The content is focused on helping patrons find and use our materials in a better way.
2. It allows library staff to display a bit of organizational personality. A video explaining how to use a database, for example, can be made in a fun way that still teaches the skill.
3. The librarian has turned into the author. Traditionally, libraries have housed other authors’ materials and helped patrons navigate through that mound of knowledge. Now, with the advent of user-generated content, we too can write for our patrons. How cool is that?
4. We can even go one step further and allow our patrons to join in the fun—with patron-created content. Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library is doing that by allowing teens to post videos to our YouTube account and book reviews to our teen blog. There are many other ways to allow patron participation. This is really not much different from the way some libraries collect books written by local authors—it’s all patron-created content.

### Real Building

With the digital branch, we also have a very real destination that we need to maintain in order for it to grow and change. This digital destination is the equivalent of the traditional library’s physical building.

Think about it this way—when people want to buy a book, they can visit the local bookstore, or they can visit Amazon. When they want to buy a shirt, they can visit the mall, or they can head to Zappos.com. In the same way, when they want to visit your library, they should have options. They should be able to visit you in person, or online at your digital branch.

A digital destination has many similarities to a library building. There are clearly laid out places to do things, just as in the library building. For example, your building probably has a children’s section, and your website should also have a children’s section.

At your digital branch, patrons can interact with you in a way that is similar to the interactions when they visit your library in person. Just as you might have a suggestion box at a physical branch, patrons can make comments on blog posts at a digital branch, or they can send a question via e-mail, text message, or instant messaging. At a physical branch, patrons can reserve materials and par-

ticipate in library programs. At a digital branch, patrons can subscribe to parts and pieces of your content using RSS feeds or attend a virtual book club using a forum you have created.

## Real Community

The concept of community is crucial to any library. Without a community to serve, a library has no reason to exist. In a physical library building, your patrons have many ways to interact with library staff and each other, thus continuously building the reciprocal relationship between the library and the community. At your digital branch, they can do many of those same things:

- *People can hang out there.* Patrons can hang out at the library's digital branch by frequenting blog comments, by friending and then interacting with the library on social networks, or by attending book clubs and visiting forums.
- *The digital branch is a real place to attend meetings.* You can set up digital-based meeting spaces. You can offer slideshows, share Google documents, or give a LiveMeeting presentation to your local business users and teach them how to use a hot new business resource owned by your library. You can also set up video or screencast tutorials or hold an event in Second Life.
- *The digital branch is a real place to interact with library staff.* This is also a type of community activity. When patrons walk up to the reference desk to ask a question, they are playing an active role in the library's community. This can happen digitally via blog comments, IM, and text reference services; comments and discussion groups in social networks; and more casual questions via a status update service like Twitter.

## The Digital Branch Allows a Choice

The coolest thing about a digital branch is that you give your patrons a choice about how they interact with you. For instance, they can go to the library by simply visiting your website. Or, through tools like RSS feeds or outpost sites like Facebook, they can have the library come to them. That's something a traditional library model really can't duplicate.

## What's Next?

The rest of this issue is devoted to examining how to build a digital branch and how to turn your current website into a digital branch. I plan to touch on quite a few things, including these:

- *Gathering information*—how to collect the background you'll need before deciding what to build
- *Planning*—how to use the gathered information to figure out what to build
- *Building*—how to build the site, including many details to consider and decisions to make
- *Preparing for interaction*—how to decide what types of content and interactions your digital branch should include

## Notes

1. Dan Lester, "Please Help SLJ: Milestones in Library Technology," Oct. 5, 1999, WEB4LIB, <http://lists.webjunction.org/wjlists/web4lib/1999-October/028842.html> (accessed June 20, 2009).
2. "World Wide Web," Wikipedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World\\_Wide\\_Web](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Wide_Web) (accessed June 20, 2009).