President's Column

Friends Don't Let Friends Use LibGuides

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On September 1st, 2014 my tenure as the Association of College and Research Libraries Louisiana Chapter President will come to an end (reminder: we changed the bylaws to have our fiscal year end and begin in September instead of July to match ACRL national), and thus this will be my last President's Column submission. I'd like to thank Treasurer Lindsey Reno and Secretary Gena Chattin, whose terms are also now ending, for their work and input over these past two years. This *Codex* journal still remains the greatest of ACRL-LA's projects, and I thank Megan Lowe for her continued work on it. I wish our Vice President & President Elect Paul Kelsey great luck during his impending presidency, and I offer my support to his ideas and endeavors as Past President.

Since this is my last President's article, I have chosen to write about a subject which is controversial and almost always seems to make librarians upset whenever I start a conversation about it. If you are offended or otherwise repulsed by anything I write here, please remember that I will no longer be president in a few weeks and that you do not need to bear ACRL Louisiana Chapter any ill will. The opinions expressed here are my own and do not necessarily reflect the position of ACRL-LA as a whole. After all, in Volume 1, Issue 4 of *Codex* there is an article which takes the exact opposite position on this matter. I myself recognize that I have extreme opinions on this subject and I confess that it's difficult to conceal my anger towards it. What is this hot button issue? Copyright

law? Free Speech? Terrorism? Abortion? LBGT issues? The Affordable Care Act? No, it's Springshare's LibGuides platform (as the article title obviously gives away)!
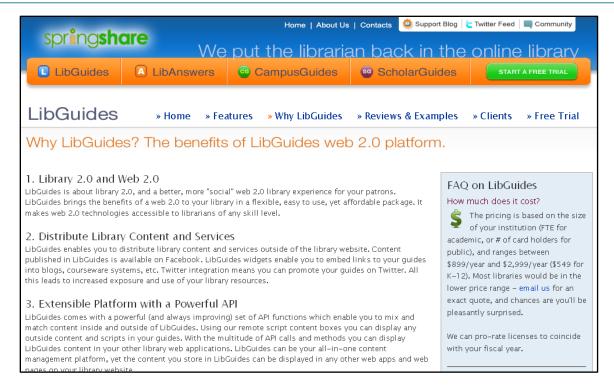
Your reaction to that is likely proportional to your actual usage of LibGuides; If you do not use it, then this might not matter to you, and if you do use it, then obviously this is going to pertain to you. Although if you're not interested in LibGuides, I think it's still important to know what it is and why it should be kept at bay. LibGuides, if you did now know, is a hosted CMS (Content Management System) made by library software publisher Springshare, which handles its servers and software for its customers. It is most popular among academic libraries, although it sells its services to other types of institutions as well. Some librarians love LibGuides. At a LOUIS Users' Conference a few years ago during a presentation about LibGuides, one excited librarian (not a sales rep) had the room get up and *sing* in praise of LibGuides, myself included (at the time I didn't know much about LibGuides, but looking back on it I really regret it). He told a story about a librarian at his workplace who couldn't learn HTML for some reason and how LibGuides was a miracle because it made it possible for her to finally post things online. A lot of people seemed interested in it.

I was only skeptical of LibGuides then, thought later I would grow to deeply dislike it. LibGuides is detrimental to librarians and librarianship, and what its popularity indicates is even more concerning than the product itself. It's the problems *behind* LibGuides that make me so angry, and I believe they are serious problems which are worth being upset about.

Although, during the writing of this article I've discovered that LibGuides isn't *quite* as bad as I had originally thought. To be fair I will admit that there are reasons why

LibGuides might seem like a good choice. It's a website that is made specifically for the needs of librarians, they handle the server and the hosting, and it has an easy WYSIWYG ("what you see is what you get") interface that doesn't require the user to know any HTML tags. However, all of the best points in its favor are features that can be provided by many different types of competitors for a better value. If LibGuides was priced fairly, was more overt about what it really is, and wasn't proprietary, it would be more acceptable, but that is not the case.

When I first heard of LibGuides a few years ago, it did not bother me all that much. I did know that it was an online publishing platform of some sort which some libraries liked to use. Generally I didn't like the way its page design appeared to be so similar between institutions, and how most libraries' LibGuides sites used a domain name which wasn't their own and made the patrons leave their own site to visit LibGuides ("somecollege.edu" versus "somecollege.libguides.com"). Other than that, it didn't seem too bad and I did not have a problem with the existence of LibGuides until I found out how much it actually costs to subscribe to and how that subscription is metered. According to LibGuides' website in 2011, subscription costs were divided by FTE (Full Time Equivalent, or Enrollment), ranging from about $900 to $3,000 a year. Those numbers are no longer valid since currently Springshare does not appear to overtly publish its cost estimates online (perhaps as not to frighten anyone away?), but they still have the same pricing model. Even now, in order to get a quote for LibGuides' services, one must provide "the FTE number (academic libraries), or number of registered card holders (public or special libraries), or number of students in your school or district (K-12 libraries)."

Springshare's LibGuides website with pricing information, circa 2011.

To many academic employees, this probably doesn't seem out of the ordinary. Yet it is unusual for a web host, since most web hosting companies usually do not price their services in this way, and this makes me suspicious. Why would that be necessary? It is true that an organization's hosting needs is dependent on how much traffic they will get and how much bandwidth they will likely use, since overloading a server will result in a website slowing down or crashing. Still, when it comes to online content your FTE is not necessarily a reflection of what web traffic you may receive. People who aren't associated with your university might be viewing it (while people who *are* might not be), and this is especially true if you have unique content which is of interest to the public or is otherwise popular.

LibGuides is a webhost, but seems very determined to keep its true identity a secret. The product LibGuides offers is indeed web hosting, but its marketing and

language often seems to obscure that. I've shopped for web hosting more than once, and Springshare presents its product in a completely different way. It sometimes presents itself like a database product would, not a host. Why should that be necessary when librarians have some knowledge of the Internet? Are we not information professional in our own right? Yet LibGuides does not treat librarians as the Information Professionals they truly are. Instead, LibGuides appears to believe that librarians are unable to understand web publishing and the Internet as a business. That's a little insulting.

It's much worse news that there may be a grain of truth to that, with librarian LibGuides fans reporting that they are glad they don't need to know HTML (HyperText Markup Language) to use LibGuides. Basic web publishing is not particularly difficult and is still used in Internet blogs, forums, and more. Refusing to learn some HTML is nothing to be proud of. I'm not a cataloging librarian, and MARC syntax looks more foreign to me that HTML tags, yet if I had to learn them, I could try. I believe you could learn HTML if you had to also, and maybe even more things. We promote Information Literacy to our students, but what about our own Information Literacy? Information distribution via the Internet has been possible since the 1990s (and long before that if you count the years of teletext and dial-up message boards). If you say "No, I can't! No one will show me!" I can see what you mean. Sometimes there's not enough time or money for professional development. If librarians need to be educated on web publishing, then so be it. I don't want to enrich publishers, I want to enrich *librarians*. Instead of dumping money into a special webhost, I think it would be better to invest in the human capital at a library and improve their skills. We're librarians! We can do it!

Or, if you truly *can't* do it... that's OK too. It really is. WYSIWYG

interfaces can be found in many other platforms like Drupal and WordPress and free desktop programs like "Komposer" which let you work with HTML without ever making you use a tag. It's almost funny that LibGuides still lists its "Point & Click Interface" as one of its main selling points when by now it's not very unique or impressive. There are major CMS competitors that charge subscriptions and compete with LibGuides. In a presentation on Drupal (a free and open-source CMS) given by fellow librarian David Comeaux and myself at the 2011 LOUIS Users' Conference, I looked at the list of features LibGuides had on its website at the time and was able to refute almost every point Springshare made lauding is services, comparing it to Drupal. I am still able to do that today. In short, almost everything LibGuides does can also be done by another web service, free or otherwise. Do not think that LibGuides is your only option just because it is made for libraries. It is a web host, and there are a million of them out there, all wanting your business. Running your own website doesn't mean that you have to run your own server in your office (although you could do that!). Make a deal.

Using LibGuides in itself demonstrates that you are not as information literate as you could be. Some years ago I found a paper LibGuides advertisement at one of the LOUIS Users' Conferences. It was covered in buzzwords like "Web 2.0" and lauded several components which were all available on other platforms, and often for free. Be smart enough to see though Springshare's smoke and mirrors and understand that LibGuides is not what it appears to be.

Yet elsewhere, LibGuides continues to be very popular amongst librarians. My gears grind their teeth off when people use the word "LibGuide" to refer to a guide which is on a library's website. They use it innocently as a brand name, the way one uses the

word "Kleenex" for "facial tissue" or "Band-Aid" for "adhesive bandage," but the implication is a bit more serious than that. A "LibGuide" is a guide which a librarian has put on the Internet. It is a page with information on it. Like any other webpage which has ever existed. Like any print "guide" a librarian has ever made before that. It's just a guide. There is no good reason whatsoever to call such a thing a "LibGuide." To use that word in that way demonstrates an elementary misunderstanding of what the World Wide Web is, creates unnecessary library jargon for the rest of the world to deal with, and perpetuates Springshare's branding nomenclature. If you hear a librarian refer to a guide on a web page as a "LibGuide," for the good of our profession do not hesitate to correct that person, I tell you.

The branded and proprietary nature of LibGuides is a core problem I have with it. In Internet is supposed to be "free" in some way, and librarians are ideally supposed to hold that mentality. Using a system and sever space you do not "own" in some way puts you at risk in the long run, because it means that all the content you create will be within that system and you lose your freedom to leave it easily. There are many open-source alternatives, and the software need not be intrinsically bound to the hardware. You can run WordPress on one host's server space, and then decided to move to a different host, taking your MySQL databases with you. Or you might not even need CMS software to meet your needs at all. There are so many choices. Is LibGuides really the best one?

Buying hosting and software together from someone else for certain purposes makes a lot of sense. We all need some way to host our SirsiDynix catalog software; we couldn't do that by ourselves easily, so LALINC and LOUIS were formed. Here at the ULM Library we pay around $2,000 a year for OCLC to host our EZproxy server

because the ULM Computing Center was more comfortable with that than buying another server they need to maintain (in this case, the value of their labor). Your library's website and its content are different, though, since your domain name and website sort of defines your identity online. You need to have complete control to do anything and everything you want, and LibGuides can't do that because it only does one thing and you can't wholly control it. It's not your house; you only rent it. Your library guides are *your* content and they belong on *your* website, not some other one.

If you're an academic library, you should already have hosting on your institution's website in the first place. Ideally, that should be where you are on the web (not counting your social media accounts). Alas, it's not that simple for some libraries. Someone did once point out to me that some libraries actually need LibGuides go incognito as a library database because that makes it possible for them to buy the web hosting they need and sneak by with it quietly without stepping on the tail of the dragon sleeping in the campus IT department. The university web designers might not want the library to have its own website, so LibGuides enables an academic library to somehow fool their university's IT department into letting them have what functionally is another website so that they can *finally* have a way to serve their patrons online.

That is not an acceptable excuse. In fact, should such a thing be true, that type of situation only compounds the misery of LibGuides. I won't mince words: if that really is the scenario for some libraries that is just plain awful. This means that your academic institution is paying for two web hosts instead of one, and that is a waste. This would be like buying a house that you can't use because the kitchen's oven is broken and then buying the house next door so that you can cook. I'm painfully aware that some academic

libraries are in a woefully impotent position in regards to their own online content. In some cases, librarians are not able to edit their own library web pages at all and must rely on an intermediary person of some type to post things online for them. This person may or may not know anything about libraries and their concerns. Since universities must have strict control over their public image, they often do maintain quality by limiting the number of people with editing privileges (in library terms, just imagine what it would be like if all your OPAC's abilities were available to everyone at the library, even the student workers). At the University of Louisiana at Monroe where I am, I've been working with web content since 2007, and it has always been a struggle to balance the two groups but I can also understand how mismanagement of a website can lead to disaster. We have been very fortunate that the Computing Center at ULM has been competent and mostly cooperative and our library Dean is overtly aware of the importance of the information technology needs of our library on campus and has not allowed us to get wedged into a position where the library cannot control its own online content. I know we're lucky; if all libraries had a situation as good as ours, LibGuides wouldn't need to exist at all. The only reason an academic library ever needs to subscribe to LibGuides is when its parent institution cannot meet its needs.

I'll type that again, because I keep saying it every time I talk about LibGuides to someone: *The only reason an academic library ever needs to subscribe to LibGuides is when its parent institution cannot meet its needs*. Since e-resources are such a deeply critical component to modern libraries, this kind of scenario is unacceptable and depending on how widespread the problem is, it could be a crisis. Using LibGuides as a way to circumvent university restrictions on web development is a cowardly and costly

way to solve that problem. Now more than ever, online content is the very locus of what an academic library offers its students. In the year 2014 is it obvious and even trite to say that since librarians have been saying this in one form or another since the 1980s. I'm aware that fighting for the needs of Library X at X University isn't easy and that there has to be compromise in that battle, but if you've subscribed to LibGuides that indicates that you've already lost. You failed to make it clear to your institution that your library and librarians need to be able to produce online content for their patrons, whether these are guides, tutorials, or even simply arranging the databases or home page.

Choosing to subscribe to LibGuides indicates either poor judgment or lack of institutional IT support for a library. I do not intend that to be an insult to librarians who have bought LibGuides, but it is a criticism. I do understand that not everyone has time to learn new things, or that the means to do so might be absent, or that sometimes a library's parent institution refuses to meet a library's needs. Sometimes that's just how it is. I see you as a victim here, not someone to blame. The manner in which LibGuides markets itself to librarians is predatory since it grabs its customers by exploiting their weaknesses.

Literally, we can't afford to fall prey to that kind of chicanery. Libraries need every cent they can get. At ULM we do not have money to spend on a lot of things we need, simple things like barcode scanners, staplers, business cards, computers, and more. Statewide it seems like no one has enough money (the libraries and their librarians). All the money went away years ago and it feels like it's never coming back. The problem isn't just limited to Louisiana or academic libraries; budget issues are common at libraries everywhere, as we all know. Perhaps some institutions can in fact afford to pay for two hosting bills, but maybe that is the real truth of my obsession with LibGuides. It could be

that it's just been base jealousy on my part all along. Try and see it from my perspective. It's like being out in the desert dying of thirst and watching someone pour a canteen full of ice water out onto the ground while standing in front of you. Why *wouldn't* I be jealous? Additionally, what might taxpayers think if they knew?

I suppose the final question to ask is: How does LibGuides actually help your patrons? Not you, but your patrons. How can you justify spending many thousands of dollars on a glorified webhost over the years instead of using those funds to buy an original resource that actually contains new content your patrons truly need, like a database, periodical subscriptions, or books? As I see it, LibGuides does not help your patrons. It helps you help them, but as I've said before, there are other means to do that. If we all had lots of money, I probably wouldn't be writing all this, but we don't, and that's why I'm asking you all to think twice about LibGuides. Couldn't you use that money to buy something else?

To LibGuides' credit, $3,000 or so a year is actually not bad a price for professional hosting where everything is done for you. I mean that. But how much is it worth? At ACRL-LA our latest hosting bill was $178.20 for *three years* of hosting service with the freedom to install and use almost any web software we want. I do most of the maintenance myself, and it's not always easy, but it certainly is worth all that money by comparison (especially because we don't have much of it). Better hosting for higher traffic and space costs more, but how much do we really need? The server you're using to view this journal page right now gets the job done at a low price, and that's what makes *Codex* possible. So if you want your library to publish its own journal or digital library or online archive, *you can do it*! It's easier (and cheaper) than you think!

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