

Minnesota Public Library Report, Website Visits

Traditional output measures such as visits, circulation, and program attendance are increasingly inadequate to capture the wide variety of ways that people use their public library. A growing number of people use library services via library websites without ever entering the building, and a subset of those who visit the building use the library website during their visit. Library websites provide a tremendous amount of information in and of themselves as well as access to electronic materials and collections. Tracking website visits adds a more accurate measure of current library use. In addition, tracking virtual use such as website visits gives public libraries the ability to provide a counter narrative to the claim that library use, i.e., physical visits, is decreasing.

Beginning with the 2018 Minnesota Public Library Report, there will be a new data element that counts annual website visits. This data element is required for all public libraries nationwide and will be reported in the Public Libraries in the United States Survey issued by the Institute of Museum and Library Services. 2018, the first year of the new federal data element, is a trial collection year, and libraries voluntarily report the data.

Definition

The new data element will appear in the 2018 Minnesota Public Library Report at the end of the Public Service Information section.

New *P32 Website Visits

Report the annual number of visits to your library's website. Visits represent the annual number of sessions initiated by all users from inside or outside the library to the library website. The library website consists of all webpages under the library's domain. A website "visit" or "session" occurs when a user connects to the library's website for any length of time or purpose, regardless of the number of pages or elements viewed. Do not include usage of library social media accounts (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, etc.). Check the *Unavailable* box if your library does not collect the number of website visits or does not have a website.

How to collect the data

The number of annual website visits may be available from your Information Technology (IT) department within your library, city, county or website provider depending on who manages your library website.

Another option for collecting this information is [Google Analytics](#), a free web analytics tool that tracks and reports website visits. After signing up for Google Analytics, you will need to establish an account for your library's website. Then, you can view the "Audience" report, which presents four data elements in the "Overview" section: Sessions, Users, Pageview, and Pages / Session. "Sessions" contains the data that should be

reported. You can filter the data by year by clicking on the date range in the top right corner of the “Overview” section and using the pop-up calendars to select the date range.

To implement Google Analytics, you need to have editing access to your library’s website. If you do not have direct access, you can go through an intermediary such as an IT department. If your library’s website is managed by an external agency such as the city or county government, this provides an opportunity for you to build relationships with these agencies while gaining access to data that will enable you to better serve your users.

There are alternatives to Google Analytics for tracking website analytics such as Crazy Egg, however, these typically require a paid subscription.

Concerns

Library websites provide information as well as access to electronic materials and collections. Tracking website visits adds a more accurate measure of current library use. Public libraries also invest significant resources in both time and money in order to provide a website. Tracking statistics to demonstrate usage of this service helps to justify the library’s investment.

Library website visits has to be a very gross measure—all visits, internal and external – because of the simple fact that many libraries can’t separate them. Because many libraries’ public access computers use the library website as the homepage, counting internal visits may artificially inflate this statistic. However, internal website visits may still count as legitimate visits – as some users undoubtedly do use the library website during their public access time. Also, the data element is named “*website visits*” instead of “*virtual visits*” to avoid the implication that these visits are occurring outside of the library building only.

Some libraries might find it difficult to get website visit numbers. When tracking evolving services, the first year’s reporting is voluntary, so that we can test and refine collection and reporting practices. This was also a concern when we added wireless sessions, but now 99 percent of the state’s public libraries report the annual number of wireless sessions. In the coming years it is likely that any new virtual services or resources that public libraries provide will pose data collection challenges. For the public library report to remain relevant and to accurately document the use of 21st century public libraries, we need to address these challenges.

If a library does not track website visits, they should check the *Unavailable* box (not counted) rather than reporting inaccurate data. We want to insure the accuracy of all of the data elements being reported. Only report valid data.

If you are concerned about privacy issues when setting up Google Analytics, be assured that Google Analytics [anonymizes IP data](#), and their policies [explicitly forbid](#) collecting personally identifiable information.

If you have questions or concerns, please contact [Joe Manion](#), State Data Coordinator, at 651-582-8640 or joe.manion@state.mn.us.



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