

AN OVERVIEW OF VIRTUAL REFERENCE TOOLS, TECHNOLOGIES AND SERVICES IN LIBRARIES

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ABSTRACT

The paper introduces the concept of Virtual Reference Service (VRS) in academic libraries. The survey investigates into the state of VRS in the libraries of premier educational institutions, the IIMs and IITs in India. The study reveals that although a remarkable advancement in the automation and electronic access to information has been achieved in these libraries, there is a long way ahead to march towards the establishment of standard VRS at par with similar institutions in developed countries.

Keywords: Virtual Reference Tools, Virtual Reference Technologies, Skype, Twitter, Chat, Email, Linkedin, VRS, RSS, Blogs, Facebook.

INTRODUCTION

Technological developments have affected not only the format and sources of the information libraries use to provide reference service, but also where we provide reference service. Libraries and their resources have partially moved to the virtual world of the Internet. As a result, library patrons can access our resources from outside of the physical library. In an effort to reach patrons accessing the library via their computers, many libraries and library consortia are extending their reference service to include virtual reference. Technology now allows users to submit their queries to the library at any time from any place in the world. Virtual reference is responsive to the patrons' need for convenient access to reference service.

Traditionally an individual institution provides reference service in a physical location, that is, in a library. With the development of technology, especially Internet technology, libraries have developed virtual (or "digital") reference services (VRS) in order to provide efficient and effective reference services to patrons in and out of the library and even to users not in the library's usual service community.

According to the guidelines provided by the Reference and Users Services Association (RUSA), virtual reference is a reference service, such as chat, videoconferencing, co-browsing, instant messaging (IM), voice over Internet protocol (VoIP) or email, conducted electronically through computers or the Internet. Most VRS are in real time and use synchronous communication. Although reference services can be conducted using telephone, fax or mail, those are not virtual reference.

Virtual Reference has been defined as a "reference service initiated electronically often in real-time, where patrons employ computers or other Internet technology to communicate with reference staff, without being physically present".(ALAR, 2004) Virtual reference is also

called digital reference, e-reference, electronic reference, remote reference, Internet information services, live reference, and real-time reference. (Nilsen & Ross, 2006)

WHAT IS A VIRTUAL REFERENCE ?

Virtual Reference can be Digital reference, Remote reference, Real-time reference, Live reference and E-reference. Virtual reference is reference service initiated electronically where patrons employ computers or other technology to communicate with public services staff without being physically present. communication channels used frequently in virtual reference include chat, videoconferencing, Voice-over-IP, co-browsing, e-mail, and instant messaging.

As libraries move closer and closer to the vision of providing information services to users anytime, anywhere, it is important to continue to recognize trends that will shape reference services in the future.

Here are some present indicators of future services:

- Improvements to online reference software and increasing user access to broadband connections will transform chat services into richer audio and visual environments.
- Both Tutor.com and 24/7 Reference are now offering online reference services in Spanish. Service in other high-demand languages will follow.
- The release of NISO standards for networked reference will result in a number of enhancements: increased security and privacy for users, capability for easy transfer of questions, and standard subject headings for knowledge bases.
- As more data from online reference transcripts become available, there will be more opportunities to analyze information-seeking behavior and the effectiveness of various question-answering techniques.
- A “marketplace for reference services” will develop as libraries purchase the information services that they need but do not have the resources to develop in-house.
- Changing staffing patterns (use of paraprofessionals, students, and contract librarians) in tiered reference will free librarians to concentrate on higher-level reference and collection development.
- outcome measures are described as the quality of the answers and should be assessed based on response accuracy, response appropriateness to the user audience, the opportunities for interactivity, and the level of instruction provided in the response;
- process measures as process effectiveness and efficiency, based upon service accessibility, response timeliness, clarity of service procedures, percentage of questions answered, staff training and review methods, and the service’s review and evaluation methods;

- economic measures to assess cost effectiveness, taking into account VR session costs, the infrastructure required to support quality VR services, and the impact on other library expenditures, and
- user satisfaction, the degree that users of a VR service are satisfied with the process and results, which can be assessed using indicators such as accuracy, timeliness, staff behaviour, technical considerations, and physical facilities.

Virtual Reference Tool and Technologies:

- Chat
- Videoconferencing Voice over IP
- e-mail instant messaging
- Text

Chat: Instant messaging (IM) services are used by some libraries as a low-cost means of offering chat-based reference, since most IM services are free. Utilizing IM for reference services allows a patron to contact the library from any location via the internet. This service is like the traditional reference interview because it is a live interaction between the patron and the librarian.

Skype: Voice Over Internet Protocol (VoIP) communication tool that can be used to conduct audio or audio/video “telephone” conversations between internet connected computers. It allows conversations to take place anywhere in the world, and both the service and the software are free. Software must be installed on a computer in order to use the service.

Twitter: Twitter is a free micro-blogging service that allows its users to send and read text-based messages of up to 140 characters known as “tweets” via the Twitter website, external applications or SMS (short message service). Access to tweets can be restricted or openly available. Using Twitter continue to use it as a communications and public relations mechanism – tweeting about resources, services, events and/or community information. While a handful of libraries accept reference questions via Twitter, it is more common for libraries to offer SMS or ‘text a librarian’ services.

Mosio: Commercial based Text messaging and email are available when chat is off. Integration with Facebook, some discovery layer and OPACs, databases, and more so patrons can seek reference help at the point of need, Collaborative answering among librarians, Mobile and tablet ready, Customizable auto-responder, Customizable ready answer templates, Statistics reporting and Archived chat transcripts

WEB 2.0 TECHNOLOGIES:

RSS Feeds (really simple syndication): A way to easily collect news, announcements, postings, and content from a variety of Web sites in an automated way. Feeds could be used to broadcast arrivals of new materials (books, audiovisual, etc.), announcements, and event information (Bolan, Canada, and Cullin 2007).

Blo Blogs & Wikis: Blogs and wikis are fundamentally 2.0, and their global proliferation has enormous implications for libraries. Blogs may indeed be an even greater milestone in the history of publishing than Web pages. They enable the rapid production and consumption of

Web-based publications. In gs and blogging some ways, the copying of printed material is to Web pages as the printing press is to blogs. Blogs are HTML for the masses. Wikis is an online encyclopedia where any registered user can write, amend or otherwise edit articles (Maness 2006).

Personalization and “My Profile”—the inclusion of users’ comments in online catalogs, online review sharing, and so on. The new publication or new arrivals can use a library barcode and pin number to manage subscriptions to electronic newsletters and announcements and allow users to personalize a Web page with content and colour (Bolan, Canada, and Cullin 2007)

Short Message Service (SMS) is a mechanism of delivery of short messages over the mobile networks. The SMS enquiry services in a library allow patrons to use their mobile phones to SMS their inquiries to the library. The reference staff deployed to attend to such queries can respond immediately with answers or with links to more in-depth answers (Sharma and Sharma 2009).

Social Networks: Of all the social aspects of Web 2.0, it could be that the social network and its successors most greatly mirror that of the traditional library. Social networks, in some sense, are Library 2.0. The face of the library’s Web-presence in the future may look very much like a social network interface (Maness 2006).

Social Bookmarking: Social bookmarking tools appeared at about the same time as social networks and have created quite a stir in their own right. Wikipedia defines social bookmarking as the practice of classifying resources by the information assigned by user defined keywords or tags (www.wikipedia.com).

Service Platform: LinkedIn, Myspace, Facebook, Orkut, Twitter, Ibibo, Netlog, Ning.

CONCLUSION:

World Wide Web brought new technologies to the libraries and librarians to understand the digital library services. Library patrons are increasing day-by-day The library’s services will change, focusing more on the facilitation of information transfer and information literacy rather than providing controlled access to it. Technological development that have enable to users to access electronic resources and conduct library research remotely have also enabled and necessitated corresponding development in library services to support the emerging virtual community. VRS is one area which is being actively explored by many libraries to support remote users in their access to use of virtual library resources.

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