

Digital versus Non-Digital Reference: Ask a Librarian Online and Offline

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Guest Editor

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SECTION ONE: THE OLD versus THE NEW

Have(n't) We Been Here Before? Lessons from Telephone
Reference 1
M. Kathleen Kern

Telephone reference services have been present in libraries for over seventy-five years. Chat reference services are a very recent addition to library services. Telephone and chat reference share some characteristics and the future of chat reference may be seen through an examination of the history of telephone reference. This article will examine issues of policy, staffing, and technology for telephone and chat reference.

KEYWORDS. Telephone reference, virtual reference, chat reference, library history, reference service, service models

E-Mail Reference as Substitute for Library Receptionist 19
Susan M. Braxton
Maureen Brunsdale

The authors explore the historical development of e-mail reference services in general, and report on the evolution of this service in their own library. Based on evidence from their own service and from reports in the literature, they propose a connection between e-mail reference service and broader library services including circulation, interlibrary loan, and even acquisitions, through which the reference librarian receives questions traditionally directed elsewhere. The e-ref button presents an unexpected avenue of librarian-to-librarian communication, both within and beyond one's home institution. Implications are discussed.

KEYWORDS. E-mail reference, reference services, academic libraries

The Internet Public Library as a Teaching Tool for Shockingly
Traditional Reference Skills
Abigail Leah Plumb

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The Internet Public Library is an experimental educational initiative of the University of Michigan School of Information. The author, a Michigan alumna, argues that the Internet Public Library can play a role in the education of reference librarians, with particular attention to the traditional reference skills it fosters. She discusses her own experience with the IPL and QRC, its digital reference tool, as a library student, positing that the value of the IPL lies in the way it renders individual aspects of the reference process explicit and forces its users to examine them piece by piece.

KEYWORDS. Internet Public Library, University of Michigan School of Information, digital reference, library school, reference, skills, virtual reference, e-mail

“Contact Us”: Archivists and Remote Users in the Digital Age 43
Katharine A. Salzmann

Archive repository web pages have become more sophisticated in the past several years, and information about repository holdings is often readily available online. However, so long as full archival records are not available electronically, archivists will have to contend with the increase in reference requests from remote users. The author surveyed one hundred university archives web pages to examine the current availability of archival records on the Web and to explore the possible effects of this presence on archivists' efforts to provide remote users with access to repository holdings through “ask an archivist” forms, electronic mail, and other modes of communication.

KEYWORDS. University archives, World Wide Web, electronic reference, virtual reference, archives and archivists, remote users

Characteristics of E-Mail Reference Services in Selected
Public Libraries, Victoria, Australia 51
Doreen Sullivan

An analysis of 96 question and answer pairs from the Bayside Library Ask a Librarian Service found that 54 percent of the queries were received from Bayside residents. Forty-seven percent of the e-mail reference questions were classed as research queries. Although only 25.1 percent of the queries were submitted for formal education purposes, all of these were research questions, and took longer than any other category to answer. In 2001, only 6 of the 54 questions submitted were tertiary level questions, but it took a median time of 95 minutes to answer each one. The 24 general interest category questions took a median time of 47.5 minutes to answer, which is almost half the time it took to answer a tertiary level query.

Librarians from three other public libraries in Victoria offering e-mail reference were interviewed, and compared and contrasted with the Bayside Library Service.

Issues of disproportionate labour, the appearance of the passive role of the

e-mail reference user, and the wisdom of public libraries devoting significant resources to answer questions for formal education were raised.

KEYWORDS. Ask a Librarian services, e-mail reference, public libraries, reference services, Bayside Library Service

SECTION TWO: HOW WE DO IT HERE

Predicting the Success of Commercial AskA Services in the United States and Abroad

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Jenny Baum

Kate Lyons

This article discusses the quality of commercial and library-sponsored AskA services and uses this as a prediction for the success of the programs. The authors also explore the idea of the commoditization of information and its acceptance rates in different countries, and use these to predict the success of commercial and library-sponsored AskA services both in the United States and abroad.

KEYWORDS. AskA, online reference, international AskA programs, information brokerage

Wired New Jersey: Q and A NJ

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Carol Van Houten

Q and A NJ is New Jersey's virtual reference service. Available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and free to all New Jersey residents, the service provides online reference assistance in real time from librarians across the state. New Jersey was the first state in the country to offer such service. This article looks at the history of the service, what it's like to be a virtual librarian, and presents a brief survey of the librarians participating in Q and A NJ.

KEYWORDS. Virtual reference, electronic information resource searching, information services, libraries, computer software

Library LAWLINE: Collaborative Virtual Reference in a Special Library Consortium

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Scott Matheson

This article details the planning, design, and implementation of a collaborative virtual reference project undertaken by a group of law libraries. Service design, scheduling, and software selection are addressed. Outcomes and changes to the service after its first year are outlined, and recommendations are made to those considering implementing similar services.

KEYWORDS. Virtual reference, online services, reference instruction, computer mediated instruction, communication systems

Planning for Multilingual Chat Reference Service in a Suburban Public Library System

Edana McCaffery Cichanowicz

Nan Chen

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Recent immigrants are settling not only in urban centers, but are dispersing throughout the suburban landscape. For many of these new immigrants, the local public library can provide a vital connection to the American Dream, if only librarians can effectively reach them. This article discusses the planning for multilingual chat reference service (currently English, Spanish, and Chinese) and some of the issues and challenges that librarians face in a suburban public library system.

KEYWORDS. Live librarian, multilingual chat, public library, Spanish, Chinese, immigrants, multicultural reference service

SECTION THREE: A FEW THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

The Social Life of Digital Reference: What the Technology Affords

Mita Sen-Roy

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Digital reference service (also known as virtual reference) has become a contentious topic in the library literature, as some critics feel that it threatens reference service more than it enhances it. Through this paper it is hoped that the debate can be refocused after a careful assessment of what exactly digital reference technology can afford and what social impact such affordances could bring. The suggestion will be made that digital reference should be employed as a means to provide reference service as long as the service is designed to play to the strengths of the technology. As such, it is recommended that libraries pursue digital reference service that is local, professional, and with privacy constraints.

KEYWORDS. Digital reference, virtual reference, reference service, affordance

The Case for Non-Intrusive Research: A Virtual Reference Librarian's Perspective

Bruce Jensen

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Electronic reference facilitates analyses not possible in face-to-face and telephone transactions. Texts of e-mail and chat reference sessions disambiguate issues of accuracy, interview discourse, and, to a lesser extent, patron satisfaction. Authentic transcripts are here advanced as superior instruments for study of AskA services, with significant applications also in better understanding other modes of reference. Clandestine questioning by colleagues, MLIS students, and researchers afflicts online reference services; it is argued here that unobtrusive study techniques useful in traditional settings are inappropriate for online reference, generating dubious data while undermining service quality. This paper examines how research affects the work of virtual reference librarians, and suggests appropriate

means of assessing virtual reference services for scholarly as well as library management purposes.

KEYWORDS. Action research, assessment, corpus analysis, evaluation, reference, electronic reference, chat reference, research methods, methodology/methodologies, transcripts, virtual reference

SPECIAL REPORTS

Getting Our Foot (Back) in the Door: Reestablishing a Freshman Instruction Program

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Janet DeForest

Rachel Fleming May

Brett Spencer

In 1999, librarians at the University of Alabama (UA) developed a program to re-introduce library instruction into the English Department's mandatory Freshman Composition Program. This article discusses the development, execution, outcome, and assessment of the program and includes tips for developing a similar program. Through negotiation and open discussion with the Director of Freshman English, the library successfully convinced the Director to allow a program of instruction back into the English 101 program. Library instruction sessions were paired with one of the essays/assignments common to all English 101 classes. A survey conducted to assess the library's efforts concluded that the instruction had a positive effect on students' understanding of library resources.

KEYWORDS. Freshman library instruction, bibliographic instruction—college and university students, information literacy, college and university libraries—relations with faculty and curriculum, cooperation—college and university libraries, University of Alabama (Tuscaloosa), collaboration with faculty

Research Consultations: Enhancing Library Research Skills

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Deborah Lee

Libraries support a number of instructional programs, including the use of individualized instructional sessions. Research consultations offered by the Mississippi State University Libraries are individualized research sessions designed to meet the information needs of the user or client. Sessions may provide basic information for undergraduates, advanced searching techniques for pre-dissertation graduate students, or serve as an overview of related resources for new faculty. Information concerning the structure and performance expectations for the service is discussed. Data from a year's use of the service are analyzed to identify the client base and to explore successful marketing strategies for the service.

KEYWORDS. Reference services, bibliographic instruction, research assistance