Virtual Reference in Libraries: Status and Issues
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Like it or not, virtual reference in libraries is here to stay. As the American Express ad used to say, "It's everywhere you want to be." Virtual patrons, with access to electronic resources the library provides, will have questions. New library users will have questions on how to gain access to the electronic holdings. Some users will not have the time or inclination to go to the library. If my library doesn't offer virtual reference, I can guarantee other libraries will gladly answer their questions.

Is virtual reference at this point a great use of resources and a great replacement for visiting the library in person? Probably not, but then I know a lot more about available library collections and resources, including the electronic ones, than the average patron. If the average user gets a satisfactory answer to their questions, will they care that some print article obtainable from their library might have answered the question marginally better? My guess is, probably not! Nonetheless, sometime you will still need to tell a patron that only print resources have the answer or that you need them to come into the library to get additional help, beyond what is available virtually.

MCLS Consortium

When many librarians hear that library management is considering offering virtual reference service, especially from an organization with as ominous a name as 24/7, it conjures up nightmares of doing reference on the 2 to 4 a.m. shift. Not something that all but the most night-owlish of folks would look forward to.

So far, despite names like 24/7, very few individual libraries offer such continuously available service unless they belong to a larger consortium or a global company network, where service from sources around the country or around the world might fit into normal work hours. "Playing the time zones" may locate a librarian somewhere in the world for whom the 2 a.m. to 4 a.m. shift turns into the heart of the working day.

The 24/7 Reference is a project of the Metropolitan Cooperative Library System (MCLS), supported by federal LSTA funding, administered by the California State Library. To find out more about the project, please visit http://www.247ref.org. To quote, "The Service's goal is to provide libraries with the tools they need to do live reference on the Web. 24/7 reference was originally developed for use in our large library consortium, MCLS, located in southern California." The project has grown, and, although it started out as a service to and for members of the MCLS consortium, the LSTA grant has allowed a large number of libraries to add the service, including Boston College, Hartford Public Library, the University of Washington, Santa Monica Public Library, and Cornell University.

The Metropolitan Cooperative Library System is an association of libraries in the greater Los Angeles area, which shares resources to improve library service to the residents of all participating jurisdictions. The 24/7 Reference service is staffed by local reference librarians, MCLS reference librarians, and library school graduate students hired by MCLS.

When users click on the Ask the Librarian logo at any participating library's Web site, the librarian answering the question may or may not work in their local library. When MCLS librarians cannot provide needed information, they refer patrons and/or their questions to their local library, the MCLS Reference Center, an expert, or another library. Note that MCLS had to hire additional graduate students to support their service; they did not go 24/7 with just the existing staff in their member libraries. Libraries using the 24/7 service can opt to participate with other libraries, taking questions from other consortium libraries, or choose only to deal with their own patrons. Because of the LSTA grant, MCLS member libraries choosing to participate in the 24/7 project do not have to pay for additional software or for training from the MCLS librarians on how to use the software. Reducing the barriers to entry this way has encouraged many a library in the Los Angeles area to try virtual reference.

The software used by the MCLS services comes from eGain Communications Corporation [http://www.egain.
based call center software used by many major corporations to handle and manage their customer service interactions. The version that MCLS uses has had many modifications to make it more useful to librarians and their patrons. As with many early versions of software, there were some concerns about bugs and problems that sometimes affected connections between librarians and their patrons, including unexpected disconnections or the inability of patrons to see what the librarians tried to present for them on the Internet.

My library at California State University Northridge, which also participates in the MCLS consortium, experienced such problems with the earlier version of the eGain software. As usual, techies on both sides contended the problems came from the other end. Software swore the problem was with our network, while the Information Technology people on our campus said it was in the software. In fairness, CSU Northridge has not yet upgraded to the newest version of the software. We hope when this happens, some of the problems will disappear.

**Virtual Reference Start-Up Issues**

More often than not, libraries initiating virtual reference desks do not make a big splash advertising and marketing its availability, largely because of fear that if they do, they will be overwhelmed with users who could swamp the small number of librarians assigned to handle the questions. Not all librarians are happy with adding yet another burden to their already overwhelming workload, and frankly, not all librarians can or should do virtual reference. Rarely does introduction of virtual reference service come with additional librarians to staff it. Many administrators will point to the fact that reference statistics have declined in the last couple of years, as more and more patrons turn to the Web and online information available in homes and offices. Virtual reference allows librarians to answer questions for electronic patrons.

Librarians who cannot multitask well or who do not enjoy multitasking should probably not be involved in providing this service. Librarians who prefer personal, face-to-face or voice-to-voice interaction to interactions done through the Web should probably also not become involved. For example, some senior librarians with many years of experience may feel uncomfortable at becoming a beginner again in the virtual reference realm. They don't want to look like they don't know what they are doing, and they may not know enough about the resources available to answer questions already on the Web. And what happens when a music librarian gets a difficult science question to answer? Others do not like having to learn yet another software and dealing with the time pressure you feel when answering virtual reference questions.

Administrators worry whether their librarians may start to ask to work from home, since they do not need to be at the library to answer questions. In my own institution, the administration has made clear to all librarians the unacceptability of working from home. Some administrators worry about librarians not being at their desks when they are needed for live reference service.

Although one of my colleagues maintains that virtual reference can be done as part of a librarian's assignment at the reference desk, no one else I have ever discussed this with believes it is possible or even desirable. The main problem is that no one can know when you will become busy, and patrons who see you typing on the computer are reluctant to interrupt you with questions, though they may suspect you are simply doing your personal e-mail and resent your failure to stop and help them. They could not know that you were doing your job and answering a reference question from a remote patron.

Virtual reference questions take incredibly longer to answer than the average question at the reference desk. Typing your answer and awaiting replies take much longer than direct conversation. I have heard estimates of the average reference question taking 12 to 15 minutes, and, at least at my library, that puts the average question into the research reference question category. Some librarians resent being tied to the computer waiting for questions that rarely come. The system also doesn't stop your phone from ringing at the very same time as you receive a virtual reference question.

My library offered very limited hours of operations for virtual reference as an experiment in the Spring 2002 semester. Frankly, the amount of patron response was "underwhelming," but given that the library did no other advertising than put an icon on our Web site announcing the offer of a live chat session with a librarian, I think the response we got was fairly good. However, if you consider how many librarian hours were taken from the traditional reference desk for use at the virtual reference desk and how many questions got answered, it was probably not the most efficient use of library resources. The one bright spot about it was that you could work on other duties while waiting for a virtual reference question.

I believe that advertisement of the service would increase the amount of questions that the library gets. I believe use of the service will continue to grow, whether or not the library eventually advertises the service or not. Those using the service receive a feedback form immediately at the end of their session. In many cases, the students are very appreciative, pleased, and impressed that the library offers such a service and hope that it continues. Clearly, virtual reference users at my institution like it and find it of value.

**Privacy and the FBI**

The software being used to answer virtual questions routinely records...
and collects the entire transcript of the virtual reference session. Libraries have used these transcripts only for training and monitoring librarians and for statistical purposes such as how many questions and how long they took. The question and concern that I raise is that even though librarians would never use this information, it doesn't mean we won't be asked by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) to turn over those transcripts, citing the Patriot Act as their authority. It is a question that librarians should think about if they hope to keep questions from their patrons confidential. Even if librarians remove the transcripts, investigators could probably find them if they start looking. Librarians should post privacy policies carefully on their Web sites so customers can know that libraries might not always be able to protect their privacy in this virtual world.

Future of Virtual Reference

There are other issues to be considered, though. Libraries of all sorts will increasingly deal with Generation X. This generation has grown up using computers, video games, instant messenger, cell phones — sometimes all at the same time. As libraries make their resources available electronically and schools offer more distance-education courses, librarians will have more users who may never physically step through their front doors. We must reach the users we have, wherever and however they want to reach the library.

When libraries began offering electronic reference to answer questions via e-mail, initially those numbers were much smaller than they are today. We have no choice, I believe, but to offer electronic reference whether via e-mail or via live chat sessions. If librarians learn to answer questions in the virtual world, reference service will not survive. To handle the virtual reference questions they receive, librarians will inevitably have to turn to consortia arrangements. It is much easier to deal with virtual reference questions if you have a hundred colleagues that can share the load rather than ten.

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