

Introduction

by Yungrang Laura Cheng, Guest Editor

Virtual Reference Services

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.

Provision of VRS is not limited by location and time. In fact, most VRS are offered outside regular office hours. Some are even 24/7. In consideration of cost and of staff availability most VRS are offered by a group of libraries or consortia rather than by individual institutions. Public libraries in many states work together to provide VRS. Among such examples are *Find It! ARIZONA*, *AskColorado*, *AskAway Illinois*, *Idaho AnswerXpress*, *Kentucky Ask Why KY?*, *Maryland AskUsNow*, *Ohio KnowItNow 24x7*, *Oregon L-net*, *Pennsylvania Ask Here PA*, *Texas Answer Zone* and *Find it Virginia*, to name a few.

Who are the users of VRS? The target users may have characteristics different from traditional library users. VRS users may spend considerable time in front of computers and surfing on the Internet. They use email, instant messaging or VoIP to communicate with friends and at work. Some

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may participate in online chatting. Besides adults, teens and children may be potential users of VRS because of their familiarity with computers and the Internet.

In this special issue different aspects of VRS are discussed. These aspects include the history (and possible future) of VRS, participatory librarianship instead of one-to-one service, evaluation of VRS, implementation of professional and ethical standards in VRS and reasons why non-users have not tried VRS.

Janes describes the history of digital references development and points out the issues and challenges that we face in developing a satisfactory digital reference service. These issues include licensing agreements for digital materials used during digital references, staff training materials, online interview skills, staffing levels/patterns/expectations, marketing of digital reference services and collaboration among libraries. Janes suggests that *scalability* and *centrality* are crucial to the future of VRS. Readers are encouraged to think about answers to the following questions: How do we move digital services beyond a one-at-a-time proposition to one that satisfies large numbers of needs? How can we demonstrate the importance of libraries and their services through VRS and connect libraries to people’s everyday lives?

Lankes discusses the possibility of moving virtual reference toward participatory librarianship, which seems to be the answer to Janes’ scalability. Lankes suggests that virtual reference may be done by answering users’ questions using pools of expertise provided by different sources. Librarians are one type of source. Users might also be able to see answers to their questions coming from different sources with different contexts and points of view. Hence many-to-one instead of one-to-one could be the focus of virtual reference. Using a test site called “StoryStarters” that was created by

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the Information Institute of Syracuse, Lankes tested the idea of a participatory system. He discusses his findings.

Pomerantz discusses evaluation of online reference services from the perspectives of library staff and users. The perspective of the library staff considers “how the service works.” The perspective of the users considers “satisfaction with the information provided and the interaction with the librarian.” Because of the difference of perspective, there can be different possible focal points of the evaluation of online reference services. Different types of data will be collected accordingly. Pomerantz also suggests using a method called “evaluability assessment (EA)” to help establish who the stakeholders are and what the measures of success should be, which are critical factors to be determined before any evaluation is undertaken.

Shachaf introduces different professional and ethical standards and guidelines for providing and evaluating virtual reference services with users in mind. RUSA’s guidelines cover both traditional (in person) and remote (online) reference services. The *International Federation of Library Associations’ (IFLA) Digital Reference Guidelines* focus only on digital reference services, as the title suggests. A study was conducted to compare the adherence levels

to the two standards. Shachaf further addresses the issue of service equality of VRS according to the ALA code of ethics. One question considered is whether the lack of face-to-face communication in VRS discourages, encourages or has no effect on possible racial or ethnic bias in reference service.

Connaway, Radford and Dickey’s study reveals reasons why non-users do not use VRS. A non-user is defined as someone who uses IM or chat for personal or business purposes and may use library services in email, telephone or face-to-face mode but does not use synchronous chat reference services. Focus group interviews and online surveys were conducted for data collection. The findings of focus group interviews show that non-users consider chat reference to be like a generic online chat room (a negative); they may be unwilling to use new software; they do not want to bother librarians; and they worry that librarians would reveal their identities or reference requests to other people. Online surveys also show that non-users prefer face-to-face reference services to develop a relationship with librarians, an important aspect of trust, which, in turn, is something many potential VRS users require. At the end, the authors provide recommendations to change non-users’ negative impressions of VRS. ■