DIKTUON: *Virtual Reference*

by Andrew Keck

Reference librarians have a long history of assisting users located outside of the physical library. Correspondence and the telephone have long been vehicles for the reference transaction. Email is a relatively recent introduction and with the advent of library websites, many libraries have instituted an "Ask a Librarian" webform which can generate an email directly from the library's website. Within the mix of reference services, "virtual reference" or a real-time chat service has been added in many library reference departments.

COOPERATIVE VIRTUAL REFERENCE

Some virtual reference services try to share the load between multiple libraries and librarians. The OCLC/Library of Congress project Questionpoint (http://www.questionpoint.org/) is one example, but there are many other cases where consortia develop a central virtual reference service among multiple institutions. As a result of working together, libraries can provide more capacity and hours for answering chat-based reference questions. A challenge for this type of service is institutionally specific questions such as "where is the BX section?"

CO-BROWSING

Some chat services provide special software that integrates "co-browsing" where the user can be virtually guided by the librarian in searching a specific database or using a particular tool. While this can have a number of significant advantages, co-browsing can be unstable and may require special plugins, browsers, or settings. In addition, co-browsing may even cause uneasiness among some users at allowing anyone (even trusted librarians) to take over their computers or browsing in a substantial way.

CHAT PROTOCOLS

After the growth in popularity of AIM, GoogleTalk, MSN, Jabber, and other chat protocols among our library users, a number of libraries decided to make themselves available within these services rather than forcing the users to use an unfamiliar library-only service. Libraries set up accounts and encouraged users to chat directly through the library's "handle" or to add the library as a "buddy."

The introduction of MeeboMe (http://www.meebome.com/) as an embeddable web-based chat system created the opportunity for users to connect to librarians without using any software client or special protocol. MeeboMe chat forms can be located directly on the library webpage and can be coded to "take messages" when library staff is unavailable.

With the proliferation of protocols, libraries initially had to install specialized software to monitor each protocol separately. Software like Adium (Mac) or Pidgin (PC/Linux) allowed libraries to monitor multiple protocols simultaneously and eliminated the library's need to support each protocol separately.

LIBRARYH3LP

One of the latest innovations in the chat-based virtual reference has been libraryh3lp (http://libraryh3lp.blogspot.com/), a project of UNC-CH librarian Pam Sessoms and her programmer husband, Eric Sessoms. Libraryh3lp has

Andrew Keck, Section Editor for Columns, is Associate Director of Duke Divinity School Library, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina.

taken the best features of web-based chat programs and developed a robust infrastructure designed specifically for libraries and librarians providing virtual reference.

The most significant features of Libraryh3lp come from separating the chat queues (public collectors of incoming chats), chat operators (library staff), and instant messaging gateways (identities in AIM, Yahoo, etc.). Multiple instant messaging gateways can be collected into a single chat queue. Multiple library staff members can monitor the same chat queue in order to share the workload, provide better transition between operators, and provide better response during peak periods. Libraryh3lp also facilitates the live transfer of chats between library staff as well as emailing complete chat transcripts.

An example of how this works in practice begins with a library user initiating a chat, either through web-based chat form or an existing instant messaging gateway protocol (AIM, Yahoo, etc.). All library staff logged into and monitoring a specific chat queue will receive notification of an incoming chat. The first library staff operator to respond "wins" the chat and continues to interact with the library user. If the chat needs to be transferred to another staff person (or another library), one can easily transfer the chat without any interruption to the library user.

Future of Virtual Reference

Virtual reference will continue to grow in demand within theological libraries as more of our incoming students use it with other libraries and institutions. While a seemingly helpful tool for geographically distant library users, many libraries ironically find a large percentage of chats are initiated by users located on campus or even in the library! Virtual reference services are also beginning to incorporate SMS services (text messaging via mobile phones), further increasing the mobile services that we can offer library users.

Opportunities and the technology for collaborative virtual reference service continue to develop. Staffing a virtual reference service as well as an actual reference desk can be challenging to libraries of all sizes. In addition, libraries have to carefully set expectations for service through both the physical and virtual worlds where our library users meet us.