



“Ask a librarian”: Comparing virtual reference services in an Israeli academic library



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ABSTRACT

This study considered two Web-based virtual reference services (VRS) at an academic library in Israel: chat (116 interactions) and email (213 exchanges). The contents of a set of questions and answers in both VRS services were analyzed, along with an open-ended questionnaire administered to the library's reference team ($n = 16$). Differences were found in the question and answer distributions. Face-to-face reference is preferred by the librarians although they acknowledge that the best fitting service is dependent on the users' preferences and their information needs.

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1. Introduction

Academic libraries of the 21st century try to meet the information needs of their patrons using a variety of online services. Among these services, libraries provide web-based virtual reference services (VRS) as alternatives to traditional face-to-face (f2f) reference (Radford & Connaway, 2007). This study analyzes the virtual reference (VR) services at the library of the University of Haifa. This library offers several types of reference services, including chat, email VR, f2f, phone, and workshops. The reference librarians need to handle multiple working environments in order to satisfy their users' information needs.

2. Problem statement

Very few studies have compared different types of VR services, and none has supplemented such a comparison with librarians' impressions about these services as compared to f2f reference. As reference services become more remotely enabled, patrons are less “visible” to reference librarians, and yet little is known about the impact of this difference in interpersonal interaction in this context. An informed understanding of VR services would enable libraries to have more insights into the information behavior of patrons using VRS and to adjust accordingly in order to improve patrons' VRS experiences. It is important to know whether patrons fulfill their information needs in the chat VR services, and if not, why not. This study explored how the VR services chat and

email were used, and how they compared to the more traditional f2f service, and was guided by the following questions:

- What are the main characteristics of the email and chat virtual reference services (question and answer types, volume)?
- Are there different emphases between the two VR (chat and email) services?
- How do the librarians view the differences between f2f and VR reference services?
- What is the librarians' attitude towards the VR services?

3. Literature review

3.1. Virtual reference services in libraries

Starting in the mid-1980s, libraries have been using VRS, which enable library patrons to receive help with information queries online (Christopherson, 2011). Responding to user demand and technological trends, libraries now routinely provide web-based virtual reference services (VRS) as alternatives to traditional face-to-face (f2f) reference (Radford & Connaway, 2007; Shachaf & Horowitz, 2008). The Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) (2010) for implementing and maintaining virtual reference services state simply: “Virtual reference is responsive to the patrons' need for convenient access to reference services” (p. 1). VRS include asynchronous (e.g., email) and synchronous (e.g., instant messaging/chat) formats. Library patrons increasingly turn to VRS for anonymity, convenience, and extended hours (Tenopir, 2004).

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3.1.1. What is virtual reference?

Virtual reference (VR) is when the patron and the librarian do not have a physical encounter (face-to-face). One of the principal reasons for providing virtual reference is to increase access to the knowledge and skills of the reference librarian (Lee, 2004; Thomsett-Scott, 2013). In the late 1980s, libraries adopted email as a form which allowed users to send questions to reference librarians and receive a response, usually within 24 h and often much more quickly (Lee, 2004). In the late 1990s the term VR (virtual reference) began to be used (Thomsett-Scott, 2013). Chat technologies that have been used primarily for social purposes have enabled librarians to conduct real-time reference interviews with patrons online.

VR creates a new working environment for reference librarians. During VR interaction in email or chat, there are no visual or audio cues to guide the reference interview (Bopp & Smith, 2011; Lee, 2004; Ronan, 2003). Librarians have to adjust and communicate effectively with remote users and translate the interpersonal skills used at the physical reference desk into the virtual environment. Librarians transition from traditional f2f interaction to a virtual interaction where conversational moves are sometimes unclear and nonverbal communication signals are missing (Christopherson, 2011). Dialogues in instant messaging (IM) for example (e.g., chat), should be short because the recipient experiences long waiting time while messages are being composed (Ronan, 2003). Users become impatient and disconnect if librarians take too long, and sometimes they simply leave the interaction without any notice (Wikoff, 2008).

It is important to choose VR technologies that suit the patrons' needs and to develop a marketing plan (RUSA, 2010; Thomsett-Scott, 2013). If a certain technology has low usage, it should be removed, although the reference staff must make sure that its lack of use is not due to poor marketing (Cummings, Cummings, & Frederiksen, 2007; Nicol & Crook, 2013).

3.1.2. Use of VRS

Usage analysis of reference interactions can provide useful feedback for reference librarians to improve the service of the library to its patrons (Finnell & Fontane, 2010). In the literature there has been some debate over the effectiveness of VR and whether these services are cost-effective based on usage rates and staffing concerns. However it is becoming clear that the services are going to continue and indeed expand (Burger, Park, & Li, 2010). Each user can choose the best way to communicate with the reference staff (Cassell & Hiremath, 2012; Connaway & Radford, 2011; Mu, Dimitroff, Jordan, & Burclaff, 2011; Steiner, 2011). Owing to the nature of VRS, the patrons get less instruction and training (Steiner, 2011). Due to the type of interaction in the f2f reference service, the librarian can visually demonstrate search strategies and skills. In virtual reference, however, it is challenging to create and recognize teachable moments, and patrons get less instruction and training (Steiner, 2011).

3.1.3. Patrons and preferences of VRS

In academic libraries, virtual services serve all patrons. Faculty as well as students embrace electronic resources and services to varying degrees (Moyo, 2004). User preferences are shaped by several factors (Nicol & Crook, 2013), some of the most researched being the perceived convenience of a service, the online skills of the user, and the type of information a user is seeking. Chow and Croxton (2012) report that convenience is important across all library user groups (students, faculty, and staff), and that user preferences are also linked to their age and the kind of research in which they are involved. Some studies (Nicol & Crook, 2013; Connaway & Radford, 2010) found that students, who are typically comfortable in the online environment, are likely to find chat both convenient and familiar.

3.1.4. Questions in VRS

Studies show that VR services (mostly via email) receive a large percentage of research questions which are similar to the types of questions asked at physical reference (Fennewald, 2006; Foley, 2002; McCulley & Reinauer, 2007). Fennewald (2006) found that the majority of questions in VRS were considered "reference," whereas the majority of questions at reference desks were "directional" (p. 27). Sears (2001), Houlson, McCready, and Pfahl (2007) and Hanz and Lange (2013) specifically analyzed the types of questions asked in online chat reference. Unlike Fennewald (2006) they observed that a minority of the questions were research-based while the remaining related to policy, procedures, resources, directions, ready reference, or technical matters.

3.2. Information seeking behavior

Transactions at the reference desk (physical and virtual) reflect the information seeking behavior of students and faculty at an academic institution (Finnell & Fontane, 2010). As academic libraries become fully immersed in the 21st century, they are beginning to realize that to best meet users' needs, they must first look at user preferences. Library users attempt to minimize the overall work associated with their information needs. Young and Von Seggern (2001) found that time spent in locating information and convenience of use were significant factors in information seeking behavior, regardless of patron's academic status. Information seekers have a lot of options and little time, and use many different types of communication tools. Libraries are trying to embrace the challenge of meeting the needs of their users (Chow & Croxton, 2012).

3.3. Millennials' information needs

Members of the millennial generation (also known as the net generation, screenagers, or digital generation) were born between 1979 and 1994 (Connaway, Radford, & Williams, 2009). These patrons tend to be results-oriented and practical when looking for information. They want easy access to full-text documents (Radford & Connaway, 2007) and become impatient with complex searching that yields only citations or abstracts. They expect full gratification of their information requests on the spot. They are used to turning to the Web for help, so Google and Wikipedia have become familiar and trusted resources for information queries for them. Millennial generation students comprise the largest cohort of today's academic library users and pose a special challenge for information service development (Connaway et al., 2009). Millennials feel at home in virtual environments. Meeting patrons on their own turf may strengthen a library's presence and help advertise what librarians can do for information-seeking users (Christopherson, 2011).

4. Methodology

This study used a mixed quantitative and qualitative method for analyzing the virtual reference transactions at the University of Haifa's library. Two VR services were studied: email and chat. In addition, a comparison was made between the results and reference librarians' answers to the open-ended questionnaires. Virtual reference transactions that occurred during December 2012 were analyzed, and the reference librarians were surveyed in October 2013.

4.1. Sample

The study included all transactions using email (213 exchanges) and chat (116 interactions) that occurred during December 2012. The content of 10% of the reference sessions was analyzed by two coders. The inter-coder reliability was 91%. The library's reference staff ($n = 16$,

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