

Term Paper

Part I: Critique of Virtual Reference

Where We Are and Where We're Going Online

Part II: Development of Basic Reference Collection

Fine Arts and Art History

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Part I: Critique of Virtual Reference: Where We Are and Where We're Going Online

Abstract

The virtual environment is constantly changing and libraries must adapt to these changes, especially in the way they provide reference services. This paper examines the evolution of reference services from the physical desk to the virtual arena, including the various technologies being used to implement virtual reference. Problems with virtual reference services are discussed, as are the positive and negative effects of virtual reference service on patrons as well as librarians. Finally, areas of improvement are explored in addition to projections for the future of virtual reference service.

Introduction

The use of computer technology has risen to extreme levels in just the past ten years. These days, almost everything is interactive and technology-based. There are smartphones, GPS devices, and ever-faster computers and operating systems. Customers can scan their own groceries at the supermarket or check out their own books at the library. While not so new anymore, the ATM is an excellent example of computer technology, allowing the user to complete a number of different banking transactions without ever entering the bank. It is no wonder that computer technology would find its way to the library reference desk as virtual reference.

Virtual reference refers to any contact with a library's reference desk *without actually going to the physical library*. This includes use of the telephone, interactive chat, instant

messaging, and email to answer patrons' queries. Virtual reference has moved quickly into the library profession, bringing positives and negatives with it.

Evolution of virtual reference services

As communication technology has worked its way into everyday life, so too it has library reference services. Initially, the telephone allowed patrons to call and ask their reference questions, thus not requiring them to go to the library. However, reference materials were all print sources, so the patron would most likely end up at the library to consult the specific sources. Later, the fax machine allowed librarians to interact with patrons and send simple documents. Now the majority of virtual reference is online in three major forms: email, chat, and instant messaging. Email consists of messages sent back and forth to virtual mailboxes. Chat takes place in real time and often includes co-browsing. Instant messaging is short, instantaneous messages and is much less structured than chat.

Problems with virtual reference

Before implementing any new service, library administrators need to look at the potential problems with the service. This is no different for virtual reference—pros and cons should be weighed, potential solutions need to be explored prior to service implementation, and eventually administrators should make a decision. Some problems with virtual reference include technology issues, miscommunication between the patron and librarian, quality control over virtual reference sessions, and cost.

Technology issues

As mentioned before, computers and operating systems grow faster all the time. However, the computer that the remote user is operating in a virtual reference transaction may be incompatible with the computer the librarian is using: “Bandwidth, server traffic, incompatibilities with Macs and Netscape browsers, and unexplained failures dot the landscape of virtual reference” (Smyth 90). In addition, newer computers no longer support some web browsers. Every aspect of technology is not updated at the same time, increasing the chance that the remote user is using a computer that will not support the library’s chat reference service. To satisfy the patron, “...whatever chat software a library is using should be accessible to all users, not just those with the latest hardware” (Buckley 132). Furthermore, if a library is part of a consortium, the individual libraries that make up that consortium need to all be running compatible systems. Email may not carry the same incompatibility issues as chat, but it too can have problems. For example, if a patron has a full email inbox, the librarian may not be able to respond to their question. In addition, an overloaded network or a misspelled email address may keep an email from being delivered to a patron.

Similarly, a patron’s computer may have a firewall that blocks online chat or instant messaging services, especially if they are using a public computer that is filtered. Pop-up windows from instant messaging may be blocked outright, regardless of their content. Additionally, the patron’s wireless signal may unexpectedly be lost. Since computers are the backbone of virtual reference, even a small technical glitch can disrupt the service. This, in turn, can cause miscommunication between patrons and librarians.

Miscommunication between the patron and the librarian

An equally important problem associated with virtual reference is miscommunication. There are several reasons for this: patrons are not clear about what they are seeking, the librarian is not well-versed in the subject the patron is seeking information about, and there is a lack of face-to-face contact.

In Nilsen and Ross's article regarding user evaluation of virtual reference, they find that patrons form vague initial questions in chat as they do in face-to-face meetings with reference librarians: "They may say, 'Can you give me information on transportation?' when actually they want pictures of steam engines" (71). In this example, the reference librarian on the other end of the chat or email may ask a clarifying question like, "What sort of transportation are you seeking information on?" When the patron indicates that steam engines are the subject, the reference librarian may begin searching databases for information on steam engines without knowing that the patron wants images, not a detailed history on steam engines in the United States. This miscommunication can cost the patron and the librarian time that could be better spent searching image databases.

Often, the reference librarian on the other end of the line (phone, chat, or email) may not know much about the subject the patron is asking about. This may stem from the above situation when patrons do not know what they want, or just simple lack of knowledge of quantum physics, Renaissance painters, or any other topic patrons may be seeking information about. In an attempt to answer the question, the librarian may provide wrong or inappropriate information or attempt to avoid the question altogether. Cassell and Hiremath assert that the reference librarian should not feel like they have to know everything; rather, clarifying the question, asking a

colleague who knows the subject, or locating a resource can aid in clearing up a miscommunication based upon lack of knowledge (40-41).

A major contributing factor to miscommunication in virtual reference is the lack of face-to-face contact. Video chat does not seem to have burst upon the virtual reference scene yet, so librarians and patrons are limited to text-based communication for the time being. While the immediacy of chat and email allows the user to get information without actually visiting the library, it hampers non-verbal cues: "Online chat involves the use of written communication; chatters cannot make use of body language, facial expressions, or tone of voice. They must manage to convey their messages textually, but frequently fail to do so. When written communication is weak, a virtual reference session is hampered" (Smyth 87). Written communication may be weak or patrons may simply misinterpret it. Without non-verbal cues such as smiling or nodding encouragingly, "...[u]sers can interpret apparently innocuous statements as negative or critical" (Nilsen 75). For example, a librarian could respond to a request for etymology with, "Did you look in a collegiate dictionary?" While the librarian is trying to avoid duplicating steps the patron may have already taken, the patron could read that question and assume the librarian thinks he is stupid and does not know to look in a collegiate dictionary. The patron then may terminate the reference transaction while the librarian remains puzzled, ready to search the *Oxford English Dictionary* or a subject-specific dictionary. Nilsen and Ross give the following example: "One user commented, 'The face-to-face interview makes sense. It was hard for them to know exactly what I wanted and it was hard for me to tell them. In fact I wanted them to try and read my mind a little bit'" (75). No matter how competent a searcher, a reference librarian cannot read minds, and the lack of non-verbal cues in a virtual reference transaction makes the likelihood of miscommunication much higher.

Many of the problems associated with virtual reference may be ameliorated if a reference interview is conducted. Cassell and Hiremath assert, “Librarians should approach the virtual reference question in the same way as a face-to-face one. In e-mail reference, the structure of the reference interview is a well-designed form that captures essential information. This is the best way for the librarian to get information from the user. Chat and IM reference have considerable potential for the reference interview because it is done in real time” (24). Unfortunately, the traditional reference interview can easily be overlooked in a virtual reference transaction. Whether the librarian is simply too busy to conduct one or assumes the patron does not have time for a lengthy conversation, it can lead to miscommunication. As Zino succinctly puts it, “...[h]ow can librarians help customers without understanding what the customer is talking about?” (94). Janes calls it a “noninterview” and goes on to explain that the virtual reference technology reinforces this: “When sending an e-mail question to a library reference service or filling out a Web form, I think most people assume that’s it and that an answer will come back rather than more questions” (51). Janes also mentions his belief that reference librarians feel they cannot conduct a proper interview in a virtual environment (52). However, patrons in Nilsen and Ross’s study indicate that they wish they were asked further questions or that email forms were more detailed and that “...the librarian saves time in the long run by asking open questions or sense-making questions...” (73). Reference librarians should conduct a reference interview virtually just as they would at a reference desk and patrons should understand that further questions are for their benefit.

Quality control

Furthermore, there may be problems with the quality of information being disseminated. When a reference book is published, it is reviewed and edited before publication and sale. With

the Internet, there are no rules. Anyone can post any type of information, factual or not. While competent searching is a core skill of librarianship, no one is immune from being spoofed. For that matter, even trustworthy resources online can be hacked and edited to contain false information. Cassell and Hiremath state, “Without any checks on authorship, reliability, accuracy, currency, or validity, information can quite literally run amok” (237). Reference librarians may, in a hurry to provide the patron with information, mistakenly offer a source that is not factual. If the patron does not double-check the information and ends up with information that is altogether wrong, they may blame the librarian. With print sources, there is a little more trust because the materials had to go through the editing and publication process. Material that is printed on a page rather than constructed by pixels on a computer screen is generally assumed to be more valid. A patron who IMs the librarian and says, “I need directions to this restaurant” and expects the answer quickly may be more likely to receive wrong directions than if they had consulted a printed map.

Cost to libraries and consortia

Additionally, there is a cost associated with virtual reference services. In addition to printed reference materials, the library often subscribes to databases as well and staff is trained on use of databases, chat software, and email. The library or a group of libraries agrees to subscribe to the chat software and needs to adequately staff it, sometimes even when the library is closed: “[M]ost libraries dedicate a separate staff member or members to sit in front of a computer and wait for virtual reference questions during every hour their chat service is open....After-hour service requires paying staff for that additional time or paying somebody else to do it for you” (Coffman 46). Routine maintenance and updates may also factor in to the cost of a virtual reference service. All of these aspects may add up to expensive maintenance of an

underused system. Coffman and Arret estimate that, with web collaboration software and instant messaging services, there could be at least 3,000 to 4,000 libraries providing virtual reference (42). At the same time, taking into account staff development and training, salaries, web design, and software, libraries have spent millions of dollars, but usage statistics remain low with some libraries reporting only one or two questions a day (Coffman 44). In the current economic climate, the cost of providing virtual reference may be prohibitive to libraries or states. In Connecticut, for example, state budget cuts threaten the Connecticut Library Consortium (CLC), which provides a discount for InfoAnytime, Connecticut's virtual reference service, as well as databases and other services. Without the CLC, the discount will be gone and it is doubtful that individual libraries will be able to foot the bill themselves (*Information for Librarians*).

Effect of virtual reference on patrons and librarians

Simultaneously, while considering virtual reference problems, the practice of virtual reference should be considered. Often, it is easy to forget that there are actual people behind the chat boxes or email forms. Virtual reference is not computers talking, it is people talking through the medium of a computer. The unreality of virtual reference affects patrons and librarians in negative and positive ways. Some of the negatives include unrealistic time pressures, rudeness, and reluctance to ask questions based on prior bad experiences. On the positive side, virtual reference can reach new users and provide unique opportunities for librarians.

Negative aspects of virtual reference and their effect on librarians

Lack of time is an oft-cited negative aspect that affects librarians working in virtual reference. Janes declares, "People get impatient with chat, especially experienced chat users.

They can drop out of conversations...because they're just bored, and there are fewer social impediments to doing that than there are in the real world. As a result, librarians feel rushed and pressured to come up with responses quickly...." (150). The librarian may neglect the reference interview, especially if there are other patrons waiting or the current patron is annoyed by the time lag. Most librarians do not want to neglect the information needs of their patrons, but speed is often deemed most important: "Our staff feared the abandonment of negotiating reference interviews, given the expectation for speed in most online communication. Similarly, some felt the erosion in the instructional role of our reference service, with staff instead providing speedy answers online, or giving scant instructions so that they can move on to the next call in the queue" (Smyth 90). Librarians who focus mainly on churning through reference questions run the risk of alienating their patrons.

Rudeness from patrons creates another negative effect on librarians. One can provide excellent service and still have to deal with a problem patron: "In the virtual environment, abuse may not be immediately life-threatening, but is still unpleasant, demeaning, and may occur for a variety of reasons: the patron is frustrated, s/he may not believe there is a human on the other end of the computer, they may be researching while intoxicated, or there may just be a communication problem" (Lindbloom 9). These actions by the patron may cause stress on the librarian and cause poor job performance or lack of motivation to help patrons. The librarian may also try to exit the reference transaction quickly, further adding to the patron's frustration. In a study on rude patrons, Radford describes this as relational disconnect or failure to build a rapport, going on to define the terms: "Relational Disconnect/Failure to Build Rapport is defined as behavior that discourages give and take, mutual understanding, and development of relationships" (Lankes 32). This definition includes impatience and verbal abuse. Radford cites

a chat transcript from Maryland's AskUsNow service where "...the client exits with a stream of abuse including name-calling and derision of the librarian's professional and personal life: 'get a real job loser I bet your spouse is cheating on you! hahaha!'" (Lankes 32). This verbally abusive behavior goes beyond simple rudeness and impatience and turns into an attack on the librarian. Since the patron is not face-to-face with the librarian, he is relationally disconnected and has total disregard for the librarian. Such abuse can be damaging in that librarians may feel undervalued. Unfortunately, repeated rudeness may, in some cases, cause the librarian to resign, at least from virtual reference service.

Negative aspects of virtual reference and their effect on patrons

Patrons are often taking a chance with virtual reference service, especially if they have never used it before. They expect an answer or at least some direction in their information search. Indeed, many patrons are drawn to the virtual reference desk in the first place because they can ask potentially embarrassing questions while having the computer as a buffer. However, they do not always find the virtual reference desk a friendly place. Patrons may misinterpret a librarian's attitude or query and this may lead to a negative opinion of virtual reference. In addition, a librarian may be just plain rude. Nilsen and Ross mention the following interaction: "...a message came on the screen reading 'Got to go. Someone else is waiting.' I was stunned by the abruptness of this termination" (67). Patrons deserve the attention of the reference librarian until their question is satisfactorily answered. Disinterested reference librarians who do not acknowledge patrons waiting in the chat queue or well-intentioned librarians who come across as brusque in email may make patrons uneasy about using virtual reference again. A bad experience may lead them to feel judged and give up on virtual reference altogether.

Clearly, the negative aspects of virtual reference on patrons and librarians can create a domino effect. Time limits beget abruptness from the librarian, which begets rudeness from the patron, and then the patron may be hesitant the next time around because of the abruptness. Each negative aspect is exacerbated by another, and the lack of face-to-face contact makes misinterpretation almost impossible to avoid.

Positive aspects of virtual reference and their effect on patrons

Often, a patron requires information that is embarrassing or they simply do not know how to ask for. The anonymity of virtual reference has a positive effect on patrons, especially if the librarian takes time to carefully consider and answer the question. Tenopir explains the benefit for non-native English speakers is that they may be more confident typing a question rather than asking it at a traditional reference desk (12/2004, 42). In addition, "...[l]ibrarians working VR may receive many more sexually explicit questions than they would get on the traditional reference desk" (Lindbloom 9). Here the lack of face-to-face contact is positive because patrons do not feel like the librarian is judging them. In these cases, librarians need to be empathetic and especially careful to avoid miscommunication.

Reaching new users is another positive aspect of virtual reference. Children and teenagers who may not want to go to the library or may not be able to get there can use virtual reference services instead, allowing them to benefit from library resources that are not available on the Internet, such as full-text databases. Bailey-Hainer cites the statistics: "The overall usage of AskColorado is consistently 50-53 percent from K-12 students....QandANJ gets 50-60 percent of its usage from teens" (47). Virtual reference may serve as a conduit for online users to come in and see what the library has to offer or "...[r]emote users may also desire specific instruction so that they may replicate a search later on their own and become independent

searchers” (Buckley 134). Also, virtual reference services may reach users “...who don’t currently think of ‘the library’ (by which they mean the building with the books in it for kids to read) as a place where they can get help, information, guidance, and so on” (Janes 47). In any case, the outreach of virtual reference is positive for patrons in that it draws them into the service, provides them with information and searching skills, and leaves them better informed. If they had a positive experience, they are more likely to recommend the service, which in turn brings in more users.

Positive aspects of virtual reference and their effect on librarians

Librarianship is all about service and helping people find information they seek. Virtual reference expands the public service aspect beyond the library walls: “The ability to assist students or patrons during times where the library is not open or for someone who does not have easy or ready access to a library is extremely rewarding...” (Lindbloom 12). Virtual reference also creates unique opportunities for librarians, including working from home, managing virtual reference cooperatives, and sharpening technology skills (Lindbloom). Reference is no longer constrained to a desk when the library is open, and with the use of virtual reference comes more job openings in newer fields. These jobs are not limited to librarians working in libraries, either. Janes suggests, “It might also be worth investigating the use of contract, part-time, retired, or freelance reference librarians who want to work at home, maybe for several libraries, respecting the individual policies of each and focusing on resources their community has available” (159). Janes also states that by having both traditional and reference services available, this “...will allow us not only to serve people in the ways they wish to be served but also allow librarians to work in ways they find comfortable and rewarding” (161).

Areas for improvement in virtual reference

The virtual environment is constantly changing, so what worked one day may be obsolete the next. The human aspect of virtual reference remains static, but as computers become more powerful, databases grow, and needs change, libraries should adapt and improve. There is always room for improvement and innovation in a fluid field like virtual reference. The major areas of improvement include treatment of patrons, training of librarians, and marketing the service.

Treatment of patrons

Simply put, the reference interview should not be abandoned in the virtual environment. Eric Zino states, "...let's work on improving VR by slowing down, conducting real reference interviews, and focusing on our customers" (94). In the long run, a reference interview will speed up transactions because the librarian will not be repeating steps that the patron already did and found lacking. Similarly, the reference librarian should follow up with the patron: "A way to give the user a second chance of finding helpful sources is for the librarian to ask a follow-up question, 'If you don't find what you are looking for in these books, come back and we can try something else'" (Nilsen). Both the initial interview and the follow up make the patron feel that their question is important and they are not just another message in the librarian's inbox. The patron is more likely to go away satisfied and recommends the virtual reference service to others.

Training of librarians

Virtual reference librarians should be trained in all aspects of the technology they are using and have more extensive knowledge of the Internet and online resources (Lindbloom 7). Furthermore, they should be able to identify the patron's question, plan and implement a search, locate appropriate resources, and deliver the information in a timely manner, all while being

friendly through text-based communication (Lindbloom 16). Every reference transaction is different and there is no perfect way of implementing a virtual reference service. However, a combination of reality-based reference skills, familiarity with technology, and application of past experience will go a long way toward improving service.

Interaction in a virtual environment also requires training. Chad Buckley suggests using the Golden Rule, that is, to treat others how we would like to be treated. He states, “The Golden Rule...does require that we be sensitive to [the patron’s] needs and desires at that moment” (134). Librarians cannot avoid questions or be rude to patrons-- a rule that holds true on the physical reference desk. However, the reference librarian working virtually needs to convey that without any facial or vocal cues. There is no way to get rid of all miscommunication, but working on improving virtual interaction will help minimize it.

Marketing virtual reference services

Awareness is the first step to good virtual reference. If no one knows the service exists, they will not use it and the library will end up paying a lot of money for an underused service. The marketing practices in New Jersey, Colorado, and Ohio indicate that informing the media, providing clear links on library websites, and putting together press kits go a long way in increasing usage of virtual reference services. Other useful practices include clear branding on the state level rather than at a single library (Bailey-Hainer 47). Librarians could offer to demonstrate the service to patrons at their convenience, create signage, and offer incentives to those who use the service. Informed patrons are much more likely to use virtual reference than those who stumble into it with no knowledge.

Where are we headed?

It is clear that virtual reference is here to stay. Reference is not going away, it is evolving: “The future of reference is best summed up as ‘high tech and high touch.’ Libraries will continue to upgrade their technology....They will also continue to develop personalized services for every user whether that user asks for service face-to-face at the reference desk, by telephone, by e-mail, or by chat” (Cassell 345). As reference moves away from face-to-face interaction, patrons want virtual services tailored to their needs. Libraries should continue to upgrade and maintain their computers and software as much as possible within their budget in order to stay current. Moreover, librarians will need to be updated and trained on all new features of virtual reference. To provide a high level of personalization for each patron, customer service skills should be sharpened, and perhaps even training in basic psychology would be useful to better understand patrons.

Currently, there is nothing wrong with virtual reference, but there is so much potential: “There are so many possibilities of things we can do, ways in which we can think in new ways about services we could provide, modes of serving people, technologies we could try, communities we could reach in ways we never could before. It staggers the imagination to think what could happen if we seized these chances” (Janes 192). Being satisfied with the current model of virtual reference will not suffice. Libraries need to innovate, communicate with each other, and communicate with patrons about virtual reference services and what they can do. Finally, librarians need to share experiences in order to discover the pitfalls and triumphs of virtual reference. By facing the future as a profession, we can improve service and better satisfy patrons.

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Part II: Development of Basic Reference Collection: Fine Arts and Art History

Introduction

The following selections are for a reference collection regarding fine arts and art history. It is for use by art enthusiasts and working artists and does not include information regarding art or antique collecting. Many of these selections will be appropriate for art students, as well. The purpose of the collection is to inform users about art and help working artists get their work sold or into a gallery. Every attempt was made to keep the cost of the collection reasonable while including as much current information as possible to achieve the collection's purpose. Also, the facility in which this collection is housed would have a non-specialized reference collection, as well, such as a standard set of encyclopedias, a collegiate dictionary, and the like.

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