



Chat Reference

A SPEC Kit compiled by

Jana Ronan
Interactive Reference Coordinator, RefeXpress
University of Florida

Carol Turner
Associate Director, Public Services Division
University of Florida

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SURVEY



Executive Summary

Introduction

The decline in questions asked at academic library reference desks over the past 10 years is an often-cited phenomenon in reference literature and in discussions among librarians. ARL statistics show that in 2001 the median for reference transactions in member libraries was 105,087, a substantial drop from the 1991 median of 133,022 transactions. Yet total numbers of users remained relatively the same, as the median for student enrollments increased gradually from 18,266 in 1991 to 19,083 in 2001. One generally held opinion as to why reference desk transactions are declining is that users are migrating to rapidly proliferating online information resources. Arguably, users still have information needs that are not being met in the online environment, most notably reference assistance. In answer to this challenge, librarians are working to reposition their services to make them more easily available and effective for remote users who may be working two states away, in a residence hall across campus, or in an office next door to the library. Popular means towards this end have been telephone reference, Web-based instructional aids and tutorials, and the ubiquitous e-mail reference service. Only recently have ARL librarians discovered the utility of chat, or text-based messaging in real-time.

A SPEC survey on chat reference was distributed to the 124 ARL member libraries in July 2002. Sixty-six libraries (53%) responded to the survey. Chat reference was defined for the survey as synchronous or real-time text-based messaging between computer users on the Internet. It is often referred to as "live online reference," "virtual reference," or "digital reference" in articles and discussions. The goals of the survey were to explore the pervasiveness of this new type of service in

ARL member libraries and to provide an overview of the technologies being used, usage patterns, and practices in the areas of personnel, policies and procedures, evaluation, and collaboration.

Extent of Chat Reference Service

The survey results indicate that live online reference, or chat reference, is a new and dynamic library service. As of the summer of 2002, only slightly more than half of the respondents (36 or 54%) reported that they offered chat reference service as defined above. All but two of these had been in operation less than two years. Eleven had been in operation for one to two years; sixteen for six months to a year; and seven for less than six months. An examination of ARL member library Web sites in December 2002 revealed that an additional 31 libraries have begun a chat reference service since the survey was distributed.

Not only are ARL libraries adding chat as a medium to extend reference services online at a very rapid rate, but they also are using a variety of software packages and services that are hosted on the vendor's server. "The spectrum of chat software ranges from free or inexpensive software, such as instant messaging or Internet Relay Chat (IRC) that supports text-based conferencing between two or more users, to sophisticated and often expensive software used in call centers that typically combines text-based chat with sound, video, white-boarding, voice over IP (VoIP) and the ability to send users Web pages and files." (Ronan, 2003).

Of the survey respondents that have a chat reference service, 83% use a hosted service. The two most popular are 24/7 Reference and Virtual Reference Toolkit (LSSI), both hosted services. When asked about the relative importance of

features in the chat interface, 81% of respondents indicated that easy access for users, or the ability to access chat reference assistance with only a Web browser (unimpeded by downloading and installing software) is of prime importance. The other features considered important are push page technology (69%), which enables the librarian to send a Web page that displays on the user's screen, and co-browsing or escorting (61%) capabilities that automatically send the user the same Web pages the librarian sees. Statistics keeping is deemed important by 61% of respondents, followed by automation of frequently used resources (56%) and system price (56%). Respondents mentioned that vendor support, user familiarity with the software, and control of transcripts are also factors in deciding which chat software package to implement.

Personnel and Work Environment

Staffing

While there is some diversity in how ARL member libraries staff their chat reference services, certain practices dominate. Librarians are the primary service providers in every one of the responding libraries. General reference librarians provide chat reference in 89% of the settings; subject specialists in 72%; and instruction librarians in 44%. Fifteen libraries (42%) also staff their chat service with support staff and ten (28%) use graduate students from library schools. In a small number of libraries, technical services, administrative, and systems staff also participate. Interestingly, only one institution indicated that staff from their consortium provides chat service; the remainder staff their service with local personnel.

Almost an equal number of libraries assign chat duties as part of ongoing reference assignments (25 or 69%) as rely on volunteers (22 or 61%); in eleven libraries both approaches are used. One surprising finding is that chat reference is not a full-time responsibility in any institution. On average, an individual only monitors the chat reference service three hours a week. In the vast majority of responding libraries (27 or 77%), an individual's schedule ranges from one to four hours per week, though eight (23%) report that chat reference staff

work six hours or more (up to 12 hours at one location.)

The most popular location for chat reference work is in the staff member's own office (83%), despite the opportunities the medium allows for remote connection. A service desk is a distant second-favorite location (36%). Chat reference personnel telecommute from home or other non-library locations in only eight of the libraries (22%).

Organization and Management

A group approach seems to be the most popular management model. Twelve institutions (33%) have special working groups or teams that manage the day-to-day operations of the chat reference service. These teams have such creative but descriptive monikers as "WebChat Action Team," "Live Ref Team," and "Real-Time Reference Team." Eight respondents (23%) have created special positions such as "Digital Reference Coordinator" or "Interactive Chat Coordinator" to manage the new service. Other institutions have simply added the new responsibilities to those of the head of reference (25%). In several cases, the chat reference service is located in a branch or subject library, in which case, the head of that library manages the service. Regardless of who manages the day-to-day operations, that person (or team) most often reports either to the head of reference services (28%) or an AUL (28%) and in a few cases to both.

Skills and Training

Survey respondents were asked to rate the importance of a range of reference, Web, and computer skills for the staff who are providing chat reference service. Reference interviewing and facility with Web-based information sources are held to be the most important skills. Comfort with computers and the ability to make effective referrals follow closely as other important skills. While respondents indicated that current staff have at least some of the necessary skills, 69% reported that staff require additional training, primarily in use of the specific chat reference software and chatting techniques or "chattiquette." Others mentioned the need for additional training on reference sources

and searching the Web.

Service Schedule

Service hours tend to fall within regular library operating hours, with chat reference most commonly available during the Monday through Friday workweek. Very few chat reference services operate on the weekend. Of the thirty-five survey respondents, only nine offer Sunday service; six of these offer Saturday hours. Hours of availability vary from as few as 10 hours a week (approximately 2 hours daily Monday through Thursday) to 100 hours per week (roughly 14 hours a day, seven days a week.) Nine libraries offer up to 20 hours a week; slightly less than half of the institutions (17 or 49%) provide between 21 and 40 hours; six offer 41 to 70 hours; and three offer 71 to 100 hours. No library reports offering 24/7 chat reference services.

The tendency is to vary the service hours during the year, according to the local academic schedule. Only 10 libraries have established a consistent service schedule throughout the year. The majority (25 or 71%) offers service during the regular semesters, slightly fewer offer summer service, and fewer than half offer intersession or holiday service. The libraries that offer the largest number of chat reference service hours tend to be those that vary the schedule from term to term.

Many libraries are experimenting with service hours to arrive at the best schedule for users. Sixty-four percent of the respondents report they have changed the schedule since beginning the service and six are considering a change. In general, the number of days of service or number of hours per day has increased as both demand and the number of volunteers increase. A few libraries have eliminated service during low-use times.

Users and Usage

The survey results indicate that chat reference assistance is offered to a broad range of users. Graduate students and faculty are eligible users at 83% of the responding libraries, undergraduates and staff of the parent institutions are eligible at 81%. An impressive finding is that 23 or 64% of the institutions offer reference service to anyone who

logs on and asks a question. Two libraries qualified this policy, saying that queries from outside users must relate to their institution or a unique collection in their library. Forty-two percent of the respondents provide online help to their surrounding communities. As one respondent put it, "Users are anonymous, but service is open to all."

The most frequent users of chat reference are undergraduate students, a finding that will not surprise readers of the recent National Telecommunications and Information Administration report, *A Nation Online: How Americans Are Expanding Their Use Of The Internet* <<http://www.ntia.doc.gov/ntiahome/dn/index.html>>. One librarian commented that use seems proportional to the size of the group and that "undergrads use it most, but they are also our most numerous group of users." Perhaps these are the patrons observed using chat reference at computers in 69% of the responding libraries, instead of using traditional reference desk service.

Graduate students are the next largest category of users followed distantly by the world at large. Faculty has used the service at only three libraries and, while patrons from fellow members of a library consortium are eligible at 14 institutions, none of these are yet reported as users. This may change as several respondents report that they are preparing to begin consortial service.

The most frequently asked questions are about library services and institution-held e-resources, followed by questions about library collections, then connectivity or access to online resources. Less frequently asked are in-depth research questions, questions on using Web resources, and basic factual questions.

Policies and Procedures

Survey respondents were asked to submit documents that provide information about the service for users and describe policies and procedures. An examination of these documents reveals that many of the libraries have established specific policies and procedures that not only govern operation of the service, but also define how chat integrates with other information and

reference services and how it is unique. These policy statements are generally provided on, or linked to from, the introductory chat reference Web page. Typically, these statements include the following components.

What the service is, when it is offered, and how to access it.

Kinds of questions that are appropriate for the service. Some libraries state that requests for certain library services (e.g., circulation or interlibrary loan actions) are not appropriate for this service or they recommend that the user review the library's FAQ page before asking a question. Several libraries state that chat is most appropriate for short-answer questions.

Resources used. Electronic resources are obviously the preferred method for answering questions in the virtual reference environment. Access to a proprietary electronic resource may be limited to chat patrons who are primary clientele, though, if the license prohibits remote access by non-primary clientele.

Privacy policy. While transcripts of chat sessions can be extraordinarily valuable training and service evaluation tools, their availability raises privacy issues for both patrons and staff. Library patrons may be concerned about the confidentiality of their personal information and research interests. Library staff may be concerned about how chat transcripts will be used for evaluating their reference service performance. The USA PATRIOT Act and other recent security-related legislation have heightened awareness about the need for a policy that addresses the retention of and access to session transcripts, as well as other patron transaction records. Libraries are responding by establishing and making available privacy policies for both users and staff.

Libraries are also developing procedures that prescribe chat reference operations. Some of these

are mechanical—how to log on, set up a session, and log off. Others relate to how the service is delivered and the unique aspects of chat. These procedures include, for example:

- Development and use of scripted messages;
- How to transfer patrons and make referrals;
- How to communicate in chat mode—quickly, frequently, and briefly so the patron knows the session is active;
- How to use appropriate etiquette in the chat environment.

Publicity

Since chat reference is delivered electronically, prominent display on the library Web page and easy identification of the service are probably the most fundamental promotional tools. Nearly all the responding libraries (32 or 89%) report that the service is highlighted on their library Web page and all but one indicated that a link to the service is provided on the top or second-level page. Many libraries feature "Ask A Librarian" or similar phrases on their top page. In addition, some libraries work closely with the university's Web portal and/or course management portal to provide access to the service. Most respondents (30 or 83%) promote their service in bibliographic instruction sessions. The majority also use library newsletters, local papers, university newsletters, student newspapers, correspondence with users, and announcements on electronic mailing lists as promotional tools. Posters, flyers, and bookmarks were frequently mentioned as other approaches. Some specific promotional efforts include "do not disturb" door hangers, t-shirts, candy, computer monitor calendar strips, and cafeteria table toppers. Other promotion venues include campus orientation sessions, admissions materials, and alumni associations.

Evaluation

The newness of chat reference is reflected in the area of evaluation. Several respondents commented that evaluation is being planned or that they are analyzing transcripts to evaluate service effectiveness. All but one of the responding libraries track the number of chat reference transactions.

Twenty-one (58%) ask users to fill out a Web survey. A small number conduct focus groups or interview users periodically.

The very nature of chat reference makes it possible to evaluate the quality of reference service in ways never before possible. Transcripts of sessions can be used to assess how well staff members understand patron information needs and conduct the reference interview, how accurately they answer questions, and how effectively they select information to meet the patron's level and depth of need. Consequently, transcripts can be used very effectively to identify problems—general and individual-specific—and to develop case studies and training tools. Furthermore, statistics generated by the system produce a great deal of information that can be used for evaluation. One respondent reports, "Each session becomes a tangible artifact that is invaluable for studying user and reference staff behaviour, the research process, and resource usage. Some of the statistics we are generating from each transaction include:

- What page the patron was on when they needed help
- What time the patron came in
- How long they waited until they were picked up by the library staff
- Most popular hour, day of week
- IP address of patron (i.e., on/ off campus)

Web statistics tell us:

- How many times our entry pages were hit
- Most popular hour, day of week
- Browsers used"

While transcripts and user surveys make it possible to evaluate chat reference more effectively than traditional reference and other library services, survey respondents are not satisfied with their libraries' performance in the area of chat reference evaluation, yet. Respondents were asked to indicate their impressions about the quality of four aspects of their chat reference service: ease of use of the service, number of service hours, accuracy of answers, and evaluating the service. After indicating their expectations for the minimum

level and desired level of service on a scale of 1 to 9, they were asked to rate their perception of their library's actual performance level. On average, the respondents have fairly high expectations for both the minimal and desired performance levels. (Accuracy and ease of use are somewhat more important than evaluation and number of hours.) Regardless, they did not give themselves high marks when asked to assess their own library's performance in these areas. As a group, the responding libraries rate their actual performance as below the minimum performance level in all four categories with the largest gap in the area of evaluation. Perhaps as chat reference services mature, the "adequacy gaps" between the desired and actual performance levels will disappear for all these categories.

Survey Follow-up Questions

Analysis of the survey data raised new questions for the investigators. To find answers, they contacted the 36 survey respondents who offer chat reference service and checked ARL member library Web sites to gather additional information. Below are statistics on use of chat reference services, information about preferred chat reference software, and a brief description of collaborative chat reference projects.

Chat Reference Usage Statistics, 2002

It is difficult to collect chat reference usage statistics at this time. Many institutions are just starting chat services and others are still devising means to count transactions. Some libraries use software packages such as AOL Instant Messenger that do not automatically count transactions. Other libraries switched vendors or chat software packages midyear. The following chat reference usage statistics were supplied by 10 of the 36 ARL libraries that responded to the original survey. Each has granted permission to include their data in this SPEC Kit.

The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign reported the highest number of transactions. This institution has as many as five librarians online simultaneously to take questions and the longest service hours. They have offered their Ask

a Librarian service for less than two years. Not surprisingly, the libraries with more modest service hours and staffing levels reported lower numbers of total chat sessions. (See Chart 1.)

Software

A review of library Web sites in December 2002 revealed that, in addition to the 36 survey respondents, 31 other ARL libraries offer chat reference service. While gathering data on the software that these newest services are using, the investigators discovered that software development and preferences are also in flux. Currently, the most popular chat reference systems are Virtual Reference Toolkit from LSSI and 24/7 Reference. Thirteen libraries each use one of these vendor-hosted services. Other products currently being used are, in order of popularity, LivePerson (9 libraries), Live Assistance (7), QuestionPoint (6), eLibrarian (5), AOL Instant Messenger (5), OnDemand (now available through QuestionPoint) (2), Human Click (now LivePerson) (1), divine Virtual Reference Desk (1), and VRLplus (1). The software being used at the remaining four libraries could not be identified.

Collaborative Projects

Collaborative chat reference service projects seem to be increasing among ARL and other libraries. In recent months, Cornell University and the University of Washington have joined to extend the hours of chat service to their patrons. Since three time zones separate their libraries, they are able to extend their service day with the assistance of colleagues across the country. Three Canadian libraries have formed the Ontario Reference Service Cooperative, libraries in the Boston area have added 24/7 chat service via the Boston Library Consortium, and OhioLink and the Washington Regional Library Consortium have begun providing chat reference service to member libraries in Ohio and the Washington D.C. area, respectively. These collaborative efforts, as well as the use of vendors such as 24/7 and LSSI that will respond to questions when an individual library's service is not staffed, are making reference assistance ubiquitous for patrons in many ARL libraries. Staffing chat

reference around the clock is something that most libraries can't do, but many still view collaborative chat projects as a way to extend their service schedule. Clearly, it is an approach that enables the library to meet the needs of those who use the Internet as a key source of information, as well as those whose information needs don't coincide with scheduled library reference service. However, some academic librarians remain leery of collaboration. As one librarian put it, "There is a perceived quality issue."

Conclusion

Chat reference is an extremely dynamic new area of library service. The survey and subsequent examination of Web sites revealed that a total of 67 ARL member libraries now offer some type of chat reference service. The number of services almost doubled in less than a year, spreading from 29% of the ARL membership in July 2002 to 54% in December 2002. Clearly, most of these services are very new; 56% of them have been in operation for a year or less.

Not only are ARL libraries adding chat as a medium to extend reference services online at a very rapid rate, they are also experimenting with a variety of software packages and hosted services. Indeed, many libraries have changed software vendors since answering the survey six months ago. At present, vendor-hosted services are the most popular.

Whether called chat, virtual, or online reference, this is an area of library service that is in continual flux at this point in its development. The savvy and committed librarians who constantly adapt new technologies, as well as service policies, to better meet the evolving information needs and search practices of users is perhaps the most constant feature at this time. Another investigation in the future is warranted to see how these librarians shape this new service to meet their users' evolving needs.

Chart 1: Sample Chat Reference Usage Statistics for 2002

Total Sessions	October Sessions	Avg. Daily Sessions	Institution Name	Age of Service	Hrs/Week	Staff Online Simultaneously
7,586	1247	41	University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign	1-2 years	50-100	5
2,560	325	14	University of Florida	over 2 years	45-56	1-2
1,117	206	9	George Washington University	1-6 months	20	1
923	137	5	University of Minnesota	1-2 years	27	1
484	65	3	Louisiana State University	6 months-1 year	37	1
310	34	2	Massachusetts Institute of Technology	1-2 years	10-28	1
158	52	2	University of California, Santa Barbara	1-6 months	50	1
109	39	2	Syracuse University	1-6 months	38	1
100	25	1	University of California, Davis	1 year	45	1
60	20	1	Michigan State University	1-6 months	20	1

UIUC: Highest in a single day was about 70 sessions, lowest about 10. Monday and Tuesday are highest; Saturday is lowest, consistently.

GWU: Service was available April to May for a six-week pilot and resumed in August.

MIT: Experienced an unusual number of failures due to technical issues. This limited use.

SU and MSU: Both of these were pilot projects.