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The Evolution of the Reference Interview

Courtney Selby¹

Abstract. While the reference interview remains the vehicle whereby librarians are able to understand the information needs of users in order to assist them, the ways in which the reference interview is conducted have changed with time and technology. This chapter provides a brief history of the evolution of the reference interview, from the face-to-face transaction to the current trends of e-mail and chat software mediated reference interviews, and examines application of these current trends in virtual reference services. While the methods of conducting the reference interview have certainly changed, the ultimate goal of meeting the information needs of the user remains constant.

Digital Models for the Reference Interview: Beyond Face-To-Face.

*The tools have changed, the mission of reference librarianship has not.*²

To understand how the reference interview has evolved, it is necessary to appreciate the nature of the reference interview itself. Despite differences in the language used, almost all attempts to define the reference interview include elements of communication and information exchange. Bopp & Smith note that “the reference interview is essentially a conversation between a reference staff member and a user, the goal of which is to ascertain the user’s information need and take appropriate action to satisfy that need through skillful use of available information sources.”³ Similarly, Katz states that “the reference interview, which takes place between the librarian with expert knowledge and the layperson in need of information, is a form of communication.”⁴ Another definition suggests that there is “purposive conversation between the librarian and the user.”⁵ When we explore the changes in reference services over time, it is

tempting to focus on the incredible transformation of those services, both with respect to the technology involved in the delivery of information and also with respect to the ever-expanding resources to which librarians can direct users. Nevertheless, the fundamental elements of a quality reference interview are unchanged.

In many ways, librarians have come to think of the face-to-face reference interview as the benchmark against which all other offerings of reference services should be measured. The face-to-face interview offers the advantages of a conversation between two people with the full range of visual and aural cues that aid in good communication. It is typically conducted inside the library, where both the librarian and user have access to the full range of resources available for answering questions. This style of reference interview offers an opportunity for the user and librarian to build a personal rapport and establish a foundation for future library use and information exchange. Moreover, the face-to-face reference interview is the transaction upon which our contemporary ideas of quality reference interviews are based.

With the advent of the telephone and its introduction into the library setting, new questions about reference services, and the reference interview itself, surfaced. As early as the mid-1930's, librarians began to advertise telephone reference as a revolutionary new type of patron service, with convenience to library users as the focal selling point.⁶ Along with this new type of reference interview came new concerns.⁷ What types of questions are appropriate for telephone reference? Which questions are best handled in a face-to-face interview? Can the library limit the delivery of library services only to library affiliates, or will it open itself to reference questions from the general public? Will telephone reference questions interfere with face-to-face

reference services? Whose questions should be attended to first? How should libraries go about staffing with this additional service in place?⁸

As telephone reference became more entrenched in the system of reference services, individual libraries answered these questions in ways that reflected their unique situations. Some libraries offered services universally, while others limited their assistance to library affiliates. Some libraries altered their staffing models to avoid interfering with in-person reference requests. Others decided to place equal value on attention to face-to-face and telephone reference questions. Still other libraries joined consortia and formed collaborative relationships with other libraries to extend services.⁹ Answering services and central library operators offered an asynchronous alternative to the telephone reference interview by delivering users' questions and contact information to librarians who could then contact the users with answers to their queries. Both the questions asked by libraries about telephone reference and the ways in which those questions have been answered resonate with the librarians who are asking questions and making policy decisions made about new reference services today. In Kern's view, this is a matter of recycling service trends, a way of using the same service-oriented framework to embrace and extend new technologies.¹⁰ Those service trends would be recycled yet again when the next substantial new information technology, the personal computer, became part of the library environment. As a greater number of libraries and library users acquired personal computers, the emphasis on the person-to-person reference transaction no longer reflected the ways in which information was being stored and the ways in which users were seeking that information.¹¹ Once again, new service models were introduced, new concerns were raised, and the tools of reference librarianship evolved to meet the needs of the user.

In the early 1990's, libraries began to incorporate recently developed web-based chat room software into the rubric of reference and information services. Many of the earliest attempts involved the use of Internet Relay Chat (IRC), a method of communication that allowed multiple users to interact in a text-based environment within forums or channels. Libraries would use a client to connect to an IRC server and either join an existing channel or set up a new channel. Library users could then connect from a remote location, join the library's channel, and interact with other users and/or librarians also on the channel.¹² While this technology allowed an unprecedented type of interaction between librarians and patrons, it also posed new difficulties. Because of the multi-user nature of the channels, librarians had little control over the direction of the conversation in the channel. Moreover, if no librarians were logged on to "hold" the channel, other non-library users connected to the server could change the focus of the channel to other issues, leaving users without a consistent and reliable forum to use for reference questions.¹³

To address some of the negative aspects of using IRC to conduct reference interviews, libraries began to explore the option of using MOO's, which stands for "multi-user domain object-oriented."¹⁴ These text-based virtual environments allowed librarians to create richly descriptive "rooms" in which users could interact with other patrons, librarians, and sometimes the environment itself.¹⁵ Because the "rooms" were defined and controlled by the librarians creating the MOO's, both the environment and the activities and conversations within it were more predictable and focused. This degree of control and sophistication also had its drawbacks. Basic programming skills were required to create and maintain the MOO's, and users were required to

learn a series of commands in order to talk, move, and interact.¹⁶ For both librarians and new pc users, the learning curve for this type of connection was high.

While IRC & MOO's offered a new, if somewhat flawed, method of conducting reference interviews synchronously, e-mail reference was also slowly integrated into the library reference repertoire as an asynchronous alternative. E-mail reference provided a host of benefits to users that synchronous reference services had not yet offered. Provided a patron had access to a personal computer, he or she could send questions to the reference librarian at any time that was convenient. The relative anonymity of e-mail reference allowed users to ask questions they might otherwise have avoided asking in person. Users were also able to take their time to carefully craft their questions. Of particular benefit was the fact that even the most basic personal computers with web access could provide e-mail services, while some synchronous or chat alternatives required quicker or more sophisticated computer equipment.¹⁷

There were, however, those who found e-mail reference services unsatisfactory or inferior to synchronous reference. Some librarians were concerned that, like the introduction of telephone reference, this type of service could open library reference desks to a host of non-affiliate reference questions that would consume too much time and resources.¹⁸ Others were more concerned about quality of service issues. With e-mail reference, the reference interview itself is "cut short."¹⁹ There was apprehension that without the exchange between the patron and librarian typical of synchronous reference, a clear understanding of the user's information need would not be reached. Moreover, those individuals sending reference questions might not receive answers to their questions for up to 48 hours, potentially long after the information need

had passed.²⁰ There were also a number of unanswered questions about the degree of privacy afforded e-mail reference questions, many of which remain unanswered.

Despite the potential shortcomings of e-mail reference, the service is currently well integrated into the collection of reference services offered by many libraries. As of 1999, over 92% of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) member libraries offered e-mail reference.²¹ Unfortunately, no similar statistics are available for law libraries. This is an area in which research could certainly be of great benefit to the profession, affording a sense of the state of reference practices in academic, firm and public law libraries and providing a gateway to the development of best practices for such services.

With both synchronous (chat) and asynchronous (e-mail) digital reference services entering the mainstream of library reference services, librarians began to discuss, if not debate, what should be included under the definitional umbrella of virtual (or digital) reference. Some authors explicitly excluded e-mail reference services from the definition of virtual reference. In making this choice, Breznay & Haas indicated that they only wished to address methods of providing reference that allow patrons a quick response.²² Other scholars defined both synchronous and asynchronous electronic reference services as part of a comprehensive virtual reference plan. The *Guidelines for Implementing and Maintaining Virtual Reference Services*, prepared by a subgroup of the Reference and User Services Association, defined virtual reference as “often real-time,” but did not exclude asynchronous digital reference services from the definition.²³ R. David Lankes argued that both synchronous and asynchronous digital reference services accomplished the same work and differed primarily in the amount of “lag” time between the

question posed and the answer provided.²⁴ In fact, he maintained that both types of reference service were vital to meeting the needs of library patrons. Kresh also shared this vision of virtual reference as an inclusive set of electronic means for engaging in the fundamental undertaking of the reference interview, a way of using new technologies to unite library users with the information they need.

Technology has become an integral part of reference service as we explore smarter, better, faster, ways of making information available. Whether we call it “virtual,” “digital,” “live,” (which begs the obvious, if it’s not live reference is it dead?), “interactive,” “real-time,” “web-based,” or my personal favorites, “synchronous” and “asynchronous,” it’s still reference.²⁵

In 1996, a new type of internet-based communication surfaced in the form of ICQ, a service whose name represented a phonetic spelling of the phrase “I seek you.”²⁶ Unlike IRC, MOO’s and e-mail, communications were sent and received through peer-to-peer connections instead of through servers.²⁷ This type of connection, based on IP and port information, allowed users to join channels, engage in synchronous one-on-one chat, send and receive files and play games. The core of what users now recognize as instant messengers (IM) was first introduced through ICQ. This new instant messaging technology was rapidly embraced by librarians, and the professional discourse again returned to the questions which were asked when the telephone was introduced into the arena of reference services.

On the heels of ICQ’s success, numerous IM services appeared to meet the growing demand for chat. AOL Instant Messenger, Yahoo Messenger, Jabber, and Microsoft’s .NET messenger introduced client programs that allowed users to connect with others using the same client. Then, to address the needs of users who wanted to chat with those using different client programs, multi-network or cross-platform services such as Gaim, Trillian, and Miranda were

developed.²⁸ Realizing that their patrons were likely to be using a number of different chat clients, libraries that began to adopt chat reference turned toward these multi-network platforms in an effort to serve as broad a base of users as possible.²⁹ Among those writing to provide librarians with advice on setting-up virtual reference services there is practically universal agreement that IM services should be offered using multi-network clients.³⁰

Call center software (CCS), an alternative to the instant message client, has been embraced by many academic and public libraries. While this software is essentially chat reference, it offers many features that instant messengers do not. The literature regularly references software such as QuestionPoint, Ask A Librarian, and Virtual Reference Desk. Designed to receive and route customer service calls, CCS is capable of handling large numbers of incoming information transactions. Because the software is web-based, no client has to be installed on the user's machine, so CCS reference services can be accessed from any pc with an internet connection³¹. Stock messages can be programmed into the software to let librarians give users basic information quickly, and transcripts of the interactions can be saved automatically and e-mailed to the user upon request so that he or she can review the librarian's information and instructions after the chat is over.³² With some types of CCS, librarians can push web pages to users or can temporarily take control of the user's pc (with the user's permission, of course) to guide the individual through lengthy or complicated processes for retrieving information online. Despite the perks of call center software, the range of services offered comes with a price. This particular software can be extremely expensive, making it more likely that consortia would purchase such products while individual libraries would find them outside their budgetary confines.

A recently launched service from Google provides both synchronous and asynchronous services within a single product. G-mail and G-chat are fused, allowing any user with a G-mail account to access the web-based chat features on the site as well. Users logged into G-mail can set their availability in the same way they would if they were logged into an instant messenger client, using standard “away” or “available” indicators or creating their own custom availability messages to tell other users exactly what they are doing or where they are located. Since both e-mail and chat features are available at the same time, a user can draft an e-mail and chat simultaneously, satisfying the multitasking desires of so many IM users.

Predictably, opinions of the new chat technology’s place in reference services, and the reference interview specifically, were sharply divided. Proponents of the new virtual reference services were quick to point out the fact that these services were meeting users at their point of need.³³ With 53 million individuals using IM on a daily basis, libraries had a unique opportunity to serve those who were comfortable seeking information in an online environment.³⁴ Patrons who did not already have chat clients could download them easily and free of charge. Some argued that chat technology might finally provide the necessary amount of anonymity required by some patrons to allow them to ask questions without anxiety or nervousness.³⁵ From a librarian’s perspective, it was also beneficial to be able to see a complete transcript of the reference interview on the screen as it was taking place, preventing important parts of the exchange from being lost in the conversation.³⁶

Chat reference was also a great benefit to distance education students who could not always physically visit the library and often had to rely on long-distance phone calls to the reference desk for help.³⁷ Even those who questioned the profession's quick adoption of the new technology acknowledged that chat reference was an excellent vehicle for assistance with reference questions related to information found on the internet.³⁸ More recently, scholars discussing information exchange in corporate environments have advocated adoption of inter-office chat systems for improved work flow and access to information³⁹, an application perfectly suited to law firm environments in which attorneys are seeking information from one another and from firm librarians.

Other scholars and librarians remain far less enchanted with virtual reference services. A number of articles have noted the fact that virtual reference sessions take more time than telephone or face-to-face reference interviews, a fact some see as an indication of inefficiency.⁴⁰ Along with efficiency concerns, cost has been at the center of some librarians' hesitation to delve into the world of chat reference. Some call center software can be extraordinarily expensive to purchase⁴¹, and even free multi-network software such as Trillian or Odigo will ultimately cost the library time and resources in training and maintaining the appropriate technology⁴². Librarians have also raised concerns about the quality of the reference interview in chat reference. Visual and aural cues present in the face-to-face reference transaction are missing, depriving librarians from some of the methods traditionally used in reference interviews to fully understand a patron's information need.⁴³ Another fear, which many "how-to" works on virtual reference services have sought to allay, is that the virtual reference interview will effectively

“depersonalize” the process of reference services and prohibit patrons from building the kind of rapport and trust with reference librarians that contributes to a positive reference experience.⁴⁴

Many are also very concerned about privacy and security issues, both in terms of the open channel created to and from a system when a chat is in progress and in terms of the transcript resulting from a reference interview transaction.⁴⁵ While software such as IMLogic and IM Manager has been created to deal with some of the privacy and security issues related to the systems themselves, there remain questions about the library’s handling of reference interview transcripts after the exchange has taken place. While some libraries wish to retain transcripts for compiling data and performing service evaluations, others feel that is an infringement of the privacy libraries guarantee their patrons.

Despite the presence of scholars and librarians on both sides of the chat reference debate, it is clear that chat reference is increasingly considered part of a well-rounded suite of library reference services. A wealth of advice-oriented material has been written encouraging those offering virtual reference services to implement policies and procedures that comply with a developing literature of “best practices” for virtual reference. Of primary importance for many authors is the willingness to transfer a virtual reference interview to another format, such as telephone or face-to-face, if it appears that the user would be better served by it. The success of any reference transaction should be measured by its ultimate helpfulness to the patron, and guiding a patron to the best format to meet his or her needs should be considered a successful transaction.⁴⁶

Authors also encourage librarians to interject humor and personality into their virtual reference transactions to avoid the kind of “depersonalization” some fear will result when the visual and aural elements of communication are removed from the reference interview.⁴⁷ Using emoticons⁴⁸ to express feelings can humanize the transaction. At the same time, scholars caution not to be too informal during the reference interview. It is still vital for librarians to maintain an appearance of professionalism when conducting reference interviews.⁴⁹ Staying in touch with the user throughout the search process is also key to completing a successful reference interview. When a search is taking some time, librarians should remind the user that they are still looking for answers and haven’t forgotten them. With more sophisticated chat software, librarians can even program basic questions to send to users in order to both “buy time” and get more information while assisting in the search.⁵⁰

Additionally, there is a call for the establishment of standards to inform reference services⁵¹, such as the *Guidelines for Implementing and Maintaining Virtual Reference Services*, prepared by a subgroup of the Reference and User Services Association in 2004.⁵² These Guidelines address the definition of virtual reference, the preparation and provision of reference services, and privacy matters unique to digital reference. The goal of guidelines such as these is to bring some degree of uniformity to virtual reference service policies, and in so doing, provide a means for comparison and evaluation of existing virtual reference services.

Despite the prolific writing on the subject of virtual reference in the library literature, there is surprisingly little information about the use of virtual reference in libraries outside the realm of general public and academic libraries. Special libraries, and particularly law libraries, are

practically unexamined on any level beyond the individual library. Isolated anecdotal evidence of virtual reference success abounds, yet regional and national trends have not been studied. The prevalence of virtual reference services and a sense of what those services include is still a mystery. It is clear that academic, public and firm law libraries are using virtual reference services, but the provision of those services seems to be isolated.

While there is no hard data to support this assertion, indicators point to a pronounced lack of consortium or collaborative participation by law libraries in large scale virtual reference projects. OCLC's 24/7 Project, an experimental and collaborative virtual reference project using the call center software QuestionPoint, began in 2000 and included a select number of California libraries. The only law libraries participating in the project were the California county law libraries, and the participation of these libraries was primarily limited to serving as subject experts in a referral capacity. Beyond the QuestionPoint 24/7 project, only a handful of law libraries have used or are using QuestionPoint for virtual reference services. The Library of Congress Law Library and a few academic libraries, primarily in the New York area, currently use the software.⁵³ In Ohio's "Know it Now" live 24/7 online reference service, only one of the fifty-one participating libraries is a law library, the Cleveland Law Library⁵⁴. The Washington State Virtual Consortium includes nineteen libraries, and the King County Law Library is the only participating law library.⁵⁵ NELLCO created an eleven member collaborative chat reference service called Library LAWLINE in 2002, but ultimately ceased offering services at the end of July, 2005.⁵⁶

Despite an intense and continued professional interest in the provision of virtual reference services on the part of individual law librarians and independent law libraries, it is clear that a cohesive and unified move toward the inclusion of virtual reference services has not materialized in the way that some had hoped. Perhaps the lack of a single, affordable and user-friendly platform has discouraged broad-based participation in collaborative virtual reference experiments. It might also be a simple lack of user demand for the service that has stymied its inclusion in the standard repertoire of reference services provided by law libraries. Whatever the impediment to the standard implementation of this service, continued inquiry will be the key to determining how, and if, virtual reference services have a lasting place in libraries.

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² Diane Kresch, *Virtually Yours: Thoughts on Where We Have Been and Where We Are Going with Virtual Reference Services in Libraries*, 38 Ref. Libr. 19, 23 (2003).

³ Richard E. Bopp & Linda C. Smith, *Reference and Information Services: An Introduction* 47 (3rd ed., Libraries Unlimited 2001).

⁴ William A. Katz, *Introduction to Reference Work: Volume II: Reference Services and Reference Processes* 155 (7th ed., McGraw Hill 1997).

⁵ Catherine S. Ross et al., *Conducting the Reference Interview* 4 (Neal-Schumann Publishers 2002).

⁶ Kathleen Kern, *Have(n't) We Been Here Before? Lessons from Telephone Reference*, 41 Ref. Libr. 1, 2-3 (2004).

⁷ *Id.* at 3-6.

⁸ As Kern points out, these are essentially the same questions currently asked by those concerned about the integration of digital or virtual reference services into existing library systems. *Id.* at 2.

⁹ *Id.* at 7.

¹⁰ *Id.* at 15.

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- ¹¹ Jana Smith Ronan, *Chat Reference : A Guide to Live Virtual Reference Services* xi (Libraries Unlimited 2003).
- ¹² *Id.* at 3.
- ¹³ *Id.* at 5.
- ¹⁴ *Id.* at 6. One of the most well-known MOO's from the 1990's was the MOO operated by the Internet Public Library from 1995-2000.
- ¹⁵ *Id.* at 7.
- ¹⁶ *Id.* at 9.
- ¹⁷ Naomi Lederer, *E-Mail Reference: Who, When, Where, and What Is Asked*, 35 *Ref. Libr.* 55, 72 (2001).
- ¹⁸ *Id.* at 71.
- ¹⁹ *Id.* at 70.
- ²⁰ *Id.* at 58.
- ²¹ *Id.* at 56.
- ²² Ann M. Breznay & Leslie M. Haas, *A Checklist for Starting and Operating a Digital Reference Desk*, 38 *Ref. Libr.* 102 (2003);
- ²³ <http://www.ala.org/ala/rusa/rusaprotools/referenceguide/virtrefguidelines.htm> (accessed Sept. 11, 2006).
- ²⁴ R. David Lankes, *The Digital Reference Fallacy*, 38 *Ref. Libr.* 35, 36-37 (2003).
- ²⁵ Kresch at 23.
- ²⁶ ICQ, The ICQ Story, <http://www.icq.com/info/icqstory.html> (accessed September 11, 2006).
- ²⁷ *Id.* and Ronan at 13.
- ²⁸ Ronan at 15.
- ²⁹ *Id.*
- ³⁰ Aaron Schmidt & Michael Stephens, *IM me*, 130 *Libr. Jnl.* 34, 35 (2005).
- ³¹ Ronan at 30.
- ³² *Id.* at 36-38.
- ³³ Breznay & Haas at 101, 103; Bill Katz, *Digital Reference: An Overview*, 38 *Ref. Libr.* 1, 9 (2003); Kresch at 20; Schmidt & Stephens at 34.
- ³⁴ Schmidt & Stephens at 34.

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- ³⁵ Jody C. Fagan & Christina M. Desai, *Communication Strategies for Instant Messaging and Chat Reference Services*, 38 Ref. Libr. 121, 126 (2003).
- ³⁶ Schmidt & Stephens at 34.
- ³⁷ Breznay & Haas at 103.
- ³⁸ David S. Carter, *Hurry Up and Wait: Observations and Tips About the Practice of Chat Reference*, 38 Ref. Libr. 113, 120 (2003).
- ³⁹ Schmidt & Stephens at 35.
- ⁴⁰ Jonathan D. Lauer & Steve McKinzie, *Bad Moon Rising: A Candid Examination of Digital Reference and What It Means to the Profession*, 38 Ref. Libr. 45, 49 (2003); Katz at 7; Schmidt & Stephens at 35.
- ⁴¹ Ronan at 30.
- ⁴² Breznay & Haas at 104.
- ⁴³ Carter at 116; Jody C. Fagan & Christina M. Desai, *Communication Strategies for Instant Messaging and Chat Reference Services*, 38 Ref. Libr. 121, 124 (2003).
- ⁴⁴ Laure & McKinzie at 50; Amanda Spink, *Mediated Online Searching and Digital Reference*, 38 Ref. Libr. 57, 59 (2003).
- ⁴⁵ Ronan at 15.
- ⁴⁶ Breznay & Haas at 110; Carter at 119.
- ⁴⁷ Fagan & Desai at 127-131.
- ⁴⁸ For an overview of common emoticons, Wikipedia has a particularly thorough article. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emoticons> (accessed September 15, 2006).
- ⁴⁹ Carter at 115.
- ⁵⁰ Id. at 118.
- ⁵¹ Kresh at 30.
- ⁵² Breznay & Haas at 102.
- ⁵³ Interview with Susan McGlamery, Project Director for 24/7 Reference and the Global Product Manager of Cooperative Services for OCLC (October 10, 2006).
- ⁵⁴ The Cleveland Law Library Association, <http://www.clelaw.lib.oh.us/> (accessed September 11, 2006).
- ⁵⁵ <http://www.secstate.wa.gov/library/libraries/projects/virtualRef/links.aspx> (accessed Sept. 14, 2006).
- ⁵⁶ <http://www.nellco.org/librarylawline/> (accessed September 14, 2006).