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Virtual Reference Services: Taking Up the Challenge in Swiss Libraries

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V

Virtual Reference in North America

“Reference Service” as defined in the Online Dictionary for Library and Information Science refers to the practice where a reference librarian provides answers to user enquiries, instructs users in the selection and use of appropriate tools and techniques for finding information, conducts searches on behalf of the user, directs users to the location of library resources, assists in the evaluation of information, and refers users to resources outside the library when appropriate¹.

Traditionally, reference services are carried out by reference librarians either face-to-face in the library or via telephones. With the Internet becoming more and more prevalent in modern ways of living, working, and learning, virtual reference (VR) has emerged as a notable new development in modern libraries. It is often also labeled as digital reference or chat reference. Although VR services utilize various media, including e-mail, Web forms, real-time chat and co-browsing on the Web, instant messaging, voice over IP, etc., chat-based services are often the focus of VR discussions. In the meantime, developments along other media, such as instant messaging, have found no lack of enthusiasts and are not without the potential of someday taking over the spotlight.

In just about five years such services have become widespread in North American libraries. Some operate as individual libraries. More and more are participating in virtual reference consortiums. One major

driver for the virtual reference development was the declining demand for reference services in the last decade. The tremendous growth of the Internet led to a significant drop in reference service transactions, because more and more people turn to Google, Wikipedia, online discussion groups, and other destinations on the Internet for information. As a technology-enabled new service, VR software became one of the most discussed topics in the early days of virtual reference. Many articles about VR have appeared, including the insightful report by Rösch². More recently, critical voices have been raised, questioning the value of virtual reference services. Coffman and Arret³ offered their analysis on the low usage and cost-ineffectiveness of chat-based VR services. However, others see that virtual reference is alive and well⁴, thanks to the cost sharing and the economies of scale offered by the VR consortiums. The debate continues. One thing is clear: Lessons have been learned.

A Different Reality in Continental Europe

Not surprisingly, only a few of VR services are outside North America. While reference service is one of the standard functions in most North American libraries with nearly 150 years of history, it is much less known or practiced elsewhere. Dropping reference transactions is not an issue in libraries in continental Europe. Such transactions are neither defined nor measured. The American-style reference services are virtually non-existent in Swiss libraries, despite the fact that library subject specialists here often have more in-depth knowledge on subject matters than many American reference librarians. The lack of a strong driver for virtual reference left libraries in this region reluctant to move in VR. While it is convenient for users to search library online catalogs from their computers anywhere, ways to contact the library are still mostly limited to e-mail, Web forms, telephone, and on-site face-to-face consultation with library personnel. Among the very few libraries that do offer real-time interactive information services is the library of

the University of Oldenburg whose chat-based BIS.LiveInfo has been in operation since the beginning of 2002.

The technologies used in virtual reference services, in particular Web live chat, did not lead to the same degree of excitement here in Europe as in North America. Despite the acknowledgement of VR as innovative, many do not see its value in the local context where libraries are more fractal and decentralized. Consequently a virtual information service consortium is out of the question before the concept is revamped for the appropriate context.

The difference between the U.S. and the European practices also have to do with the libraries’ roles in fostering information literacy, a concept which originated in the final report of the American Library Association Presidential Committee on Information Literacy in 1989⁵. Information literacy is the ability to learn. In other words, an information literate person is able to recognize when information is needed and has the ability to locate, evaluate and use effectively the information. American librarians have become more active in information literacy education along with schools, parents and continuing education programs across industries and government agencies.

On the contrary, libraries in continental Europe are more focused on the management of collections and the logistics of operations, with information desks providing basic support for user enquiries. Even among the large research and academic li-

¹ Online Dictionary for Library and Information Science at http://www.lu.com/odlis/odlis_r.cfm retrieved on 15/04/2005.

² Rösch, H., “Digital Reference: Bibliothekarische Auskunft und Informationsvermittlung im Web”, in B.I.T. Online, 6 (2003) Ausgabe 2, pages 113–127.

³ Coffman, S., Arret L., “To chat or not to chat – Taking another look at virtual reference”, in Searcher, July/August 2004, pages 38–48, also at http://www.infotoday.com/searcher/jul04/arret_coffman.shtml retrieved on 15/04/2005.

⁴ Bailey, B., “Virtual Reference: Alive & Well”, in Library Journal, January 2005, at <http://www.libraryjournal.com/article/CA491140> retrieved on 04/15/2005.

⁵ Presidential Committee on Information Literacy: Final Report at <http://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlpubs/whitepapers/presidential.htm> retrieved on 15/04/2005.

braries here, few have the organizational structure and operational capability to foster user information literacy. Changes have emerged in recent years⁶, including the Swiss InfoSociety initiative. Nevertheless the challenges are not to be underestimated. Besides the limited capacity of libraries, few library users are aware that there are information specialists in the libraries who may assist in their research. Students here do not ask for open-ended research assistance in libraries, but rely on sources provided by their professors and peers, as well as their own efforts through trial and error to accomplish their information tasks.

The Challenge for Swiss Libraries

Is there a need for virtual reference here in Switzerland? If yes, how would we do it differently from our American colleagues? Here are some possible approaches to the challenge we face:

1. Take a user-centered approach. Do we really understand the target market of a VR service – the library users? When and in what context might the librarian or the online library be the preferred source, given the many other options freely available and easily accessible on the Internet? What kind of questions would we anticipate the users to ask if they do ask? How could we best prepare ourselves to give quality answers that satisfy user needs instead of focusing on the number of reference transactions?
2. Be realistic but forward-looking. Although libraries have an important role

⁶ Bättig, E. "Information Literacy an Hochschulen: Entwicklungen in den USA, in Deutschland und der Schweiz", Diplomarbeit, HTW Chur Information Science, April 2005, at http://www.iudchur.net/fileadmin/iudpdf/CSI/CSI_8_Baettig.pdf retrieved on 15/04/2005.

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the users, how could we reach out, increase awareness, gain mind share, and eventually build trust and relationships?

Conclusions

There is so much information available on the Internet today. Information-seekers have many more options to look for information than going to a library. When the library is the preferred destination, virtual contact is likely more often the choice than a visit to the physical library.

To maximize the value of libraries, not only library collections and electronic resources, but also the services and expertise of library professionals need to be accessible over the Internet.

The development of virtual reference services commences a new dimension of communication between information specialists and information-seekers.

The concept of virtual reference services is worth being exploited and further developed with sensible considerations of local culture and practice. ■

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