The Human Face in Virtual Library Digital Reference Service

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Abstract

The article briefs about the activities of the Digital Reference Service its present scenario. The importance and functionalities of the service are highlighted. This service can provide the real missing link between the electronic resources and the users of the services.

Keywords: Digital Reference Service, Virtual Reference Service, Real-Time Reference Service

0.   Introduction

As the requirement changes so do changes the mechanism of production and delivery of the required goods. This basic premise has influenced the global economic scenario over centuries. In the same breath, it can be mentioned that the gambit of the information delivery is no way isolated or insulated from this argument.

Over the years the mechanism of distribution of information has vastly changed from the paper to the electronic mode. In the present day a large amount of scientific, technical and scholarly publications are made published and distributed electronically. Hence the mode of assisting to locate a required piece of information, in other word the Reference Service, in this ear has got to change it service structure. Even a couple of years back, the concept of the reference service were solely based on the traditional method of information delivery. However, as the new and better technological advancements are taking place, the reference service has now got a new boost to improvise itself based on real-time architecture.

1.   Digital Reference Service (DRS) : A Brief Overview

Many terms are used to describe the study and practice of digital reference (e.g., virtual reference, real-time reference, chat reference, real-time chat reference, live reference). All share a central concept: the use of software and the Internet to facilitate human intermediation at a distance.

Widespread accessibility to the Internet and developments in software and hardware has turned the concept of digital and online library into a reality. Based on real-time architectures, many Universities and libraries throughout the world is now providing online reference services. This service is alternatively known as Virtual Reference Service. To enhance the quality and coverage of the service, some of the institutes have even started providing consortium based reference service.

The virtual reference service gives a library a set of powerful tools to serve its user community. The library must be fully committed to virtual reference service, that is interacting with the users to fulfil their information requirement and assist in locating required information. As information organizations, libraries should quickly adopt to the Internet not simply as a source of information, but as a means to provide help to locate the required source of information. With increasingly ever-present Internet connectivity, providing online virtual services works as a catalyst to maintain the high standards of quality education and research activities.

2.   Advantages of DRS

There are several advantages of providing Digital Reference Services, some of which are mentioned below:

2.1   Enhances ability of user to locate needed information through computer-mediated services

As mentioned earlier, almost all scientific, technical and scholarly publications are now available electronically and mostly through web-based technology. As such, it is difficult for any common user to locate such set of publications until and unless supported by well-managed reference service. The DRS provides a cutting edge technological support to locate the required electronically available document over the user's own desktop, without even moving out of his/her armchair.

2.2   DRS provides real-time assistance in locating local and universal resources of information

It is also to emphasis that DRS not only helps to locate web-based documents but also helps to provide online and real-time assistance to the user to locate a locally available documents, as well as, forward the request for locating such documents to other partner libraries and return the appropriate assistance to the user concerned.

2.3   DRS helps to provide a round the clock online assistance service

Unlike the traditional reference service, the DRS provides the mechanism to provide 24/7 services as the user can request the questions at any time of their choice. If the library is in position to facilitate such service a significant size of user community can be supported round the clock. The service span can easily be enhanced if the DRS is taken care by a consortium, which not only helps to provide larger size of manpower supports but also a diverse collections.

DRS can provide several platforms for interacting amongst special interest groups:
It is not only the above advantages which the DRS can facilitates but also it can provide several platforms for Special Interest Groups to intercommunicate amongst themselves to share information and ideas.

3.   How Does it Works

Digital reference services constitute a rapidly growing extension of the traditional reference service offered to library users. While the service may be delivered via real-time chat or asynchronous e-mail, the essential characteristic of the service is the ability of the users to submit questions and to receive answers via electronic means. Each service of interconnected users constitutes a digital reference domain.

The real-time architecture is the latest technological supports that enable the libraries to provide reference services beyond traditional walk-ins, appointments and telephone reference. For years, libraries have responded to questions via e-mail, however, e-mail can only answer unambiguous where step-by-step instructions are not required. It fails to work when the user and the librarian have to follow a series of steps to explain the scope and nature of the question.

In the real-time interaction system the user can keep on clarifying the issues in hand, especially when the question is complex in nature. In this chat-like situation the remote user can get the attention of a librarian by clicking on a hypertext link and entering some basic information about themselves as well as their

question. The librarian will answer the question in real-time. This interactive nature of the process encourages the clarification and refinement of the query. Additionally, librarian can share online information with a user via a special feature, in which the resources browsed by the librarian can be displayed on the user's terminal, technically known as 'push feature'. This feature enables to share information from Web sites and databases to be used in providing the answers. The DRS provides a useful online complement to traditional desk-based reference services.

4.   Present Status

Though a comprehensive study of the on-going projects on Digital Reference Services is yet to be taken up, it is important to mention that a large number of libraries in the developed countries have started providing DRS. For the purposes of this paper, digital reference is defined as human-intermediated assistance offered to users through the Internet. Today, libraries are offering human-intermediated reference over the Internet at an increasing rate. Research by Janes (Janes, 2000) found that 45 percent of academic libraries and 12.8 percent of public libraries offer some type of digital reference service. Stephen Francoeur (2001) reports that as of April 2001 he was able to identify, "a total of 272 libraries [that] were being served by a chat reference service, 210 of which (77 percent) were served by one of eight chat reference consortia." However, digital reference services are often ad-hoc and experimental. Janes and McClure (1999) found that for quick factual questions, librarians using only the Web answered a sample of questions as well as did those using only print sources. Many libraries conduct digital reference service in addition to existing obligations with little sense of the scale of such work or its strategic importance to the library.

Though much initiative in this direction is yet to taken in Indian context, but with the ever-increasing number of consortia in Indian academic domain the need of providing a digital reference service has become a prior most important agendum for this country.

5.   Conclusion

The digital reference gives the library a set of powerful mechanism to serve the users. With increasingly ever-present Internet connectivity, and with out-of-the-box network solutions, simply having a presence online is easy. Having an online presence that is meaningful and useful is still as difficult as ever. The point is not to have a library transform itself completely to an online entity, but rather to have its online virtual services meet the high standards of quality which the library is expected to provide all the time of the ages. After all, it is the only service of the digital-library era where there is a human-face on the Internet and nowhere else.

6.   References

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