
Transformation of Library Services : With Special Emphasis on Digital Reference Service

Padmini Kaza

Abstract

Easily accessible digital information has rapidly become one of the hallmarks of the Internet. Online resources have surged in popularity as more individuals and organizations have connected to the global network. Thousands of organizations have turned to Internet-based information delivery as an effective and cost-efficient alternative to traditional communication methods, and many have expanded their services further by interacting with their users and responding to inquiries via the Internet. Digital reference services provide subject expertise and information referral over the Internet to their users. This paper provides an overview on transformation of traditional information services to digital reference service.

Keywords: Digital Reference Service, Reference Service, Digital Library

0. Introduction

The quest for information has been expanded significantly and it is , now, coupled with a desire for swift and better services. In the mist of fast emerging information explosion, finding a particular relevant information has been a very cumbersome job. Hence there is a dire need to create and manage digital resources of information and make them easily accessible to the user.

Today's researchers need to find quickly information that is usable, relevant, authoritative and verifiable. To meet that need, libraries must adapt the traditional strengths of acquiring, describing, and serving information to an environment that is not bound by time or physical place, the virtual library without walls.

1. Origin of Digital Reference Service (DRS)

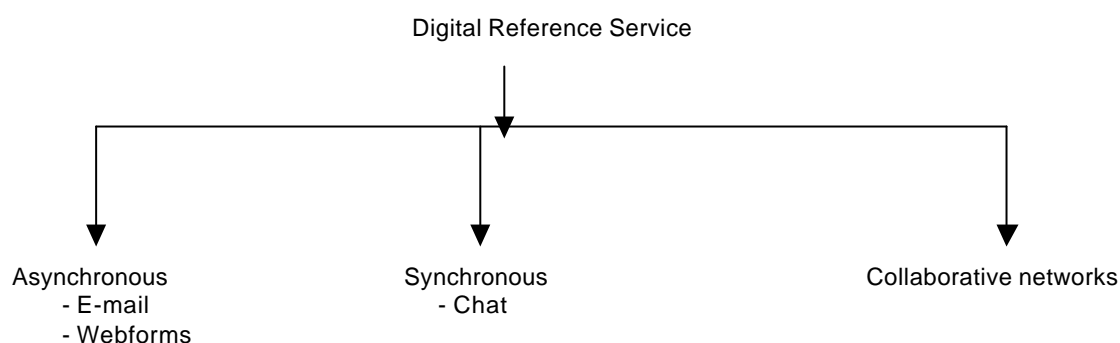
The origins of digital reference can be traced to the library field, where libraries sought to augment traditional services by providing reference assistance in an electronic environment. One of the first services to go online was the Electronic Access to Reference Service (EARS), launched by the university of Maryland Health Services Library in Baltimore in 1984. Although initial e-mail-based digital reference efforts received little attention from patrons, digital reference services proliferated over time and became increasingly popular, eventually spawning such internationally-known services as AskERIC in 1992 and the Internet Public Library in 1995.¹

1.1 What is DRS ?

Unlike traditional reference, digital reference services allow patrons to submit questions and receive answers via the Internet and other electronic means. The users get connected with librarians or information professionals and receive direct assistance wherever and whenever they need it. In addition to answering questions, these information experts may also provide users with referrals to other online and print sources of information and support the development of skills such as information literacy. The terms "virtual reference", "digital reference", "e-reference", "Internet information service" and "AskA service" are used interchangeably to describe reference services that utilize computer technology in some way.²

1.2 Types

The following are the various types of providing digital reference service:³



2. Need for Standards

The purpose of standards is to promote digital reference best practices on an international basis. The online environment is uniquely suited to consortia models of work and to the development of shared resources. Libraries in different countries may have different traditions of public service, which both affect their current reference practices and their patrons' expectations. But it is also important to recognize that new technologies will enable librarians to redefine the scope of their public services.

Butler examines the need for a common, standard data format for the management of reference transactions. This need is discussed from two perspectives: that of major research libraries and that of AnswerBase Corporation (ABC), a Web-based digital publisher.⁴

3. Process

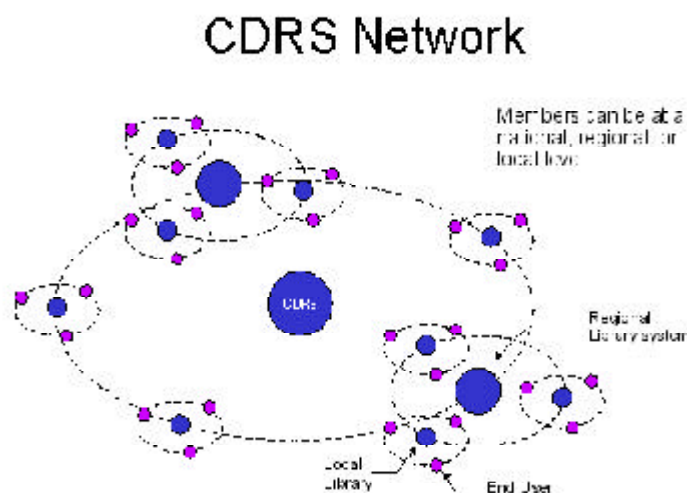
A six-step process was developed to aid organizations in the creation and operation of digital reference service, which can be applied to a wide variety of organizations and audiences including the K-12 education community, government agencies, libraries, and industry. The steps are: Informing, Planning, Training, Prototyping, Contributing, and Evaluating.⁵

A model was proposed that is particularly relevant to academic libraries in large research institutions, but extendable to other types of organizations with similar characteristics. The five critical issues examined include: integrating virtual reference service with existing services; allocating fixed resources; acting as an effective advocate to secure organizational support; developing a distributed service model integrating specialized, subject-domain expertise; and targeting and serving disparate segments of the user community.⁶

4. International Scenario

Libraries, including the Library of Congress, have a rich tradition of collaborating to get work done. Institutions have collaborated to preserve collections, to catalog materials and make them accessible, and to create virtual libraries. They have borrowed collection items from one another and used one another as service models. By linking libraries for reference services, the Collaborative Digital Reference Service (CDRS) would combine the power of local collections and staff strengths with the diversity and

availability of libraries and librarians everywhere, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The graphic below provides an idea of what this network system could look like:⁷



4.1 Internet Public Library (IPL)

The **Internet Public Library** (<http://www.ipl.org>), which exists only in a networked environment, started in 1995 as a student project at the University of Michigan School of Information. It was the first virtual Public Library on the Internet. As a public service organization, the IPL also serves as a learning and teaching laboratory. The IPL offers an annotated collection of high quality Internet resources and a reference service available via a Web form. This service is offered by a network of reference librarians (professional librarians as volunteers, and library students in training). The service is free of charge and open to the Internet community.

- ✂ Answer Zone. Six public libraries in Texas. <http://www.answerzone.org>
- ✂ Ask-A-Librarian. Eleven members of the Association of Southeastern Research Libraries. <http://www.ask-a-librarian.org/>
- ✂ AskNow. An Australia-wide service offered by the National Library of Australia and the eight state/territorial libraries. <http://www.asknow.gov.au>
- ✂ QuestionPoint Collaborative Reference Service. Library of Congress and OCLC. <http://www.questionpoint.org>
- ✂ Washington Research Library Consortium. Ask A Librarian. Seven academic libraries in the DC area. <http://www.wrlc.org/virtualref/>
- ✂ Washington State Library. Statewide Virtual Reference Project. <http://wlo.statelib.wa.gov/services/vrs/>
- ✂ Refdesk.com - Since 1995, free and family friendly. Refdesk indexes and reviews quality, credible, and current information-based sites and assists readers in navigating these sites

5. National Scene

Many libraries of higher learning and research institutes are stepping towards digitizing their resources. To meet the information demands of their user communities, besides rendering traditional reference and information services, they have also introduced OPAC, E-mail and Bulletin Board, Document scanning, CD-ROM networking, Internet access, Electronic referencing, Indexing and Abstracting, CAS&SDI, other bibliographical, electronic document delivery, and reprographic services. Although automated libraries are not yet sufficiently advanced to offer interactive reference services, electronically mediated reference services are increasingly available through libraries and information centers. Their next focus will be on Digital Reference Service. The following are some of such institutions:

- ✍ Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore. webman@library.iisc.ernet.in
- ✍ Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi. <http://www.iitd.ac.in/accd/library/index.html>
- ✍ Sir Jehangir Ghandy Library- XLRI, Jamshedpur. <http://www.xlri.ac.in/library>
- ✍ Indira Gandhi Memorial Library, University of Hyderabad. <http://www.uohyd.ernet.in>
- ✍ Jawaharlal Nehru University library, Delhi. <http://www.jnu.ac.in>

6. Benefits

The benefits of Digital Reference Service are:

- ✍ Regional library consortia offer member libraries the opportunity to share reference questions with each other using the Internet and other technologies.
- ✍ Collaborative Digital Reference Service allows individual institutions to share expertise and resources.
- ✍ Expanding hours of service.
- ✍ Providing access to a large collection of knowledge. Serve the public good by providing valuable information in a timely fashion, and have the potential to gain international visibility.
- ✍ Enhanced public relations benefits by having satisfied users and by providing high-quality of information.
- ✍ Accessible 24 hours a day and unrestricted by geography.⁹

7. Challenges

Some of the important struggling issues in the provision of digital reference service are listed below:

- ✍ Librarians often juggle real-time patron requests with those of walk-in or phone patrons.
- ✍ Staff must be trained to use selected real time tools.
- ✍ On going technical support must be available to maintain the system.
- ✍ Ensuring the quality and consistency of responses.
- ✍ Reaching Consensus in developing procedures and policies.
- ✍ Configuring technology that can be best accessed and used by each participating group.
- ✍ Premature launched services may not have potential impact on global audience.

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- ✍ Which user population to serve?
 - ✍ How to respond to question overload?
 - ✍ Secure funding for continued operation.
 - ✍ Task of creating and managing Internet – based question-and-answer services is complicated by the ever changing nature of the Internet

8. Possible Means

Besides acquiring adequate financial support and infrastructure, following are some of the possible means to ensured qualitative and effective Digital Reference Services, in institutions of higher learning:

- ✍ Librarians as information engineers have to learn more about the Digital Information Technology and they must of necessity, change their way of thinking if they are to meet the challenges of the present century.
- ✍ Information professional need to think creatively and adopt new technology.
- ✍ Interact with users to learn about their requirements and expectations.
- ✍ Librarians should reorient themselves.
- ✍ Web is in need of librarians who are trained in the structuring and organizing information.
- ✍ Participating staff should have the ability to locate and evaluate information resources, and have in-depth subject expertise.
- ✍ Traffic from non-primary clients needs to be controlled.
- ✍ Services are to be pilot-tested in a controlled environment.
- ✍ Regular evaluation ensures the quality of services.
- ✍ Defining realistic service goals, accompanied by workable policies and procedures, with participating staff fully cognizant ensure consistently excellent Digital Reference Service.

9. Conclusion

Digital reference services are a powerful means for the free exchange of information and the promotion of interactive learning. Thousands of organizations, at International level, have turned to Internet-based information delivery as an effective and cost-efficient alternative to traditional communication methods. As the provision of such service is very close before the Indian higher learning institutions, this is the right time to probe into the realities and current practices and step carefully forward in building and maintaining such service. Organizations interested in offering Internet-based information services must understand not only the fundamental tenets of the question-and-answer process, but also how this information is processed and translated into actual service. By proper planning and understanding of digital reference practices, libraries in higher learning institutions can ensure the effective creation and maintenance of exemplary digital reference service and high quality of the same.

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About Author



Mrs. Kaza Padmini presently working as Associate Professor (1998) in Department Library and Information Science Institution, Sri Venkateswara University, Tirupati, Andhra Pradesh. Prior to this responsibility she has worked as a Lecturer in Dept of Library Science, D.R.W. College, Gudur, Nellore Dt. (A.P.). She has PhD in Library & Information Science, MA (Population Science); MLIS; B.Sc. (Home Science). Guided number of MLIS Dissertations and guiding research scholars. She is a life member of various professional associations – ILA, IASLIC, IATLIS, APLA, ALSD, & SIS. She has contributed 10 research articles in seminars, conferences & journals.

Email : padmisvu@yahoo.co.in