

Virtual referencing: a simulated version of libraries

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ABSTRACT: *The technological advancements and innovations that took place over the past few decades have transformed libraries from mere store houses of printed information into hallway to easy accessible knowledge. Modern libraries are hybrid in nature having a blend of both electronic and traditional sources. Technology has changed the entire concept of libraries from 'holding' to 'access' (Khalid, 2000).*

This study points out to the behavioural changes brought about in the contemporary information seekers and discovery of Virtual Reference as an appropriate tool suitable for digital natives. It further explores the definition of Virtual Reference as given by different authors and the broad categories under which it can be divided. New technology is a structured and sequenced process and development is inevitable. The chapter also encompasses the list of present day software available and the factors to be taken into consideration while estimating the usability of these software

KEY WORDS- *Reference service, Virtual Reference Service, Asynchronous, Synchronous, Digital Natives.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

With surging demand for the information in today's digital world, there has been a significant change in the role of libraries. Libraries are altering their roles by providing enhanced & enriched set of services. With the existing patrons and the fresh entries, the extension to this collection of services has also changed. Prabha, Chandra, Lynn Silipigni Connaway, Lawrence Olszewski, and Lillie Jenkins calls today's world as "overloaded information environment". According to them, in an "overloaded" information environment, many information users tend to experience a sense of information inadequacy and anxiety. Insight into information seeking can be gained by understanding how users seek information sources and how they choose content to meet their needs. They further quoted that in today's fast-paced world, anecdotal evidence suggests that information tends to inundate people, and users of information systems want to find information quickly and conveniently. Knowledge building is a social process in this modern age.

The digital/electronic/virtual library: scheme

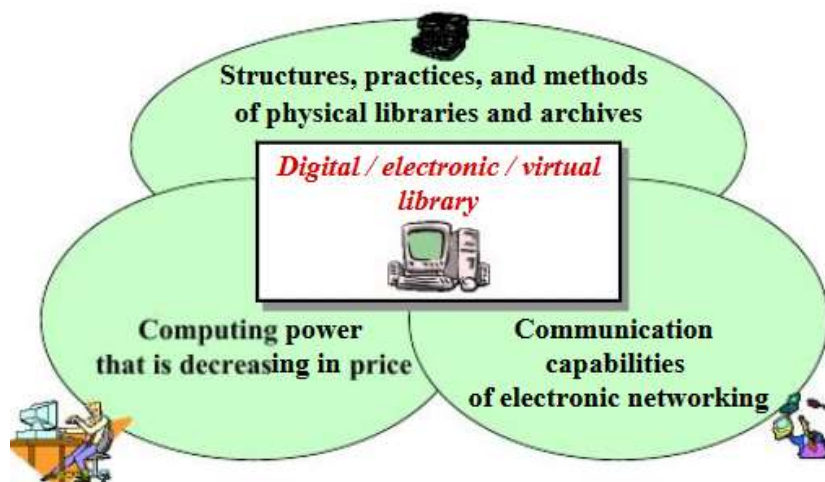


Fig 1 The Future libraries

Turnor (1988) “Information is the key resource that can bring about change in the society”

To highlight the change and explore the opportunities of the future libraries as depicted in the figure no. 1 there is a need to come out of the contemporary barrier. The information is abundant which can be easily accessed anytime, anywhere.

The father of Library and Information Science Dr. S R Ranganathan mentioned “Reference Service is a personal service to each reader in helping him to find the documents answering his interest at the moment pin pointedly, exhaustively and expeditiously”. In his view, providing Reference Service means making contact between the right user and the right book at the right time and in the right personal way.

CA Bunge says, “Reference Service, sometimes referred to as reference and information service, which refers to the personal assistance provided to the information seekers in the pursuit of information”.

With the vying world of available information, the challenge is to identify the habit and the workflow of the patrons. While looking onto the numerous ways of acquiring, identifying and the factors determining the easy and convenient access to the digital information the current library services needs to transform and switch to Virtual reference service and virtual tour.



Fig 2 Ballard Carnegie Library checkout desk, ca 1907



Fig 3 Regenstein's Reference Desk (1st Floor)

Transformational Synchronization

The change in the Information seeking behaviour of the millennials that consist of the largest regiment of the academic library users arise the need to synchronize VR with current requirements. Prensky (2001) has proposed that these “digital natives” who cannot remember life without computers, “...think and process information fundamentally differently from their predecessors”.

The obvious distinction in the behavioural characteristics between the Digital Natives and their predecessors can be seen.

- An increasingly disparate, disillusioned, and mobile society has generated a demanding user base with an array of information-seeking habits and needs.
- A boundary less world that exists between work, home and recreation is linked through instant chat and messaging apps.
- Strong affinity for electronic communication via computer, phone, television, video games has enabled them to learn the skill of multitasking.
- Visual and auditory modalities are also efficiently moulded to accept varied range of information simultaneously.
- Convenience of time, place and easy accessibility acquired through virtual world has become a way of living.
- A unique sense of self confidence can be seen in them that defies any assistance and proudly bears the feeling of empowerment that they get in disseminating the informal learning.
- Amidst of all these behavioural patterns, their opinions, choices and preferences are strongly influenced by peer reviews.

Virtual reference can be an effective tool to engage browsers and trigger their curiosity for further exploration. These ‘reel libraries’ can direct the students to relevant sources in their own ability to locate the information they need without resorting to direct librarian assistance as in case of ‘real libraries’. This will enable students to spend more time thinking about information rather than participating in time consuming searching.

Virtual Reference Service

Digital Reference or Virtual Reference is considered to be an extension of reference service providing assistance to the user by answering the query raised in real with the help of internet.

"Virtual Reference is reference service initiated electronically, often in real-time, where users employ computers or other Internet technology to communicate with librarians, without being physically present." (MARS Ad Hoc Committee on Virtual Reference Guidelines (2003, May). Draft Guidelines 5/2003.)

"mechanism through which people can send questions and get answers via e-mail, chat or Web format" (Saunders, 1001)

"The reference services of libraries with well-trained librarians use and assess the tools and resources on the network for optimization of the results" (Sullivan, 2001)

Virtual reference service: definition

Virtual Reference is a service for the library patrons to access the library with the help of remote access option, to resolve the query escalated with an instant reply. The service is extended via internet without physically, being present hence known as virtual reference. This service is assisted with the technology or can be called a technology driven service introduced electronically to the users. Empowering and assisting the user to ask different questions using the library website is the most important feature of virtual reference service. This features enables the user to get the query (access of electronic database, frequently asked questions, etc.) resolved by sitting anywhere with an anytime time assistance remotely.

Virtual Reference Services: categories

The virtual reference service can be broadly divided into two categories Synchronous reference and asynchronous reference as shown in figure 4. The basic difference among the two type is time involved to answer a query elevated by the user or patron.

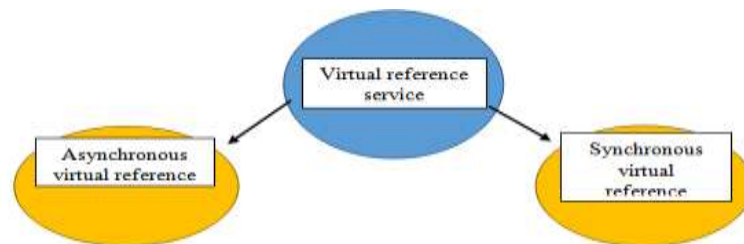


Fig 4 Types of Virtual reference

Asynchronous reference

In this type of reference service, the response to patron's query is resolved during the course of time i.e. through E-mail, web form. There is a little delay in time to answer the query however with the back and forth exchange of mail the complex queries can be easily resolved in a very cost effective manner.

Synchronous reference

This type of reference service is also known as real time, as the queries are attended immediately and promptly i.e. in real time like chat based services, video conferencing etc.

In the libraries communication happens through many different channels as instant messaging and web based chat reference however, adapting the technological change the librarians presently are also rendering reference services virtually through web conferencing tools, such as Adobe Connect (Arvin and Kaiser 2012), Web 2.0 tools such as Twitter (Arya and Mishra 2011; Beaton 2012), Facebook and Twitter (Chu and Du 2012); mobile devices, such as WeChat (Pun 2015), Whatsapp (Akeriwa, Penzhorn and Holmner 2014) and Skype (Beaton 2012). These services are initiated by the libraries in order to meet users' needs, pursue virtual reference technologies (Yang and Dalal 2014) and improve library services (O'Dell 2010).

Facets of Virtual reference service

The facets of Virtual reference service are based on "Trinity of library". According to Dr S R Ranganathan, father of library science, "the library is made up of trinity of books(resources), readers(users) and staff(librarian)". He stated that library is a social institution where books-reader-staff are interdependent. The book represents all types of material of library, reader is the member of the community who depends on the library in pursuit of knowledge. Staff is the link between resources and readers. On the grounds of this well founded ideology the facets of virtual reference service are:

- Electronic resource

- The patrons/users
- Reference librarian i.e. information specialist & Type of interface for communicating

Need for Virtual Reference

Besides the transformational changes discussed earlier, this generation can also be characterized by relatively short span of attention which flickers with a minutest source of distraction. This further poses a challenge to the information seeking development, hence academic library development becomes imperative. Thereby, the need of Virtual Reference Service emanates –

- Limit time consuming face to face interface
- A prompt assistance to the library patrons
- Yielding specialized services
- Directing the user to best available outcome based the response
- Leading to the best research methods and material
- Educating the user in the selection of information source for various purposes
- Provide 24/7 reference services in a variety of formats and to market these services to make people aware of their existence.
- Provide users faster and easier software.
- Enhance the capability to personalize the interface.
- Provide reliable co-browsing.
- Extended hours of service.
- Less complex chatting environment.
- Impressive peer reviewer's environment.
- Additional ways to access information on how to use library technology, such as kiosks.

Technological support

With springing needs it is evident that Virtual Reference Service is supported with multiple software available in the market. Based on the evaluative strategy of – Identify > gather > analyse > share > the various software delivers the ease to use the technology with analytical capabilities. The list of software are as follows-

- Zendesk Chat
- Freshchat
- WhosOn
- Snapengage
- Zoho desk
- tawk.to
- LiveChat
- Contact At Once!
- LiveEngage
- Intercom
- Bitrix24
- Chatra
- Tidio and many more...

Initiating a new technology is a structured sequenced process. With the availability of various online chat applications for providing online support are many. The usability of these types of software is based on multiple considerations.

- To know your user
- To assess the query
- To customize the communication
- Directing to the right selection
- Clarifying the doubts related any resource print or digital
- Last, but most important cost effective

Perhaps the prevalent software gives an extended support to adapt the technology however the cost incurred is always one of the biggest consideration. Hence most of the libraries have started opting the open source software. Open source software is free, reliable and can be easily modified and also available with the source code.

II. CONCLUSION

Libraries are being challenged and confronted with the digital information. The patrons are looking on to exchange of information digitally. The virtual reference service known differently as electronic reference service or digital reference service endeavours to provide a high quality of service to the users. To keep up with dynamic technologies a personalised, reliable interface is the need of the hour. VRS epitomizes a gigantic tread in fulfilling the instruction gap in the online world (Moyo, 2004a). Scaling up with the interoperability of the unlimited, infinite and boundless information sources, Virtual reference service is not only a boon to user but also to the libraries in this digital world.

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Ritu Nagpal, Manager, Global Library, O P Jindal Global University, a graduate from University of Delhi, pursuing her qualification from BLIS, MLIS & MPHIL in Library in Information science is a research scholar for Phd in Library in Information science from Periyar University, Salem. Along with PGDCA, she is a certified Automation trainer for "ALICE for Windows". Awarded for Best Educationist of the year 2017, awarded for National Educators in the year 2018 and for Outstanding Academic in Library & Information Science in the year 2019. Having experience in teaching students at Senior secondary level and being Coordinator for the International School by British School the interest area lies in working on Automation and digitization of academic libraries.



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