

MINITEX

Reference NOTES

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Information Bits

MINITEX Webinars Underway
<http://www.minitex.umn.edu/train-conf/webinars/>

MINITEX is pleased to announce the arrival of webinars on a variety of topics! Webinars are free, livemeetings/ demonstrations/trainings/ or seminars that take place over the web.

The visual component is web-based. You sit at your computer and view a presentation on the web. MINITEX provides the audio connection via your telephone.

MINITEX webinar sessions are typically limited to 10 attendees and generally last between 20 minutes and one hour. These small, focused sessions provide a great way for library staff around the region to ask questions and to receive personalized attention during the training. Webinars are an efficient way to transmit and share information. There is no transportation involved - so webinars save time and money! Webinars are a perfect vehicle for sharing timely and important information and to train library staff on a variety of topics.

For more information on MINITEX webinars, including a complete listing of our current offerings and web-based registration, visit <http://www.minitex.umn.edu/train-conf/webinars/upcoming.asp>.

Virtual Reference Services

Part 3: Issues in Virtual Reference

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In Part 1 of this series, we looked at the various types of virtual reference tools: e-mail, chat, call center software, and others. In Part 2, we looked at the two different ways of doing virtual reference: going solo or collaborative virtual reference. In Part 3, we'll consider some of the issues in virtual reference, such as training, licensing and standards.

Training vs. the Shazam effect

What is the Shazam effect? That's what happens when reference librarians are asked to do virtual reference without any additional training, and Shazam!, they can do virtual reference. Generally a good reference librarian will be a good digital reference librarian, but there are some aspects of digital reference for which training can come in handy. Effective online communication is critical, whether it is by e-mail or by text chat. Good text chat skills are essential if a digital reference service is relying on chat-based interaction. Even though your chosen software may have some scripted responses to help hasten the interaction, good chat typing skills are critical. You must be able to converse quickly and correctly online. If you have tried to use chat, you may know that it isn't as easy to use as it looks, especially when you first start using it. The person on the other end isn't getting visual cues from you while you are trying to find the answer for them, as they would be if they were at the reference desk. This means that you need to keep them apprised of what's going on, while you find the answer. Practicing the use of chat by partnering with other librarians and having mock reference sessions has been very useful for some librarians. Training on the additional features of the digital reference software your library is using, such as the mechanics of co browsing and application sharing is also important. It's a good idea to learn about and practice using these features before you go live with a patron. Training can be done with two librarians in the same room, but it's a closer match to actual digital reference if the two librarians are in two different locations. Generally, some training is useful as libraries prepare for digital reference.



Licensing

Licensing issues fall into several areas, including the use of databases with remote patrons, the sharing of content with non-constituent users and use of databases in collaborative digital reference. Escorting a patron in the use of an online resource is one of the benefits of digital reference software. You can both be looking at the same thing at the same time, and control can often be passed back and forth from librarian to patron and back to librarian. It is possible that this could be viewed as remote access to a resource. If your license agreements preclude remote access this could potentially be an issue. Considering that you are not giving the remote patron separate unescorted access and that the original access during the transaction came from the library, it could be argued that it is not really remote access. If a digital reference service provides service to non-constituent users of the library, and provides them with access to searching via escorted use, or to content, say with access to a single full text article, is that within the license agreement? When a non-constituent user comes into a library to use resources, they are often allowed to use the available online resources that the library makes available to its own patrons. It could be argued that the provision of content via a digital reference service is doing the very same thing, and is in fact more controlled because the librarian is escorting the access. Another issue of digital reference is whether or not database licenses permit use of the database for collaborative reference. Some institutions only use the set of commonly held databases for collaborative reference work to avoid any possible conflict with license terms. This approach works, but it limits the potential to leverage the value of additional collection breadth. In some cases, existing licenses already allow additional library-related use that would cover this type of use. Many libraries already use their resources to answer phone or in person reference questions from people who are not their primary constituents, so collaborative reference may just be an extension of that. These licensing issues are relevant to digital reference, but haven't necessarily been resolved one way or the other. It is important to acknowledge them, but it is also important to realize that there are still more questions here than answers.

Standards

A need for defined standards in digital reference services is emerging as a result of the growth of such services. Currently, digital reference services are independent systems

that aren't capable interoperability. As digital reference grows, there will be a growing interest in developing such services so that they can be interconnected and interoperable with each other, thereby more fully achieving collaborative or cooperative digital reference. Defined and adopted standards would allow disparate digital reference services to interoperate and could also help ensure service quality.

In 1997, the Virtual Reference Desk Project started work on a set of quality characteristics as part of their work on AskA services. These characteristics were later revised for institutions participating in the Virtual Reference Desk Network. The development and assessment of quality standards are currently being researched in the digital reference service field. Technology standards that include specifications for how digital reference questions and answers are expressed, tracked, transferred and stored will be necessary for services to interoperate. Early work on standards by the Virtual Reference Desk project (<http://www.vrd.org>) resulted in the Question Interchange Profile (QuIP), a threaded data model that would track a question as a thread from start to finish. QuIP relies on metadata to maintain, track, store a services' questions and answers in a consistent file format. KnowledgeBit is another data format for the handling of reference transactions. In response to the interest in developing digital reference standards, a NISO sponsored Workshop on Networked Digital Reference Services was held April 25-26, 2001. The workshop explored potential areas of standardization. Links to the agenda, presentations and the final report can be found at http://www.niso.org/news/events_workshops/netref.html. The workshop participants identified two possible areas of standardization to support digital reference services. One area is the development of a question processing transaction protocol for the interchange of messages between digital reference services. The other area of focus is to build a set of metadata elements that will identify and describe the key data components related to questions and answers, as well as institutional and personal data. A new NISO standards committee, the Networked Reference Services Committee (Standards Committee AZ), will be formed into 2 teams to address the two areas. Visit http://www.niso.org/committees/committee_az.html for more information on the committee. Visit <http://alexia.lis.uiuc.edu/~b-sloan/digiref.html> for a digital reference services bibliography compiled by Bernie Sloan.

Google Enhancements

The search engine that couldn't get any better just got better. In the past four months, the folks at GOOGLE have created several new features that seek to satisfy the shopper and news hound in us. Google Catalogs and Froogle are database spin offs connecting consumers with company catalogs and general merchandise categories, respectively. Of perhaps greater interest to library folk is Google News, a compendium of late-breaking and timely news stories aggregated from over 4,000 news sources available on the Web. You can get to Google News off the Google home page by clicking on the "News-New!" tab directly under the Google banner at www.google.com

Google News stories are grouped in standard categories: World news, U.S. news, Business, Sports, Sci/Tech, Entertainment, and Health. You can look at the indexed items for an entire category by clicking on the headers on the left side of the page, or you can go directly into a newspaper-like format by clicking on the headline of stories that interest you. Headers and stories are color coded to connect the subject matter and content is updated every fifteen minutes. A note at the end of each story update will tell you how "old" the posting is. Depending on how deep the backfile of a news source is, material in Google News may remain in the database for up to thirty days.

The selection of news sources is based on computer algorithms. According to the Google disclaimer, there is no human intervention in the selection of news sources. The computer-generated selection of news stories on the site is based on frequency of a story's appearance on other Web sites. This method of selection is based on the same general principle that guides most of what appears on Google: the "collective judgment of web publishers to determine



which sites offer the most valuable and relevant information." Practically, this means that those news sites that get the most hits are most likely to be included in the news digest. For a listing of the principle sources indexed, go to the bottom of the Google news page and click on "News Resources" link. It should be noted here that although Google says that there are 4,000 potential sources for news that are crawled for content, the "News Resources" page lists approximately one hundred titles of the major national and international news organizations. It is these sources from which the preponderance of articles in the digest are drawn. The news sources you would expect to find in the digest are there—Washington Post, BBC, Reuters, CNN, International Herald Tribune, Forbes—as well as more specialized and/or politically charged titles, such as Ha'Aretz (the Pakistan News Service), American Red Cross, and the UN ReliefWeb. If you or your patrons are looking for news reporting from across political or geopolitical spectrums, Google News is a good place to find multiple views on events.

You'll also find a search box at the top of the news page that allows you to search for articles by subject (in addition to the default browsing.) A search on "heart disease" offered over one hundred articles on heart disease treatment, diagnostics, rehabilitation and prevention from national and international news sources and an option to sort results by date. You can also add terms for a particular type of news writing—movie review, editorial, and commentary—to a subject term for more perspective on a particular topic.

Like Google in general, Google News is clean looking and simple to navigate. I recommend it especially for those of you working with students with current event assignments. The digest is a great way to painlessly retrieve comparative news pieces that students are often asked to analyze.

More on Google in the next installment of Reference Notes.

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