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David L. DeHart
Appalachian State University, dehartdl@appstate.edu

Ann Viles
Appalachian State University, vilesea@appstate.edu

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Virtual Reference Service in Southeastern Academic Libraries: A Study of Availability

David L DeHart and Ann Viles

David L. DeHart is an Assistant Professor for the Library and Information Commons at Appalachian State University and can be reached at dehartdl@appstate.edu. Ann Viles is a Professor for the Library and Information Commons at Appalachian State University and can be reached at vilesea@appstate.edu.

Academic libraries are experiencing a gradual decline in the number of reference transactions. In a recent compilation of statistics for members of the Association of Research Libraries, for example, the median numbers of reference transactions reported fell from 134,944 in 1998 to 66,300 in 2005, an average drop of 4.6% per year (Kyrillidou and Young 2006). Traditional reference transactions still greatly outnumber virtual transactions in most libraries, but there is some speculation that virtual reference will overtake traditional reference in the near future. In an attempt to establish a baseline for the availability of virtual reference services in Southeastern academic libraries, the authors browsed the web sites for 1,126 academic libraries and recorded the locations of links to AskALibrarian services, chat reference, and instant messaging during the summer and fall of 2006. The results are a snapshot of virtual reference in the region.

History of AskA Reference Services

The earliest efforts to provide asynchronous virtual reference services were e-mail-based. One of these was the Electronic Access to Reference Services (EARS) launched by the University of Maryland Health Services Library in Baltimore in 1984. In that same year, the University of Washington Health Services Library in Seattle began a service using the university's e-mail system that allowed patrons to submit requests for holds, interlibrary loans, online searches, renewals, etc. In 1987 the Indiana University Libraries began offering e-mail access through their LIRN (Libraries Information and Reference Network), a menu-driven system that was part of the campus-wide information system. The reference queries generated by these pioneer efforts in virtual reference service were generally very low (Still and Campbell 1993).

The introduction of AskA virtual reference services can be traced to 1992 when AskERIC was launched at Syracuse University as a project of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Information and Technology. As an Internet-based service, AskERIC offered human-mediated reference service through its replies to educators' e-mail queries and the provision of a web site containing a wealth of ready to use online resources. Though AskERIC ceased operation in December 2003, this groundbreaking service experienced exponential growth over its 11-year history in both the number of questions submitted and the number of hits on the AskERIC web site. Following AskERIC's debut, a host of library AskA reference services were introduced in response to burgeoning Internet access and the ever-increasing availability of online resources. Throughout the 1990s these services were predominately asynchronous and users submitted reference queries via e-mail or web-based forms.

Today many libraries provide access to their virtual and other patron-librarian interfaces through an AskA link on their web homepage. Such links typically enable users to connect to a second-level page that offers multiple options for obtaining reference service, from the more traditional forms of assistance to those requiring a computer interface including e-mail, web-based chat and Instant Messaging (IM).

History of Chat Reference Services

From an historical perspective, academic libraries' earliest use of chat reference began in the late 1990s and was based on the chat software that had been successfully used in e-commerce applications for customer service call centers (Sloan 2001). A SPEC survey of ARL member libraries in the summer of 2002 revealed that very few of these libraries were offering any type of chat reference service prior to 2000. However, there has been a significant increase in the number of libraries offering such services in the past few years (Ronan and Turner 2002).

The two most prevalent forms of chat reference service currently being offered by academic libraries are web-based chat and Instant Messaging (IM). Though both are types of synchronous electronic messaging, a key distinction is in the type of communication channel each follows. With web-based chat, when the user clicks on a link or icon to access the library's chat service, the software opens a chat window on a web page, allowing users to exchange messages with a librarian, and those messages are routed through web servers. IM chat, on the other hand, requires downloading special client software onto both user and librarian computers. Communication through IM programs is faster because the messaging session is conducted through a direct connection between the librarian and the user that bypasses web server routing. Web-based chat typically offers features such as co-browsing, web page and document pushing, pre-configured scripts, session transcripts, and statistical reporting that are not available with IM programs. Web-based chat applications are commercial products that will likely require costly licensing fees, and many libraries offering web-based chat are doing so in collaborative arrangements with other libraries to mitigate costs and extend the hours the service is available. Conversely, most IM client applications are free, allowing both users and the library to download them without cost (Houghton and Schmidt 2005).

In 2001 Francoeur identified web-based chat as the category of chat generating the greatest interest among librarians. He further noted that six of eight chat reference consortia reported using Web-based chat compared to two using IM software (Francoeur 2001). The 2002 SPEC survey referenced earlier also indicates that most libraries offering chat reference use the feature-rich software associated with web-based services, however, libraries' use of IM to deliver chat reference seems to be gaining momentum.

Text Messaging aka SMS (Short Messaging Service)

With access to mobile phones now being almost universal among the college student population (Student Monitor 2005), yet another tool for providing digital reference service is beginning to emerge. This form of asynchronous service known as SMS (Short Message Service) involves the sending of queries as text messages from library users' mobile phones to a library phone number dedicated for this mode of reference service. User-generated text messages are converted by special communications software to e-mail and then routed to a designated e-mail account for a librarian to respond. The software converts the librarian's e-mail reply to a text message that is routed back to the user's mobile phone (Altarama 2006).

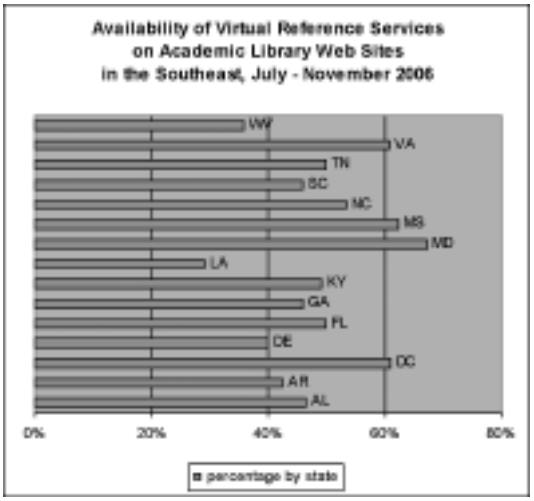
While current use of SMS is very limited in the U.S., its application internationally has been much broader (Giles and Grey-Smith 2005). Some of the advantages of SMS include its social acceptance given students' ready access to mobile phones and their familiarity with text messaging communication, its appeal for students having spoken language difficulties, and the ease of implementation and training for reference staff who are already capable of handling e-mail reference queries. Limitations of SMS as a viable digital reference option include a technology-imposed limit of 160 characters per text message, the availability of synchronous reference services (in-person visits to the reference desk, telephone calls, IM and chat) that can respond more readily to users' queries, and the "text-only" nature of the medium.

Methodology

During the period of July-November 2006, the authors searched the library web sites of 1,126 degree-granting institutions in the Southeast for links to virtual reference services. The list of libraries was obtained from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) "Data from Academic Libraries Survey Fiscal Year: 2004" web site. NCES defines an academic library as a "library associated with a degree-granting institution of higher education. Academic libraries are identified by the post-secondary institution of which they are a part." The database was queried for the names of libraries from the following states: Alabama, Arkansas, District of Columbia, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia.

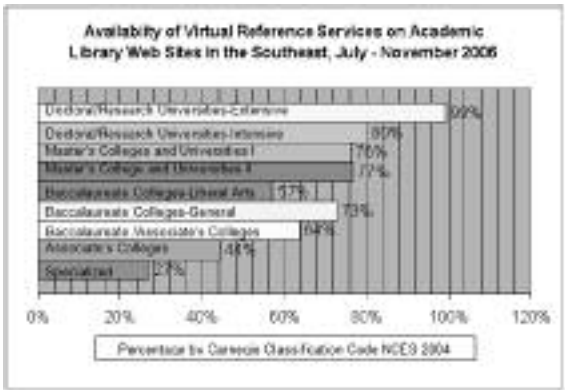
Results

Links to virtual reference service in any format were located on the web sites of 565 or 50 percent of the academic libraries in the Southeast. This figure is lower than 680 libraries or 60 percent, who indicated on the NCES survey that library reference service was provided by e-mail or the web during 2003-04. Some of the difference in the percentage of virtual reference links located in this study and the percentage reported in the 2004 NCES report may be due to the unavailability of public access to the library web sites of some private institutions. Three states in the Southeast and the District of Columbia provided links to virtual reference service on the web sites of more than 60 percent of their academic libraries—Maryland (67%), Mississippi (63%), Virginia (61%), and the District of Columbia (61%)



Almost all of the institutions in the Southeast which are classified in the Carnegie NCES 2004 data as "Doctorate/Research Universities-Extensive" provide links to virtual reference services on their library web sites, as do more than three-fourths of the institutions classified as "Doctoral/Research Universities-Intensive," "Master's Colleges and Universities I," and "Master's Colleges and Universities II." Baccalaureate colleges awarding more than half their degrees in liberal arts are less likely to offer virtual reference services on their library web sites (57%) than the baccalaureate colleges awarding less than half their degrees in liberal arts (73%). "Baccalaureate/Associate's

Colleges," institutions predominantly offering associate's degrees and certificate programs but also awarding at least 10% of their degrees at the baccalaureate level, were found to provide virtual reference links on 64% of their library web sites, while "Associate's Colleges," institutions predominantly offering associate's degrees and certificate programs and almost no baccalaureate degrees, were found to provide virtual reference links on 44% of the sites. The data for specialized institutions, such as theological seminaries, medical schools, and business schools, have been combined in this study and show that only 27% of these institutions are likely to include virtual reference links on their library web sites.



Of the 565 library web sites found in this study to have virtual reference service links, 65 percent provided links to AskALibrarian or similarly-named forms and 28 percent provided links to generic e-mail addresses. Chat reference service was available in 32 percent of the library sites providing virtual reference; instant messaging (IM) in less than 8.5 percent. Chat and IM occurred most frequently as additional options to AskALibrarian e-mail or forms. Six libraries offered only IM, and forty-six only chat. More than 73 percent of the libraries providing links to chat reference participate in a chat consortium. Only one library was found to include a link to text message a librarian.

Of the 183 libraries that provide chat reference services, 134 or 73 percent participate in a consortium. The following consortiums were found to be most frequently used: Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities, Florida Ask a Librarian Service, Maryland AskUsNow!, Mississippi Electronic Libraries Online (MELO), NCKnows, Virginia Community College System LRC Live, and the Technical Colleges of South Carolina.

Summary

Almost a quarter of a century has passed since a small number of academic libraries initiated the delivery of reference services through electronic means. As library collections and information resources have become more digital, so has the need for providing virtual reference services become more pronounced. The aim of this study has been to identify and articulate the extent and nature of virtual reference services in Southeastern academic libraries. Through a search of over 1100 academic library web sites, it was discovered that half of those libraries offer some form(s) of virtual reference service and the preferred means for steering library patrons to those services is an AskALibrarian link on the library's web site. It was also noted that web-based chat and Instant Messaging are the two most common forms of synchronous virtual reference and one or both were identified in approximately 40 percent of the academic library web sites offering virtual reference service. Most of the libraries providing web-based chat do so as members of chat consortiums. While the data clearly indicate that the presence of virtual reference service has transcended being a novelty adopted by a few avant-garde libraries, it is less certain how this presence will evolve in the years to come. To this end, it is believed that this study establishes a baseline for future availability investigation.

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