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Virtual Reference Service in the Muslim World: Opportunities and Challenges

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Introduction

The reference function has undergone changes in the variety of services offered and in the service itself. One area of change is in the deployment of the technologies used to meet the demands of users. Remote access by library users is a serious challenge to reference services. They must develop strategies to cope with the demands of the user for remote access.

Many academic libraries still have access to large numbers of serial titles in their online databases, whose full text articles can be accessed by users for teaching, learning, and research. These rich repositories are not available through mere navigation of the Internet, but are only available to authorized users. Professors and other teaching staff who are engaged in research may also be able to purchase articles with research funds. In this scenario, the worst off are the millions of people who live in developing countries, and who cannot access the Internet or pay for articles. The free resources and services of the public library are the only avenue for most people in developing countries. Reference services in public libraries also play a key role in the provision of knowledge and information to the public.

Malaysia is a developing country that is fortunate not to suffer the pinch as much as others. Our university libraries, for example, have numerous essential online databases in all fields of knowledge. International Islamic University Malaysia Library has top online databases titles in the field of business, education, law, engineering, medicine, sciences, information and communication technology, and other social sciences disciplines and is on par with academic libraries in developed countries. Professors and other teaching staff engaged in research have the opportunity to address their publication needs directly by sending requests to the document delivery suppliers overseas. Other developing countries, especially countries of the Muslim world, may not be as fortunate as Malaysia in having a strong academic libraries all over the country and a good public library system spread across all states and regions of the country.

Libraries have devised several strategies to meet the challenge of remote access. One of these is virtual reference. Virtual reference is a type of electronic reference service that may or may not have real time operations. Tenopir (2001), in a survey of 70 academic libraries in the US, found that 99 percent were operating asynchronously. This means that the users may interact with the reference librarians by appointment or through email. Order (2001) found that only 29 percent of users could interact with reference librarians in real time by instant messaging and video conferencing.

Email reference service may be adequate, since users can send queries to reference librarians 24 hours a day and seven days a week. Response to the queries may not be immediate, since librarians

answer the queries only during working hours. One way to overcome this problem is a system that is interactive and can be accessed at any time of the day.

Another approach is the creation of call centres that are designated to handle not only voice, fax, email, video interactions, or web chat. In the case of web chat, for example the librarian is able to accompany the users as they browse through electronic resources, offering them advice, answering queries, and training the user online in how to use the electronic resources.

As a consequence of these developments, some researchers have argued that the reference services as they currently exist will undergo major changes in the near future, whether the libraries participate or not. According to Campbell (2000), three major forces will be responsible for effecting the changes: the migration of learning into the asynchronous environment, the emergence of the web-based generation, and the arrival of commercial forces into the education marketplace. Some authors have argued against this approach as face-to-face interviews are still important (Chowdhury 2002; Gamsey and Power 2000).

Others have suggested a middle course, suggesting that libraries to provide both synchronous and asynchronous services (Stemper and Butler 2001). Librarians must select services based on their needs and resources (Janes, 2003).

Scope of the Study

There is a great deal of interest in the concept of virtual reference services, especially the use of chat software. It would be useful to find out whether this interest pervades the countries of the Muslim world as well, and to know information professionals in the Muslim world have introduced some form of virtual reference service. The study is limited to public libraries in selected countries of the Muslim world. A survey was conducted to identify virtual reference in public libraries in Islamic countries. Findings from this study would indirectly reveal the extent of use or application of the Internet in libraries of selected countries.

Methodology

In most developing countries, the national library plays a pivotal role in the development of public libraries in the country. In Malaysia, "the progress of the respective public libraries is closely monitored by the National Library of Malaysia in order to identify the program, service and manpower requirements for budgetary purposes" (Ahmad, 1998). National library websites have links to the public libraries of the respective countries. In this study the public libraries of the major countries of the Muslim world are assessed on the basis of the types of reference services they provide. The services are judged using a scale that measures their maturity.

A public library that operates traditional services where a user is provided with answers through personal contact, normal mail, or telephone is treated as having zero maturity. A score of 1 is assigned when a small number of libraries have begun providing email reference. An email link on the library website is an indicator of this level of virtual reference service.

A score of 2 is assigned to a situation in which a moderate number of public libraries are providing email reference, while a score of 3 is assigned when a large number are providing this service. When public libraries have a web form designed solely for reference service, a score of 4 is assigned. A score of 5 is assigned to libraries that offer their virtual reference services in real time and 24/7.

A survey of the national library in the major countries of the Muslim world was conducted. Data on the public libraries were gathered from the links found on the national library websites. It is to be noted that not all nations in the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) are covered in the survey. Only Islamic

nations that are viewed by the author as having contributed something to Islam and the Ummah are covered in this survey.

Results

None of the countries surveyed had a public library that offered virtual reference services in real time and 24/7. This is not surprising, since these services are costly. Even public libraries in Western countries are often not able to maintain this type of virtual reference services. As a result, consortia have been formed to share the responsibility for virtual reference at the global level. QuestionPoint is an example. QuestionPoint “stems from an arrangement between the Library of Congress’ Public Service Collections Directorate and OCLC to provide libraries with access to a growing collaborative network of reference librarians in the U.S. and around the world. Library patrons can submit questions at any time of the day or night through their local library’s Web site” (Quint 2002). One of the salient points of QuestionPoint technology is the presence of web-based question-submission forms, e-mail interaction, and live chat service.

Table 1 shows the countries with a score of 3 and 4.

Table 1. Countries scoring 3 and 4

COUNTRIES	SCORES
Egypt	4
Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan	3
Islamic Republic of Iran	3
Islamic Republic of Pakistan	3
Malaysia	4
Republic of Indonesia	3
Republic of Turkey	3
Saudi Arabia	4
Sultanate of Brunei	3
United Arab Emirates	3

In Egypt, the Bibliotheca Alexandrina has “Ask a Librarian” on the library website. Similarly, the King Abdul Aziz Public Library of Saudi Arabia also has a link called “Ask Me” on the library website. There are a number of countries with a score of 3. Most of the major Islamic countries belong to this category. Countries such as the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Republic of Turkey, the Republic of Indonesia, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, the United Arab Emirates, the Sultanate of Brunei and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan are in this category.

Only one country surveyed has a score of 2. The others all scored 1, indicating that they have yet to cope with Internet technology as a way of offering reference services. They prefer the traditional way of offering reference service, either through personal interaction, telephone, or mail. There are very few public libraries with an email link on their websites.

Table 2 shows the countries that belong to categories 2 and 1. Countries are not listed were either not surveyed or access to the public library websites in those countries was not feasible.

Table 2. Countries scoring 2 and 1

COUNTRIES	SCORES
Syrian Arab Republic	2
Federal Republic of Nigeria	1
Kuwait	1
Lebanon	1
Republic of Sudan	1

Conclusion

A survey of the public library websites of countries of the Muslim world shows that virtual reference service is not common or well-developed. From the results we can deduce that the state of development of public libraries and the support that they received from governing bodies may have played a major role in the adoption of virtual reference services. It also seems to suggest that the lack of information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure may have taken a toll as well. Countries like Malaysia and Saudi Arabia that have good ICT infrastructure and good government support show more development of services such as virtual reference.

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