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Facing Live Reference

By Joe Fernandez

Live reference (LR) is growing in popularity—people have discovered the convenience of chatting online with a librarian for their information needs. Almost anyone with access to the Internet can use this service, which is now becoming a standard

feature of library services in many parts of the world. This form of communication is quite a leap when you consider the fact that the Internet's original intent, in its Arpanet incarnation, was a communication tool for military scientists.

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Libraries are using LR as one form of reference service—in some cases collaboratively with other regional or national libraries. Australia provides some good examples. The isolation problem faced by many communities in Australia, combined with the high rate of computer usage among Australians in general, is making LR an increasingly popular tool for information queries. Australia's AskNow LR service receives a large number of

are taken to a completely new dimension. The concept of sender, message, medium, and receiver takes on new meanings.

In a virtual encounter, the participants do not have the luxury of nonverbal cues to enhance communication. Researchers believe that in FtF communication, nonverbal features such as facial expression, eye contact, body posture, tone of voice, physical distance between speakers,

on clients. Scripted messages, which can be easily recognized, may be conceived as impersonal and may make the client feel alienated. Scripted messages create a psychological distance between the communicators, undermining the communication act.

People in general are uncomfortable talking to machines. In the interest of making LR a more personalized experience, it is better to send individualized messages to clients. To enhance social presence, use the affective features of communication, referred to as electronic paralanguage.



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PERSONALIZING LIVE REFERENCE

Transcripts of LR sessions show that librarians and clients employ various linguistic devices to connect with each other while communicating virtually. A very basic one is using the name of the client right from the start of the electronic interaction, "Hi Kimmy, this is Joe from the State Library of New South Wales. Let me work on your query." An opening like this could signal to the client that the online encounter is not going to be an impersonal, automated affair. It also conforms with the principle of politeness from the field of pragmatics, in which speakers are committed to maintaining a civil discourse. To continue the positive nature of the communication, it is important for the librarian to use the client's name judiciously throughout the session. At the same time, it is also important for librarians to use their own names during the session.

However, revealing a name sometimes makes librarians vulnerable to inappropriate online behavior. In the apparent safety of online anonymity, clients sometimes indulge in unsolicited communication such as "Can I take you out this Friday night?" and, worse, even verbal aggression. This contravenes the cooperative principle of conversation from the field of pragmatics, which holds that speakers are committed to engage in mutually useful discourse, but is a risk LF librarians face and are certainly professionally capable of handling. In

queries each day, attesting to its popularity among people from all walks of life. Similarly, in other countries, LR caters to the growing number of people who find it an invaluable service; LR is now considered an essential part of many virtual libraries.

Librarians using LR are able to chat with clients to identify their information needs and provide them with the needed information. They are also able to show clients how to identify reliable online resources and suggest print and networked resources from the clients' nearest library. With this form of service, clients now have information at the tip of their fingers. Although the advantages and benefits of this form of information service are numerous, there are certain issues with which librarians must contend.

THE THIRTY PERCENT DILEMMA

In contrast to face-to-face (FtF) communication, LR is fraught with a number of challenges. In this dyadic, synchronous, and task-oriented form of computer-mediated communication (CMC), theories and concepts from the field of pragmatics

body language, and other nonverbal cues carry around 70 percent of meaning. As such, LR librarians have only a limited bandwidth of around 30 percent of the communication act to work with. This obviously limits the virtual exchange between the interlocutors. However, this problem may not be all that intimidating. Librarians contending with this virtual gap may want to take into consideration a number of factors including social presence and media richness.

CREATING VIRTUAL HARMONY

Social presence is an important concept in electronic communication environments like LR. This refers to the extent to which the communicators feel the presence of the other during the course of their electronic exchange. Electronic interlocutors often look for markers that they are communicating with real people and not some inanimate cyborg devoid of human emotions. In this respect, the pushing of scripted messages to online clients may be considered by some to be a very efficient procedure. However, such messages may have a negative effect

the event that a client becomes impossibly obnoxious and the communication act is beyond redemption, librarians then have the luxurious option of terminating the offensive session by labeling it as "inappropriate behavior." Before terminating such a session, some librarians take a proactive approach and tell the client, "Tammy, when you have a reference question, please contact us."

REFERENCE AS CONVERSATIONS

On a more positive note, librarians reinforce the client's presence by using affective responses where appropriate and when possible like "Hope you enjoy living in Canberra!" to a client who wants the address of the local library in Canberra, where she is relocating. Such responses can contribute towards creating a bond between the client and the librarian, even if it is a tenuous one, leaving the client with a positive feeling about the service. Transcripts of LR sessions also show that clients often attempt to enhance social presence during a live reference session in different ways. They intersperse the session with conversational features that are extra grammatical, like "Yep!," or, "You gotta be kidding!" They also use textual improvisations like, "Cya," "ty v much," "Thanx," and "Is anyl there?" They also express backchannelling cues using lexical surrogates such as "Hmm," "Huh!" and "Um." Other communicative devices include the use of capital letters like "HURRY UP!!!!," the use of punctuation marks and typographic symbols such as "?????" to signify tone and "I'm in a hurry please" or "Thank you ^^."

Humor is another useful element that can enhance social presence in LR. Sprinkling humorous remarks where appropriate will go a long way towards maintaining a non-threatening level of conversation that indirectly enables successful reference transactions. For a query like, "I understand from family lore that my ancestor changed his name after arriving in Australia. How do I find out

his original name?" the librarian may be well served by commenting, "Might be nice to start a new life with a new name. That would be cool!!" It is also a good idea for librarians to share their feelings or thoughts when possible, "It has been quite hot here in Sydney today! Nice weather for a barbie!" These may not necessarily be directly related to the ongoing conversation; however, these comments have the potential to enhance social presence and contribute to better communication between clients and librarians.

MEDIA ENCOUNTERS

Like social presence, media richness plays an important role in contributing towards successful LR. Media richness refers to the extent to which a communication medium is able to convey various language cues that contribute towards reducing ambiguity in a communication exchange. FtF communication has the highest level of media richness because this medium affords a broad range of verbal and non-verbal cues, whereas letter writing, without such cues, is a very lean medium of communication.

Current LR software includes features that try to compensate for the

features are already freely available in chat rooms, such as Parachat and ICQ. Clients should have the flexibility to personalize their CMC; it gives them a sense of power and the ability to express their individuality, albeit to a limited extent. Media-rich features like these will certainly assist in enhancing the social presence of the online interlocutors.

LIVE REFERENCE COMPETENCE

In addition to the importance of social presence and media richness in LR, librarians will also need to consider other factors. They will need a lot of patience to deal with the wide range of questions that come through. Each and every question deserves an appropriate response. Some of the queries that librarians receive need delicate handling. Faced with a question like, "How do you make babies?" for example, the librarian could send the client a relevant Web site that deals with this topic in an objective manner and refer the client to the nearest library for further research. Responses like this may surprisingly elicit comments like, "Cool, man!!"

In LR, the reference interview is equally important to ascertain the

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... is its main advantage.



lack of nonverbal cues. Features include enabling librarians to push Web pages to clients and co-browse with them. Librarians can then show clients how to research a topic using online resources. The synchronous nature of LR, with its ability for instant responses, is its main advantage. Taking LR to another level, clients are able to choose from a range of emoticons, fonts, and background colors. Many of these fea-

exact nature of a query. For example, "Can you give me some sites for marketing?" could be an escalator question that requires a thorough reference interview, even though the client expects a quick response. The client is probably looking specifically for resources on marketing campaigns, but other aspects to the question could emerge. Librarians should ideally tell clients where, and most importantly, how

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the answers were found. The LR session is also another opportunity to teach clients how to become independent researchers.

In LR, there are constraints on the size of the messages. If the librarian is typing a long reply, the client is not aware of what is going on. This is when clients become impatient and resort to yelling, "Talk to me!" or, "Are you there???" Librarians will need to use short succinct sentences and to keep communicating at regular intervals as silent pauses sometimes make people uncomfortable.

LIVING UP TO EXPECTATIONS

Clients often have very high expectations of LR and send in very involved queries requiring in-depth research that are well beyond the scope of LR. In these kinds of situations, librarians should offer some resources

perfectly in a symbiotic relationship, just like yin and yang.

LR librarians will have to be comfortable with multitasking. This is one of the interesting features of LR. It's not a burden, but an opportunity to serve a number of people at the same time. This is something that librarians could never do at the reference desk. An online client cannot see that the librarian is dealing with other clients simultaneously. However, it is important that the librarian does not take on too many clients at the same time. Some librarians feel that three clients at a time should be the maximum.

ROLE OF SEARCH TECHNIQUES

Search skills using the Internet and networked databases are very important. Librarians, however, are certainly not restricted to electronic resources in answering

these resources in any manner suitable to the individual librarian's online personality, without worrying about cataloging mantras or information architecture principles. These portals should enable the librarians to find needed resources as quickly as possible.

It is also important to bear in mind that LR sessions can be highly stressful. Librarians need at least half an hour to collect their thoughts before going online to face the electronic masses. Similarly, librarians also need at least half an hour to de-stress after each session.

"REACH OUT AND TOUCH SOMEBODY"

LR is an adrenalin-pumped social event. Questions span the whole gamut of the human experience. Your next query may be from someone out in some isolated and arid desert mining community or from someone in an air-conditioned office just across the street. The questions can range from something as straightforward as, "What is the capital of Nepal?" to something as exotic as, "How many Russians collaborated with the Nazis in Paris during World War II?"

More and more people are discovering the advantages of using this form of library service for their information needs. LR may not be as rich as FtF communication but it is not without its excitement. LR is a challenging proposition for librarians to provide the best possible information service. It is a dynamic vehicle for a community of information seekers and information providers struggling in cyberspace to find a partnership to fill information gaps. Australian librarians, like their colleagues elsewhere, are taking a proactive approach to this new medium of information service. What an exciting time to be a librarian!

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In LR, there are constraints on the size of the messages.

to get the client started, then refer them to networked databases and print resources at their nearest library. In certain cases, the LF librarian would refer such involved queries to research librarians for a later response. Never give clients the impression that all their information needs will be found online. In fact, clients should regularly be advised to consult their nearest library for further research. This is also important in order to reassure local libraries that the virtual library is not poised for a hostile takeover of their services—the virtual library can never make the physical library redundant. Virtual libraries and physical libraries complement each other per-

queries. Using print resources and the skills of colleagues represent other resources in the repertoire of LR librarians. There should be a telephone at each LR desk with the telephone numbers of colleagues and their specialized skills. A copy of the day's roster should also be available at the LR desk in order to contact a colleague when needed for a specialized query; collaboration is definitely an important ingredient of this service.

Librarians will obviously have to be familiar with a variety of online reference sources. It would be very helpful if librarians could create their own personal Web portals of useful online resources. Arrange

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