Theme
Information resources and research & Integration of Islamic digital resources for e-learning

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Topic
Virtual Reference Services for Islamic Countries: Opportunities and Challenges
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By

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Introduction

The Reference Department currently has undergone vast changes not only in the variety of services being offered but also in the conduct of the services itself. It will not be difficult for anyone who visits an academic or public library to find these changes. A clear demonstration of the changes that are taking place is in the deployment of the technologies that are specifically used to meet the demands of the users. The users are least attracted to visit their libraries as they can access other sources without any difficulty over the Internet, even from their own living rooms. The remote access by the library users of other non library resources has become a serious challenge to those who are running the
reference services. They have to develop strategies to cope with the demands of the user for remote access of their services.

The Reference Department in an academic library, unlike the public library can still breathe a sense of relief as their turf is still not being eroded as much by the wind of change. They can still claim that they still hold millions of serials titles in their online databases which can be accessed for the full text articles that are needed by the users for teaching, learning and research purposes. These rich repositories are currently not available through mere navigation of the Internet unless the library users can afford to pay for those articles that are being offered by the document delivery service vendors over the Internet. This may not be a problem for the professors and other teaching staff who are engaged in research as their purchases of those articles can be reimbursed from the research funds.

In this scenario, the worst affected party would be those millions of people who are living in the poor developing countries of the world for not being able to access the Internet as well as the capacity to pay for copies of articles. They suffer from double jeopardy because of the position and destinies they are in right now. Unlike the beneficiaries of research funding and others who are able to break from the shackles of poverty they have nowhere to complain their cases but only to seek solace by accessing the facilities and services of the public libraries that are mostly free anyway. Libraries that are catering for the needs of the general public are usually found to be doting the horizons of the urban areas and
Malaysia as one of the developing countries is fortunate not to suffer the pinch as much as other developing countries. Our university libraries for example are filled with numerous essential online databases in all fields of knowledge. Take the case of the International Islamic University Malaysia Library, for example it has all the top online databases titles in the field of business, education, law, engineering, medicine, sciences, information and communication technology and other social sciences disciplines and can posit as on par with those academic libraries in the developed countries. Professors and other teaching staff engaged in research have the opportunity to address their publication needs directly by sending their requests to the document delivery suppliers overseas. Other developing countries, especially Islamic countries may not be as fortunate as Malaysia in having a strong academic libraries all over the country and a good public library services spreading across all states and regions of the country.

To meet this challenge of remote access upfront libraries have resorted to a couple of strategies. The type of strategy taken by the library is largely dependent on the understanding of the definition of the term **virtual reference** by the reference librarians. Sometimes they are confused with the right term to be used for describing the scenario as there are other terms which fit the same description that can be used instead, for example digital reference or e-
Virtual reference may be defined as that type of reference service which is electronically based that may or may not have real time operations. Tenopir (2001) in a survey of 70 academic libraries in the USA found that 99 percent of libraries were operating not real time. This means that the users may interact with the reference librarians by appointment or through the use of electronic mail. In his study on e-reference, Order (2001) found that in only 29 percent of cases the users could interact with the reference librarians in real time by using software such as AOL Instant Messenger and video conferencing.

In reality operating an email reference service is good enough as the users can send their queries to the reference librarians 24 hours a day and seven days a week. The only drawback would be in the immediacy of responding to the queries as the librarians can answer the queries only during their working hours. One way to overcome this problem is to put in place a system that is interactive and machine based which can be accessed at any time of the day.

Another approach that have been used to enhance the live connection between the users and the reference librarians is the creation of some call centres that are duly designated to handle not only voice through phone but also fax, email, video interactions or web chat. In the case of web chat, for example the librarian is able to accompany the users when they browse through the electronic
resources, offering them advice, answering queries and train the user online on 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 some 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 the face-to-face interviews are still thought to be important by them at least on the ground of gaining some non-verbal cues from the interviews that may help in determining exactly the needs of the users Chowdhury (2002) and Gamsey and Power (2000).

Others have gone into the foray by leveraging a middle course approach in suggesting libraries to provide both the synchronous services (in person at a walk-up desk or by appointment via phone, via digital technology as well as asynchronous services (by mail, email or web form) Stemper and Butler (2001). Naturally, the librarians have to examine these options and to select from among them those that make the most sense for the communities they serve, the kinds of information needs they have and the situations in which they find themselves and the appropriate mix of resources to be allocated among them (Janes, 2003). While many libraries in Australia and New Zealand already offer online reference services
via e-mail or a Web form, as yet very few have ventured into the world of online reference services in real-time (Janes, 2003).

**Scope of the study**

There has been a great deal of interest recently, notably in the developed countries, in the concept of virtual reference services especially the use of software that allows a "chat" session between librarian and patron. Therefore, it would be useful to find out whether such interest pervades the countries of the Muslim World as well. At least we should know whether information professionals in the Muslim World have introduced in their libraries some form of virtual reference services either as a synchronous or asynchronous services. As the community of academics are able to gather their information needs with not much difficulty as compared to those who are outside the campus areas the study would limit the concentration only on public libraries in selected Islamic countries.

A survey was conducted to identify whether virtual reference services are being practiced or not in public libraries in the Islamic countries. If virtual reference services are practiced in Islamic countries are the services being offered in real time or otherwise. Findings from this study would indirectly reveal to us the extent of use or application of Internet in libraries of those selected countries
Methodology

In most developing countries, including countries from the Muslim World, the National Library plays a pivotal role in the development of public libraries in the country. For example in the case of 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). In light of this it is possible to conduct the survey by visualising the website of the National Library to get the linkages to the public libraries of the respective countries. This way you would also not run into problems of ascertaining the individual public libraries as the network of public libraries are usually being managed nationally by the National Library of the country.

In this study the public libraries of the major countries of the Muslim World will be assessed on the basis of the types of reference services that they provide to the users. To access these public libraries the National Library of the Islamic countries will be used as a gateway to the public libraries. The reference services of these public libraries will be judged on the stature of the virtual reference services by using a scale of maturity of the services provided to the users.

It is assumed that any public library that operates in a traditional manner where a user is provided with answers to his/her inquiries through direct personal contact, through normal mail or through telephone conversation will be treated as having zero maturity
simply because in this case there appears to be no attempt yet on
the part of the public library service to galvanize itself for a virtual
reference service. A scale of 1 (One) will be assigned to a situation
in which a very few of the public libraries in a particular country has
implemented the practice of using the email for reference services
purposes. Most of the public libraries in this category adopt the
traditional way of providing reference services. The presence of
email facility at a particular public library website may be taken as
an indicator of the presence of virtual reference services at the
library.

A scale of 2 (Two) will be assigned to a situation in which the
number of public libraries having email facility is found to be
moderate, while a scale of 3 (Three) will be assigned to a situation
in which the number of public libraries having email facility is found
to be high. In the instance where the public libraries have used the
web form designed solely for reference services in their websites
then a scale of 4 (Four) will be assigned to them A scale of 5
(Five ) will be assigned to public libraries that offer their virtual
reference services in real time on the basis of 24/7 prerequisite.

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 linkages found on the National Library websites.
It is to be noted that not all nations in the 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
The results are displayed based on the scoring weightage of one (1) to five (5). It was found that not a single Islamic country has exhibited a public library that offers their virtual reference services in real time on the basis of 24/7 prerequisite. This is to be expected as it is costly to maintain virtual reference services in real time. Even those public libraries in Western countries are not able to maintain this type of virtual reference services. As a result a few of them got together to form some sort of consortium. This is also happening to the virtual reference services at the global level. The formation of QuestionPoint is a testimony of this tendency. “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 which achieve a score of 4 which means their public libraries are providing web-mail form designed purposely for the reference services at their websites.
Only three countries were found to exhibit a score of four. These are Egypt, Malaysia and Saudi Arabia. In the case of Egypt the Bibliotheca Alexandrina has a facility 

**Ask a Librarian** in the library website. Similarly the King Abdul Aziz Public Library of Saudi Arabia also has a facility labeled as **Ask Me** in the library website. There are a good number of countries that operate public libraries that can be categorized as having a scoring weightage of 3. These countries are listed as in Table 2. 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 and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan are in this category. Other countries that are in similar position include the United Arab Emirates, the Sultanate of Brunei and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.

**Table 1** Countries with scoring weightage of 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COUNTRIES</th>
<th>SCORES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2** Countries with scoring weightage of 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COUNTRIES</th>
<th>SCORES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Only one country which was surveyed can be placed under the category 2 slot. The others are all in the category 1 indicating that the public libraries of these countries are yet to cope with the Internet technology at the point of offering their reference services. They prefer the traditional way of offering their reference services either through personal interaction, telephone or ordinary mail. There are very few public libraries that have e-mail facility in their websites.

Table 3 shows the countries that belong to category 2 and 1. It should be pointed out here that other countries are not listed in Table 3 as they either are not surveyed in this study or access to the public library websites in those countries are not feasible.

Table 3 Countries with scoring weightage of 2 and 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COUNTRIES</th>
<th>SCORES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Syrian Arab Republic</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal Republic of Nigeria</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuwait</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conclusion

A survey on the public library websites of Islamic countries show that virtual reference services are not openly accommodated by librarians or information professionals. From the results we can deduce that the state of development of public libraries and the support that they received from the governing bodies may have played a major role in the adoption of virtual reference services by the respective public libraries. It also seems to suggest that the prevalence of the information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure may have a toll as well concerning the offering of virtual reference services. Countries like Malaysia and Saudi Arabia that have good ICT infrastructure coupled with the fact that the public libraries are given a big push by the Government may be the impetus or enabler to attain current stature.
REFERENCES


