

2014

Let's Chat: Academic Law Libraries Providing Real-Time Reference Using Synchronous Chat Services

Heather Joy

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.law.uw.edu/law-lib_borgeson

Recommended Citation

Heather Joy, *Let's Chat: Academic Law Libraries Providing Real-Time Reference Using Synchronous Chat Services* (2014), https://digitalcommons.law.uw.edu/law-lib_borgeson/30

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Law Librarianship Program at UW Law Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Borgeson Papers by an authorized administrator of UW Law Digital Commons. For more information, please contact jafrank@uw.edu.

*Let's Chat: Academic Law Libraries Providing Real-Time Reference Using
Synchronous Chat Services*

Heather Joy

Submitted to ~~Professional Requirements for~~ *Current Issues in Law Librarianship, LIS 595, and to fulfill the graduation requirement of the Cumulating Experience Project for M L I S University of Washington Information School* *Seattle, Washington*

May 2014

Introduction.....	1
A Little History.....	2
Talking Terms.....	3
Virtual Reference Service.....	3
Asynchronous.....	4
Synchronous.....	5
Instant Messaging (IM).....	5
Chat.....	6
Why Are We Talking About Chat Again?.....	6
Because We Aren't Talking About Chat.....	6
Because We Need Chat.....	7
Commerce.....	8
Why Chat?.....	9
Easy.....	10
Fast.....	10
Flexibile.....	10
Physicality.....	11
Quiet.....	11
Anytime.....	11
Anonymity.....	12
Chat in Libraries.....	13
A Look Back.....	13
Current Trends.....	14
Declining Statistics.....	15
Static Chat.....	15
Chat Up.....	16
Librarian Concerns.....	17
Staffing.....	17
Nonverbal Cues.....	19
Other Issues.....	19
Fix It.....	20
Marketing.....	21
Access Placement.....	21
Consortium.....	22
Training.....	22
Conclusion.....	23

Let's Chat: Academic Law Libraries Providing Real-Time Reference Using Synchronous Chat Services

“Live, digital reference allows librarians to be where their users are, when their users need them, armed with the resources they require.”¹

Introduction

I don't consider myself a “techie.” I never have the latest model cell phone, I am not the first to sign up for the newest explosion in social media, and I still can't explain more than the bare bones of HTML. The words “widget” and “app” do not pepper my daily lexicon. I do however, consider myself to be curious and quite dedicated to service – and more so – to efficient service. Which is how I ended up writing this introduction, to a paper on a little techie service that we are all familiar with at this point – chat.

Working the summer shift at an academic reference desk can be slow some days; most of us have been there at one point or another. Whether you are grateful for the respite – a chance to move forward on this project or that – or whether you are fervently wishing for more patrons to make the day a little more interesting – you may have handled a few more patrons than those showing up in person if you happened to be covering your virtual reference services at the same time.

When I was at the Boley Law Library, the librarian on the desk was responsible for handling chat too, as well as picking up the phone and checking email periodically. I remember getting only a few chats a day, and wondering “Why aren't there more chats?” Because personally, I love the chat options on websites – real-time assistance that does not require me to pick up the phone, my neck crooked to the side to hold it, listening to ads or elevator music as I wait forever on hold. In fact, I feel a bit miffed if I have a question and the retailer does not offer me the option to open a text box and send out a quick query. As we were so graciously offering this access point, this quite handy tool for busy summer interns, remote Oregonian (or individuals from farther afield), and faculty members reluctant to leave their desks, why were we not inundated with messages?

As my curiosity got the better of me, I began to wonder how other schools handled chat, if their experience was similar to mine. And then I started to ask how this whole chat thing got started, and what everybody else thought about it – because, per my more satisfying online retail experiences, chat was clearly something available in the commercial world, plus I distinctly remember spending hours on AIM chatting with my buddies when I should have been doing homework in those high school years. So chat is a thing, but how much of a thing, and what is its place in the academic law library?

¹ Brian Kenney, *Live, Digital Reference* (an LJ RoundTable), LIBR. J. 46, October 1, 2002.

This paper is an effort to review the big picture of chat, to provide an introduction to a discussion about how to treat chat in our academic law libraries – where it came from, how it evolved, where it’s at now, and where it might go in the future. Odds are that you are probably already familiar with chat – you likely even have the service – but this is a chance to take a step back and re-educate, re-assess, and re-evaluate the relationship between you, your chat service, and your patrons.

A Little History

Where did chat come from? Why does it exist? Has anyone bothered to talk about it at all? The answers are briefly: a few places, because it could/needed to, and sort of. Latzko-Toth summed up the lack of conversation rather succinctly when he explained “very little attention has been paid in this scholarship to the history and emergence of chat, with the exception of brief and partial accounts to introduce the object of study – often a specific system or application. It is not addressed either in historical literature on the emergence of communication networks....”² So what *can* we gather?

The first computers were born large, clunky machines, a single entity taking up huge amounts of space. In the earliest days it was a boon to have even one computer; but as time progressed, and the machines compressed, it became possible through their reduced size (and thus cost) to have multiple machines. Eventually, wires wound through entire buildings and computers migrated into offices on different floors, or even different buildings within a complex. It is thought that this is when the need for computer-mediated-communication (CMC) was born – that as computer terminals moved farther from the central unit, the need to send messages from one terminal to the next became, at the very least desirable, if not necessary.³ This may very well be an origin of chat. In fact, the real answer of where chat came from sounds a familiar refrain for members of the legal community – it depends. Part of the difficulty of pinpointing a single origin for chat is that, like many technological innovations, there were simultaneous or near-simultaneous moments of creation.⁴ “Because of simultaneous developments in mainframe-based time-sharing systems and in microcomputer-based bulletin-board services, chat has never followed a singular line of evolution. Thus, the answer to “how electronic chatting began” often changes depending on who is asked, and when.”⁵

Let’s stick to the basics then. We know the earliest form of chat emerged in the late 1960’s.⁶ Then, about twenty years later in the 1980’s the Athena Project at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology started laying out the foundation for

² Guillaume Latzko-Toth, *Metaphors of Synchrony: Emergence and Differentiation of Online Chat Devices*, 30 BULL. SCI., TECH. & SOC’Y 362, 363 (2010).

³ *Id.* at 364.

⁴ *Id.* at 363.

⁵ *Id.* at 363 (citing Theresa Senft (2003)).

⁶ *Id.* at 363.

a “notification service” which led to the Zephyr, the first “instant-messaging system.”⁷

Once the educational pursuit bore fruit, the commercialization quickly followed. In 1996 Mirabilis, an Isreali company, launched ICQ – the first commercial service, and labeled it “instant messaging.”⁸ AOL acquired Mirabilis shortly after, in 1998, and AIM was born; AOL received the patent for the “instant messaging” service in 2002.⁹ Microsoft got on board with a commercial offering just after AOL, introducing its own “MSN Messenger” in 1999.¹⁰ These systems are the basis of the chat services we have today, and the basis of the expectations of many of today’s traditional matriculating students.

Of course, no technology stays static, and after these initial forays, chat continued to morph and change. Many online sites now offer embedded text chat services similar to instant-messaging.¹¹ Facebook’s chat function, and Skype’s text function are two examples.¹²

Talking Terms

We have talked a bit about “chat,” and thrown around terms like “computer-mediated-communication” and “instant-messaging,” but what do these terms mean, and how are they different? In this section we are going to define terms and give a little bit of scope.

Virtual Reference Service

First, the topics and technology this paper discusses fall under the category of “virtual reference services” or VRS.¹³ You may use another name for it, recognizing instead *digital reference*, *e-reference*, *electronic reference*, *remote reference*, *live reference*, *real-time reference*, *chat reference*, *synchronous reference*, *online reference*, all of which are used synonymously or interchangeably with “virtual reference.”¹⁴ While there seems to be little

⁷ *Id.* at 364.

⁸ Latzko-Toth, *supra* note 2, at 364.

⁹ *Id.* at 364-65.

¹⁰ *Id.* at 368.

¹¹ *Id.* at 369.

¹² *Id.*

¹³ Marie L. Radford et al., *Are We Getting Warmer? Query Clarification in Live Virtual Chat Reference*, 50 REF. & USER SERV. Q. 259, 259 (2011); Marie L. Radford & Lynn Silipigni Connaway, *Not Dead Yet! A Longitudinal Study of Query Type and Read Reference Accuracy in Live Chat and IM Reference*, 35 LIBR. & INFO. SCI. RESEARCH 2, 2 (Jan. 2013); Erica Carlson Nicol & Linda Crook, *Now it’s Necessary: Virtual Reference Services at Washington State University, Pullman*, 39 J. ACADEMIC LIBRARIANSHIP 161, 161 (2013).

¹⁴ Vicky Duncan & Angie Gerrard, *All Together Now! Integrating Virtual Reference in the Academic Library*, 50 REFERENCE & USER SERVICES QUARTERLY 280, 281 (2011); Kate Shaw & Amanda Spink, *University Library Virtual Reference Services: Best Practices and Continuous Improvement*, 40 Australian Acad. & Res. Libr. 192, 193 (2009); Kenney, *supra* note 1, at 46.

agreement on what term is most appropriate, there is at least recognition of that lack of agreement.¹⁵

That same lack of agreement – or at least, lack of specificity – carries over to defining what precisely constitutes virtual reference services. Here is a sampling of definitions:

- The phrase “virtual reference services” refers to a variety of “non-traditional delivery methods.”¹⁶
- “[V]irtual reference, also known as *digital reference*, is defined as the synchronous exchange of information between library reference staff and patrons, using online chat software.”¹⁷
- “According to the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA), the definition of virtual reference is “a reference service initiated electronically, often in real-time, where patrons employ computers or other Internet technology to communicate with reference staff without being physically present.”¹⁸
- “Virtual or digital reference services include a wide variety of reference services delivered via the Internet, such as e-mail and chat reference.”¹⁹
- “[V]irtual reference refers to all reference services provided online, synchronous or asynchronous (email, LibAnswers, and IM) or via SMS (text).”²⁰
- “VRS communications can involve asynchronous or synchronous communication.”²¹

At the very least, virtual reference services are the ways we interact with patrons online – active, computer-mediated-communication (CMC) between the librarian and the patron. Let’s break down some of the transactions a little more thoroughly.

Asynchronous

Computer-mediated communications can be asynchronous; occurring with a lag in query and response. Examples of asynchronous services are email, web form questionnaires, and SMS text messaging.²² This type of service allows a

¹⁵ “Nevertheless, the recent boom [in digital reference] is remarkable, and it is perhaps one of the reasons there is so little agreement on what to call the service.” Kenney, *supra* note 1, at 46.

¹⁶ Radford, *Warmer*, *supra* note 13 at 259.

¹⁷ Duncan, *supra* note 14, at 281.

¹⁸ Mariana Lapidus & Irena Bond, *Virtual Reference Chat with Us!*, 28 MED. REFERENCE SERVICES Q. 133, 133 (April 2009).

¹⁹ Kimberly Chapman & Darcy Del Bosque, *Ask a UT System Librarian*, 9 INTERNET REFERENCE SERVICES Q. 55, 56 (May 2004).

²⁰ Erica Carlson Nicol & Linda Crook, *Now it’s Necessary: Virtual Reference Services at Washington State University, Pullman*, 39 THE J. OF ACAD. LIBRARIANSHIP 161, 161 (2013).

²¹ Xianming Mu et al., *A Survey and Empirical Study of Virtual Reference Service in Academic Libraries*, 37 THE J. OF ACAD. LIBRARIANSHIP 120, 120 (2011).

²² Mu, *supra* note 21, at 120; Radford, *Warmer*, *supra* note 13 at 261.

patron to submit a question at any time – even when there is no librarian available, or the library is closed – and the librarian can respond when it is possible to do so.²³

Synchronous

Computer-mediated-communications can also be synchronous; occurring in real-time. Examples of synchronous services are chat and instant messaging.²⁴ A service is synchronous when “it involves the simultaneous engagement of interactants in the communication process” like a phone conversation.²⁵ This type of service allows a patron to instantly connect with a librarian in real-time, asking their question directly to a live person. However, the term synchronous is slightly misleading, as with this type of service messages appear as they arrive at the server, and as such do not necessarily follow a call and response pattern – adjacent messages may not be related because one individual has sent another communication before the other has sent a reply – therefore this type of service is more accurately “quasi-synchronous.”²⁶

*The term “virtual reference service” is used to refer to both asynchronous and synchronous communications, but is used more often to refer to synchronous communications.²⁷

Instant Messaging (IM)

Instant-messaging (IM) is a form of synchronous computer-mediated-communication; a real-time conversation using text.²⁸ It generally requires a software download in order for an individual to use it, and there are many free versions available.²⁹ Some of the most common IM applications are AIM, MSN, and Yahoo!Messenger, though new options constantly become available.³⁰ IM usually has a simple interface that makes it easy to learn and operate, and there are aggregators available that pull combine multiple IM accounts to create a single interface for the user.³¹ IM also allows for a high level of anonymity.³²

²³ Mu, *supra* note 21, at 120.

²⁴ Mu, *supra* note 21, at 120; Radford, *Warmer*, *supra* note 13 at 261.

²⁵ Latzko-Toth, *supra* note 2, at 362.

²⁶ Irene Koshik & Hiromi Okazawa, *A Conversation Analytic Study of Actual and Potential Problems in Communication in Library Chat Reference Interactions*, 63 J. OF THE AM. SOC'Y FOR INFO. SCI. & TECH. 2006, ¶10 (2012) (citing Garcia and Jacobs (1999)).

²⁷ Mu, *supra* note 21, at 120.

²⁸ Diane Murley, *What Is All the Fuss About Library 2.0?*, 100 L. LIBR. J. 197, 202 (2008).

²⁹ Murley, *supra* note 28, at 202; Sarah K. Steiner & Casey M. Long, *What Are We Afraid Of? A Survey of Librarian Opinions and Misconceptions Regarding Instant Messenger*, 47 THE REFERENCE LIBR. 31, 32 (2007).

³⁰ Steiner, *supra* note 29, at 32.

³¹ Steiner, *supra* note 29, at 32; Amanda Clay Powers et al., *Moving from the Consortium to the Reference Desk: Keeping Chat and Improving Reference at the MSU Libraries*, 15 INTERNET REFERENCE SERVICES Q. 169, 170 (2010).

Chat

Chat is also a synchronous computer-mediated-communication, but some differences are highlighted between IM and chat. Instead of both parties downloading software, a chat participant can simply visit a web-page and click on a specific link to begin a conversation.³³ Also, chat is sometimes considered a form of communication that is more “feature-rich” than IM, offering functionalities (co-browsing, page-pushing, usage statistics, and surveys) that will be discussed later in this paper.³⁴ However, it is important to be aware that many internet-goers use the term “chat” to refer to any online text-based communications.³⁵

There are some distinct hallmarks of the terms we just reviewed, but many of them are used interchangeably. Many consider the distinctions (at least, in terms of real-world use) between IM and chat to be artificial, as they are used synonymously in common speech and scholarly publications, even including articles in the field of librarianship.³⁶

In this article “chat” will refer broadly to synchronous computer-mediated-communication; for sake of ease, the focus will not be on slight technical differences, but will emphasize the role of technology that provides real-time online communications between patrons and librarians. Whatever the program, software, widget, or application if it allows people to have real-time exchanges on their computers, tablets, or smartphones, and is text-based, then we will call it chat.

Why Are We Talking About Chat Again?

You’re probably familiar with a lot of the concepts we’ve touched on, and odds are that you have used some form of chat in your personal life and your professional life at this point. It all seems pretty straightforward right? So why are we talking about it?

Because We Aren’t Talking About Chat

Mostly because we have not been talking about it. There’s a surprising dearth of discussion in the professional publications of law librarians.³⁷ Searching HeinOnline’s collection of the Law Library Journal for every variation of “virtual

³² Powers, *supra* note 31, at 170 (citing Carpenter & Renfro (2007) at 7).

³³ Murley, *supra* note 28, at 202–03.

³⁴ Steiner, *supra* note 29, at 32.

³⁵ Latzko-Toth, *supra* note 2, at 362.

³⁶ Steiner, *supra* note 29, at 32; Stephen Francoeur, *An Analytical Survey of Chat Reference Services*, 29 REFERENCE SERVICES REV. 189, 190 (2001).

³⁷ Daniel Perlin, *Chat Reference: A “Must Have” for Academic Law Libraries?*, 35 CANADIAN L. LIBR. REV. 20 (2009); author’s own searches in various legal and academic databases, as well as general internet.

reference,” “chat,” and “IM,” turns up about a half-dozen articles, mostly only tangentially on point.

Our fellow academic librarians in non-specialized libraries have had a bit more to say – Bernie Sloan especially has been compiling bibliographies like mad since the early 2000’s³⁸ but still there are not the numbers you might expect to see. And there have been quite a few complaints about the type of research published in the profession. No reliable model for evaluating and assessing chat undertakings has been consistently set forth.³⁹ Much of the literature is criticized as being too local, too anecdotal, too editorial, too weak, and too limited.⁴⁰ And many studies that do exist focus on the accuracy of questions answered⁴¹ instead of assessing the current and future role of chat in libraries generally.

Because We Need Chat

Let’s stop and think about that for a second – what is the current and future role of chat in our libraries? You probably thought about it quite a bit when you first added a chat function to your suite of virtual reference services – or when you decided not to adopt chat. When was the last time you stopped to assess whether or not chat has a place in your library’s life? Why am I bringing this up now, a decade after the chat boom and subsequent and apparent bust? We are used to evolving (albeit slowly) with technology – from snail-mail letter queries, to telephone calls, to email – we *do* evolve over time,⁴² and chat is just one more way to absorb the future – we’ll get there eventually. But is eventually fast enough?

- “Not offering chat reference is not an option. Users have come to rely on it, and we are all providing services to our users.”⁴³
- “As a pioneering format of synchronous VRS, live chat reference has become “an integral part of a library’s reference portfolio”.”⁴⁴
- “In the past year, live, digital reference services – also called chat reference, virtual reference, online reference, and synchronous reference – have been initiated in hundreds of libraries...”⁴⁵
- “If law libraries continue to develop primarily static web sites with no tools for our users to communicate, collaborate, and discuss resources and policies, then we will increasingly be seen as out of touch. Already, conventional wisdom believes libraries are irrelevant. We can only

³⁸ At <http://vrbib.rutgers.edu/vrbib.php?sort=2>, now managed by Rutgers, and directed by Dr. Marie Radford.

³⁹ Shaw, *supra* note 14, at 197–98.

⁴⁰ *Id.*, at 199.

⁴¹ *Id.*

⁴² Mu, *supra* note 21, at 120.

⁴³ Courtney Young, *To be Discontinued*, 54 REFERENCE LIBR. 175, 176 (Apr. – Jun. 2013).

⁴⁴ Radford, *Not Dead Yet!*, *supra* note 13, at 2 (citing Luo (2007) at 195).

⁴⁵ Kenney, *supra* note 1, at 46.

reestablish our credibility if we can convince our users to take advantage of our unique skills and resources. To do this, we need to offer services and applications that work like those with which they are already familiar.”⁴⁶

- “...law librarians must develop a Web 2.0 toolbox from which we can chose the applications that are best suited to our patrons and our libraries – weblogs to broadcast the latest library news, chat boxes for instant communications, or online photo-sharing accounts to highlight recent library events...”⁴⁷

Apparently not. As technology and information norm turnovers occur more and more quickly, we have to adapt ever faster in order to keep up. As Francoeur so poetically stated “as the information landscape changes, so do the needs of our users.”⁴⁸ Users expect convenience,⁴⁹ but from where is that expectation arising and what form does it take? Does it really require a chat service?

Commerce

Blame Amazon. Or Walgreens. Nike, FedEx, Verizon, Bank of America, Pottery Barn, Lands’ End, Sony/Playstation, Western Union, Sears, Capital One, Cricket, UPS, Apple, Macy’s.... The list goes on. Blame WestlawNext and LexisAdvance. Because all these companies offer a chat option on their website.⁵⁰ Even ten years ago, surveys showed that 90% of people shopping online wanted to be able to interact with another human in their transaction experience.⁵¹ It took a little time, and a few years, but they got what they wanted.

In its earliest days chat functionality was originally introduced for conferencing, intra-company communications, or even game-playing.⁵² But when IM and chat began debuting for everyday personal interactions (AIM, MSN Messenger, Yahoo!Messenger)⁵³ in the late 1990’s businesses were quick to jump onboard. Lands’ End and L.L. Bean were two early adopters, offering up chat options by December of 1998, but many other commercial entities added the service too, including banks, technical support departments, and quite a few

⁴⁶ Deborah Ginsberg, Meg Kribble & Bonnie Shucha, *Inspiring Innovation: Planning, Implementing, and Evaluating the Web 2.0 Challenge*, 101 L. LIBR. J. 355, 355 (2009).

⁴⁷ *Id.*, at 356.

⁴⁸ Francoeur, *supra* note 36, at 196.

⁴⁹ *Id.*, at 197.

⁵⁰ Author’s own common websites, plus additional examples drawn from the list of online companies offering synchronous chat assistance as generated by the site <http://gethuman.com>.

⁵¹ Francoeur, *supra* note 36, at 196 (citing Bannan (2000)).

⁵² See generally Latzko-Toth, *supra* note 2.

⁵³ See generally Latzko-Toth, *supra* note 2.

computer manufacturers.⁵⁴ By 2003, only about 10% of commercial websites were offering chat,⁵⁵ but this is certainly no longer the case. There are specific websites available to help users find commercial vendors that offer chat on their page (which may indicate how intensely users desire this option). Gethuman.com allows you to search by company, or browse lists of popular or recently-viewed sites with chat options.⁵⁶ The heading above the search bar reminds the user that chat is faster than calling, and that it is quieter – that it can be used even when you can't talk out loud⁵⁷ – essentially that it is convenient.

That convenience makes a sound suspiciously like the ka-ching of a cash register (a long, long, time ago, some of you may remember). Hundreds if not thousands of retail websites online offer a chat option, and many of the web's most visited service providers offer the option.⁵⁸ And it's not just money in the bank for the retailer, it's money in the bank for the chat provider.

Go ahead and Google “chat provider” – go ahead really. And then take your time browsing through the 33,000,000+ results.⁵⁹ BoldChat, Zulip, LivePerson, Kayako, Velaro, LiveHelpNow, Zopim, Comm100.... Again, the list goes on. It seems there are nearly as many chat providers as there are websites to host the chat options.

Back in 2005, Pew found that 90% of online teens were using IM. It was familiar to them, their friends used it, they liked it.⁶⁰ It became available on most of their favorite online retailers. They've spent the last ten years getting even more comfortable with the instant gratification of chat in every incarnation online.⁶¹ And if those teens aren't in your library yet, they're on their way next year: finishing undergrad, entering graduate programs, expecting answers, expecting – convenience.

Why Chat?

The short answer is convenience. “Convenience has been found repeatedly, to be critical to the library users' willingness to use library services.”⁶² Everyone

⁵⁴ Steve Coffman & Linda Arret, *To Chat or Not to Chat – Taking Yet Another Look at Virtual Reference, Part 1*, 12 SEARCHER 2, 2–3 (July/Aug. 2004) available at http://www.infotoday.com/searcher/jul04/arret_coffman.shtml.

⁵⁵ *Id.*, at 4.

⁵⁶ <http://gethuman.com>

⁵⁷ *Id.*

⁵⁸ Author's own research; try pulling up your favorite sites – you might be surprised that your utility company offers a live chat option, and that so does your bank, your town hall, and your insurance provider.

⁵⁹ Results will vary from day to day; the author's last search for “chat provider” entered into <https://www.google.com> on May 10, 2014 returned 39,800,000 results.

⁶⁰ Steiner, *supra* note 29, at 33.

⁶¹ Jessica Kayongo & Elizabeth Van Jacob, *Burning the Midnight Oil: Librarians, Students, and Late-Night Chat Reference at the University of Notre Dame*, 16 INTERNET REFERENCE SERVICES Q. 99, 99 (July 2011).

⁶² Nicol, *supra* note 20, at 162.

from your law review radicals to your pajama researcher⁶³ is pleased with convenience.⁶⁴ But what constitutes convenience?

Easy

If you're already online, maybe even on a page with an "Ask Us" button, then one-click to question is an incredibly simple undertaking. Ease of use has a high impact on perceptions of usefulness of a chat option,⁶⁵ and if presented correctly, electing to chat can literally be a one-click operation.

Fast

With chat there is no hurry-up and wait implicit in emails, or sometimes even with in-person reference.⁶⁶ Multiple studies have found that timeliness is an important issue for many users,⁶⁷ and that *quick* translates to *convenient*. User surveys ring with responses like *quick, speedy, efficient, rapid, fast*.⁶⁸ In fact, more than 50% of survey responses indicate that fast answers are the primary motivation for preferring chat.⁶⁹ On the other hand, studies have also shown that users are not necessarily in a hurry – in which case the emphasis is on the immediacy of the availability of transaction, and not the speed at which it concludes.⁷⁰

Flexible

With more and more devices on the market allowing online interactions, the flexibility of chat availability on multiple devices makes it easy to chat on the move, with what's in your hand.⁷¹ And with the interconnectivity of some devices, starting a chat on your desktop won't keep you from leaving the office and continuing it on your phone, allowing continuity in the workflow.

⁶³ Mary Whisner, *Practicing Reference: The Pajama Way of Research*, 99 L. LIBR. J. 847, 848–49 (2007).

⁶⁴ Amy Buckland & Krista Godfrey, *Save the Time of the Avatar: Canadian Academic Libraries Using Chat Reference in Multi-User Virtual Environments*, 51 THE REFERENCE LIBR. 12, 15 (Dec. 2009); Laura Taddeo & Jill M. Hackenberg, *The Nuts, Bolts, and Teaching Opportunities of Real-Time Reference*, 13 C. & UNDERGRADUATE LIBR. 63, 81 (2006) available at <http://www.acsu.buffalo.edu/~jmh7/nutsbolts.pdf>; Radford, *Not Dead Yet!*, *supra* note 13, at 11; Jung-Jung Chang & Chyan Yang, *Viable or Vital? Evaluation of IM Services from Patrons' Perspectives*, 30 THE ELECTRONIC LIBR. 70, 80 (2012).

⁶⁵ Chang, *supra* note 64, at 80.

⁶⁶ Perlin, *supra* note 37, at 20; Paul Neuhaus & Matthew R. Marsteller, *Chat Reference at Carnegie Mellon University*, 1 PUB. SERVICES Q. 29, 34 (March 2002) (noting that lines can form and dissuade potential patrons).

⁶⁷ Mu, *supra* note 21, at 121; Taddeo, *supra* note 64, at 82.

⁶⁸ Taddeo, *supra* note 64, at 80; Radford, *Not Dead Yet!*, *supra* note 13, at 11; Chang, *supra* note 64, at 80.

⁶⁹ Chang, *supra* note 64, at 80 (citing Horowitz et al. (2005); Pomerantz and Luo (2007)).

⁷⁰ Radford, *Warmer*, *supra* note 13 at 262.

⁷¹ Radford, *Not Dead Yet!*, *supra* note 13, at 11.

Physicality

Continuing on with the notion of flexibility – being on the move from your office, to a meeting, to home, it’s not just the flexibility of devices and the flexibility of physicality that is desirable. Chat means you do not have to stay in one place. The option to get help no matter where you might be is highly valuable to users.⁷²

But more than the option of chatting while moving, chat serves those who cannot or will not move – remote users that for one reason or another are not available for in-person assistance, and want an immediate answer – not an email. Remote users value the ability to access that kind of help, whether they did not or could not come to the library. In a survey of academic library users at the University of Buffalo, results indicated that of the top three reasons users liked chat, two were related to physicality – 1) “I live far away from campus,” and 2) “I don’t have to walk to the library.”⁷³ Fifty percent of users in another survey indicated that “not physically coming to the library” was a primary motivation for using chat.⁷⁴

One somewhat startling revelation from multiple surveys is the indication that many chat users are *in* the library. For whatever reason – disinclination to stand, a desire not to leave their belongings, the belief that it was faster – many students reported using chat even when they were within sight of the reference desk.⁷⁵ They viewed it as saving both “time and aggravation.”⁷⁶

Quiet

Another variation of flexibility – users value the ability to seek help silently. When being on the phone is not an option due to volume constraints⁷⁷ or other reasons, chat offers a means of getting help without alerting others to the transaction.

Anytime

Because chat does not have to take place in person, it is possible to staff a chat option for hours far outside the reference norms. Radford reports that “after-hours” availability through chat is one of the main reasons users enjoy it.⁷⁸ In instances where chat is available late at night or on the weekends, statistics indicate it is used at a rate comparable *or higher* to regular reference hours.⁷⁹

⁷² Taddeo, *supra* note 64, at 82.

⁷³ *Id.*, at 80.

⁷⁴ Chang, *supra* note 64, at 80 (citing Horowitz et al. (2005); Pomerantz and Luo (2007)).

⁷⁵ Polly D. Boruff-Jones, *Our Experience with Two Virtual Reference Services at IUPUI University Library*, 38 THE REFERENCE LIBR. 241, 251 (Nov. 2002).; Taddeo, *supra* note 64, at 81.

⁷⁶ Boruff-Jones, *supra* note 75, at 251.

⁷⁷ *Id.*

⁷⁸ Radford, *Not Dead Yet!*, *supra* note 13, at 11.

⁷⁹ Kayongo, *supra* note 61, at 99, 104, 108 (Over the 30-month period that late-night chat

Anonymity

While not necessarily an element of convenience – there is much merit to the benefit all on its own - anonymity is one of the key factors for many users electing to seek assistance via chat instead of another means.⁸⁰ It can be hard to recognize that anonymity is so important to a user when, as a profession, we strive to be welcoming and accessible to all users.⁸¹ But the truth of the matter remains that some individuals would rather avoid asking questions face-to-face, through identifying emails, or even over the phone.

This reluctance to provide identifying information can stem from the question content; for example a user might be more comfortable talking about sensitive topics – at least one courthouse librarian has reported getting chat questions from (apparently) teenagers regarding whether or not they are old enough to have sex – something she has never been asked face-to-face.⁸²

A different slant on content is that the user may fear their question reveals an unacceptable level of ignorance, and they simply do not want to appear stupid in front of a librarian.⁸³ That feeling of ignorance can arise from the content of the question, or from the process of finding the answer. Pamela Martin makes an interesting point when she states “By using the internet, patrons, especially students, have become convinced that most information is easy to locate and available freely online. And because so many queries can be answered quickly online, patrons feel ashamed if they cannot locate answers on their own.”⁸⁴

Another reason may be simple shyness and reluctance to interrupt; by asking a chat question online, a user does not feel they are actively interrupting whatever the librarian might be working on at the time.⁸⁵ The process of asking a question online can also simply be less intimidating overall for a user.⁸⁶

Unfortunately, the reason may also be that the user is put off by unwelcoming body language, and feels safer by asking questions anonymously through chat than approaching in-person.⁸⁷

Though true anonymity is not guaranteed through chat – some applications require authentication, or record IP addresses⁸⁸ – many users feel that generally chat provides an acceptable level of anonymity,⁸⁹ an adequate sense of privacy for them to pursue their question and request for assistance.

We find ourselves in a situation where library users are accustomed to online

was offered, 24% of all chat questions occurred during that time frame).

⁸⁰ Buckland, *supra* note 64, at 15; Chang, *supra* note 64, at 73 (citing Buckland and Godfrey (2010)).

⁸¹ Whisner, *supra* note 63, at 849.

⁸² Perlin, *supra* note 37, at 20.

⁸³ Buckland, *supra* note 64, at 15; Taddeo, *supra* note 64, at 69.

⁸⁴ Nicol, *supra* note 20, at 163.

⁸⁵ Perlin, *supra* note 37, at 20.

⁸⁶ Nicol, *supra* note 20, at 163 (citing Radford & Connaway (2010)).

⁸⁷ Buckland, *supra* note 64, at 15.

⁸⁸ Powers, *supra* note 31, at 184.

⁸⁹ Powers, *supra* note 31, at 171.

convenience and anonymity in their daily digital transactions. They are familiar with chat, they use it, and they like it. This is information we can use – looking to the commercial sector for inspiration in reaching users is an excellent tool,⁹⁰ letting us build on and adapt the work (and money) of others. What have we done with that?

Chat in Libraries

A Look Back

As mentioned earlier, there is not a lot of research on chat in law libraries, so for the moment we are looking to the insights of our academic neighbors. The State University of New York at Morrisville began experimenting with chat in 1998⁹¹, and Cornell University Library launched their chat reference back in 1999;⁹² both services are still available.⁹³ It took about ten years from concept introduction – chat reference – to early adoption by libraries, but since the early 2000's the number of libraries offering chat has risen steadily, with hundreds of new libraries offering chat services.⁹⁴

Medical libraries especially were some of the earliest adopters. In 2002, 21% of medical school libraries in the United States provided some chat reference.⁹⁵ Only two years later that number had increased to 27% of medical school libraries.⁹⁶

Other countries were also quick to pick up on chat. The Silkeborg Public Library in Denmark is supposedly one of the first libraries to offer chat reference to users, becoming available in May of 1998.⁹⁷ The National Library of Australia launched AskNow in 2006,⁹⁸ and by 2009 many academic libraries in Canada had

⁹⁰ Jo Kibbee, *Librarians Without Borders? Virtual Reference Service to Unaffiliated Users*, 32 THE J. OF ACAD. LIBRARIANSHIP 467, 472 (Sept. 2006)

⁹¹ Kenney, *supra* note 1, at 46.

⁹² See Virginia Cole & Baseema B. Krkoska, *Launching a Text a Librarian Service: Cornell's Preliminary Experiences*, 52 THE REFERENCE LIBR. 3 (2010). Texting a librarian is not longer an option, but 24/7 chat services are available: <http://www.library.cornell.edu/ask>.

⁹³ See: <http://library.morrisville.edu>; <http://www.library.cornell.edu/services/askalib>.
Html

⁹⁴ Francoeur, *supra* note 36, at 189; Kenney, *supra* note 1, at 46.

⁹⁵ Cheryl R. Dee, *Chat Reference Service in Medical Libraries, Part 2 – Trends in Medical School Libraries*, 22 MED. REFERENCE SERVICES Q. 15, 16 (Summer 2003) (25 of 117 schools surveyed were offering chat at that time, with many others indicating coming adoption).

⁹⁶ Lapidus, *supra* note 18, at 133–34.

⁹⁷ Bernie Sloan, *Twenty Years of Virtual Reference*, 11 INTERNET REFERENCE SERVICES Q. 91, 95 (2006). (However, the library does not appear to currently be offering a chat option; see <http://silkeborgbib.dk>, last visited April 21, 2014).

⁹⁸ Jolie Ogg Graybill & Tracy Bicknell-Holmes, *Location, Location, Location: The Impact of IM Widget Placement*, 20 C. & UNDERGRADUATE LIBR. 72, 76 (2013) (citing Davis (2007)); (Unfortunately, this library no longer appears to support a synchronous chat option,

been using chat reference for several years.⁹⁹ For example, the University of British Columbia supports offers an ask-a-librarian option on their homepage, and provides a widget to begin a chat directly through the website.¹⁰⁰

Current Trends

Even in the last five years or so, the chat landscape has continued to change dramatically. In 2007 just over half of 2- and 4-year college libraries had a chat option.¹⁰¹ By 2011, 85% of such libraries were offering chat – more than a 30% increase.¹⁰² Some libraries are excited to offer the service, and others offer it only grudgingly¹⁰³ – but there does at least seem to be a consensus that libraries should at the very least, consider chat to be one of a set of virtual reference options available to users.¹⁰⁴

Basically, chat is now a common feature.¹⁰⁵ Which is great, and essentially a “correct” response to meeting our users’ needs. As discussed earlier, users are fairly accustomed to instant gratification,¹⁰⁶ and meeting user preferences by offering chat is one example of catering to expectations inherited from other information environments.¹⁰⁷ As time goes on, there is an increasing element of chicken-egg balance – as chat becomes more and more common, so does its effect on how users seek information and see libraries.¹⁰⁸ Data indicates that demand for chat is increasing, and will continue to do so in the foreseeable future.¹⁰⁹ To continue to trust and rely on us, users must view libraries as current and knowledgeable.¹¹⁰ Additionally, libraries have been making huge strides in regard to digital collections – as Francoeur noted so eloquently years ago “If we went to all the trouble to erect these digital edifices, should not they too be staffed in some way?”¹¹¹ Are we not merely echoing the evolution of our physical libraries – building collections, cataloging them, and proffering them for public consumption with all the attendant services implied?¹¹²

though they do encourage questions on Twitter and Facebook; see <http://refracker.nla.gov.au/ref100.aspx?key=Enquiry2>, last visited April 21, 2014).

⁹⁹ Perlin, *supra* note 37, at 20.

¹⁰⁰ See: <http://www.library.ubc.ca>.

¹⁰¹ Steiner, *supra* note 29, at 38.

¹⁰² Mu, *supra* note 21, at 122.

¹⁰³ Steiner, *supra* note 29, at 33.

¹⁰⁴ Kenney, *supra* note 1, at 47.

¹⁰⁵ Koshik, *supra* note 26, at 2006; Marie L. Radford & M. Kathleen Kern, *A Multiple-Case Study Investigation of the Discontinuation of Nine Chat Reference Services*, 28 *LIBR. & INFO. SCI. RES.* 521, 522 (Winter 2006).

¹⁰⁶ Kayongo, *supra* note 61, at 99.

¹⁰⁷ Radford, *Multiple-Case*, *supra* note 105, at 522.

¹⁰⁸ Chang, *supra* note 64, at 70–71.

¹⁰⁹ Nicol, *supra* note 20, at 167.

¹¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹¹ Francoeur, *supra* note 36, at 196.

¹¹² *Id.*, at 196 (citing Peters (2000)).

If chat is common and expected, and virtual collections continue to grow, and online access stretches farther and more thoroughly across the globe everyday, then why have so many libraries adopted chat, only to drop it like a hot potato?¹¹³ How much use does our chat function get, and why do librarians seem to hate it so much?

Declining Statistics

It is not news for most reference desks to hear that most libraries are experiencing an overall decline in reference desk visits and queries. As ready-reference answers are relegated to Google, and individuals begin asking even more complex questions of the internet at large, it is no surprise that there has been a drop in desk statistics.¹¹⁴ All the way back in 2008 librarians were seeing a drop-off in visits.¹¹⁵ CalPoly Pomona, thanks to strict statistic-keeping, can reliably report that their total number of reference transactions was only 18,517 for the 2010/2011 school year – half of what it was ten years before in the 2000/2001 school year, and down 75% from 1990/1991.¹¹⁶

But while the overall number of visits may be dropping, libraries are seeing a shift in numbers as well. Currently, it seems that most libraries get some chat questions that constitute a small percentage for their virtual reference options, but it is a number that is growing.¹¹⁷ Some institutions have reported a trend indicating that between 2006 and 2011, virtual reference questions increased almost 300%, and a great deal of that increase could be attributed to chat reference options.¹¹⁸ CalPoly Pomona, while their overall reference queries have dipped, are seeing virtual reference transactions make up 28% of the total transactions, up from .03% back in 1998/1999.¹¹⁹ However rocky the reference road may be, it looks like chat is currently a small but steady factor for users.

Static Chat

Nevertheless, it is perfectly common to hear librarians feeling frustrated about the slow growth or lack of use of the chat option. Initial excitement about the service fades under the weight of frustration and disappointment “that the service gets such little use” – “It doesn’t seem like the investment of time and resources that librarians have invested is having any significant outcome, in terms of numbers of patrons using the service, compared with the energy being put into

¹¹³ Radford, *Multiple-Case*, *supra* note 105, at 522.

¹¹⁴ Chang, *supra* note 64, at 72 (citing Lipow (2003); Williams (2010)).

¹¹⁵ Christy R. Stevens, *Reference Reviewed and Re-Envisioned: Revamping Libraries and Desk-Centric Services with LibStARs and LibAnswers*, 39 THE J. OF ACAD. LIBR. 202, 207 (2013) (In 2008 Banks and Pracht surveyed 101 academic libraries, serving five-thousand to fifteen-thousand students, and many reported declining reference statistics).

¹¹⁶ *Id.*, at 204.

¹¹⁷ Duncan, *supra* note 14, at 283.

¹¹⁸ *Id.*

¹¹⁹ Stevens, *supra* note 115, at 203.

staffing the service.”¹²⁰ Many early attempts at chat reportedly received surprisingly low usage. One institution reported that in a trial offering between fall of 2003 and summer of 2004, their chat service received only about 100 transactions – or about ten per month.¹²¹

At more than one library, chat statistics come in under the double-digit mark. One library reported chat constituted only 6.33% of overall questions, back in 2008.¹²² Another reported a number barely higher just two years ago in 2012 – their chat reference transactions made up only 7% of their total queries, even though the service had been available for four years; the number of transactions had risen steadily over time, but the number has stayed well under 10%.¹²³ These numbers seem surprising when Pew Internet statistics from the American Life Project reported that, as of 2010, 86% of teenagers use some form of chat on a daily basis – a percent of youth almost doubled from the last survey six years prior.¹²⁴ With so many of student-age using chat on a daily basis in other areas of life, the percentage of chat happening in libraries seems incredibly low.

And those low numbers, even if some posit them to be rising steadily, have led to chat retractions at more than one library, academic or otherwise. Most articles are written to report the success of chat options, and far fewer detailing the death of services, but Radford presented a case-study of nine locations that closed their chat option.¹²⁵ She listed six major reasons as being the cause of such closures – funding, low volume, low volume from the target populations, staffing problems, technical problems, and institutional culture issues.¹²⁶ However, even at these libraries where chat was being discontinued, some were revving up for another try amidst the ashes of their initial attempt.¹²⁷ Aside from the desire to serve, to meet the users’ needs as previously identified, in a way that is both familiar to them, what is prompting such attempts?

Chat Up

Contrary to the tales just reviewed, plenty of libraries are reporting enough chat traffic to justify the offering of chat as a tool. One test run of chat reference at an academic law library saw almost 700 chat transactions in just one spring semester during 2012 – a number that made up almost 70% of all the virtual reference queries from that semester.¹²⁸ Others reported similar numbers, with one library waiting patiently as the visits climbed steadily over a five-year period, finally reaching 158 chat transactions per month in 2008, or about 600 chat

¹²⁰ Chapman, *supra* note 19, at 74.

¹²¹ Nicol, *supra* note 20, at 162.

¹²² Graybill, *supra* note 98, at 74.

¹²³ Perlin, *supra* note 37, at 22.

¹²⁴ Graybill, *supra* note 98, at 74.

¹²⁵ Radford, *Multiple-Case*, *supra* note 105, at 524, 527.

¹²⁶ Radford, *Multiple-Case*, *supra* note 105, at 527.

¹²⁷ *Id.*

¹²⁸ Nicol, *supra* note 20, at 167.

queries per semester.¹²⁹

Not only are the numbers up in some institutions overall, but some demonstrate that chat is very much preferred even over other forms of virtual reference. At the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, sampling over a six-month period revealed that chat queries were beating out email queries nearly two-to-one.¹³⁰ Overall, whether they track carefully or not, many libraries are deciding that whatever chat traffic they are seeing is “enough” to justify keeping chat around for users.¹³¹ How to figure out what “enough” means, and what can be done to promote growth will be addressed in a later section. First let’s focus on the challenges librarians see in chat.

Librarian Concerns

There are many legitimate concerns librarians can, and have, voiced about chat. But before addressing those concrete issues, let’s acknowledge that while attitude is not everything, it can play a major role in whether a new feature flies or flops. If user satisfaction is the measure of our service, we can hardly expect users to be pleased with a service librarians are not happy to offer.¹³² Many librarians have reported feeling that chat is not a productive use of their time, or that they have anxiety related to providing chat.¹³³ Of course there, again, are legitimate reasons for reluctance – increases in workload, time invested in learning new skills, concerns about funding, worry about return on results¹³⁴ – but if librarians give up on a service before giving it a try, then it should surprise no one when it fails.

When chat is a success however, it is certainly worth the time to take a look at the concerns and complaints that arise from real-world experience with chat transactions.

Staffing

Often the initial mention, and certainly ranking at the top on the prioritized list of concerns, staffing is a chat issue that is consistently raised.¹³⁵ Whether it is a matter of not enough bodies to staff separate “desks” or too many hours to cover,

¹²⁹ Graybill, *supra* note 98, at 74.

¹³⁰ Kibbee, *supra* note 90, at 468.

¹³¹ Nicol, *supra* note 20, at 162.

¹³² “If library staff working with VRS believe that VRS has value, if they are prepared to meet their constituents online, and if they feel rewarded and supported for their VRS work, VRS is much more likely to flourish and library users of RS are much more likely to encounter helpful and positive experiences.” Nicol, *supra* note 20, at 163.

¹³³ Chapman, *supra* note 19, at 69–70.

¹³⁴ Nicol, *supra* note 20, at 163.

¹³⁵ Nicol, *supra* note 20, at 163; Steiner, *supra* note 29, at 45; Duncan, *supra* note 14, at 282; Andrea Cohn et al., *Using LibraryH3lp to Form a Collaborative Reference Service*, 54 THE REFERENCE LIBR. 245, 248 (2013).

staffing is by far the most consistent complaint about providing chat reference. Further, different models contribute to fomenting different staffing issues.

In one model, a staff member covers the physical reference desk and the virtual reference desk (or at least the chat option) simultaneously. Almost no literature suggests that simultaneous staffing by one librarian is the ideal approach to covering physical and virtual reference.¹³⁶ Libraries with chat reference report that “unless your library has a quiet reference desk, it is probably not a good idea to expect your staff to do chat reference while also working at the desk;”¹³⁷ and “with few exceptions, most libraries have found it very difficult, if not impossible, to do virtual reference from the regular reference desk.”¹³⁸

Librarians can feel overwhelmed by trying to juggle multiple services, even without multiple and simultaneous patrons.¹³⁹ And simultaneous patrons often occur, in combinations of either face-to-face patrons and chat patrons, multiple chat patrons, or multiples of each type of visitor.¹⁴⁰ It is not uncommon to see the same “feast or famine” cycle in virtual visitors as we normally see in physical visitors to the desk.¹⁴¹ This is important to keep in mind, especially when reviewing numbers of users – the average number of visitors for any given day can be reasonable, but if all those users arrived at the same time reference can quickly become unmanageable.¹⁴²

A side effect of juggling patrons is that the quality of service may suffer. Chat can require a level of concentration and mental acuity that may not be necessary for a face-to-face patron, when their books are spread in front of you, and their nonverbal cues are picked up in a fraction of a second.¹⁴³ Juggling patrons can become frustrating – especially if extra effort is required to let a face-to-face patron know that you will be right with them – but just a moment please because you are helping someone who is not there. Frustration breeds shortcuts, and librarians are aware that the service can suffer, which only reinforces a sense of frustration.¹⁴⁴

Unfortunately, though staffing is the single most important factor¹⁴⁵ in determining the success of a chat service, very few libraries can staff a separate chat desk, due to funding issues or labor issues, or both. Of course, those libraries that are able to swing separate coverage sometimes deal with the opposite issue – being underwhelmed. Chat transactions can be few and far between, and though many projects can be accomplished at one’s desk, some cannot, and some

¹³⁶ “...it is ideal when one staff member can monitor the virtual reference service while working at the traditional reference desk.” Duncan, *supra* note 14, at 282.

¹³⁷ Francoeur, *supra* note 36, at 199.

¹³⁸ Coffman, *Part 1, supra* note 54, at 9.

¹³⁹ Karen Ciccone & Amy Vanscoy, *Managing an Established Virtual Reference Service*, 8 INTERNET REFERENCE SERVICES Q. 95, 97 (June 2003); Nicol, *supra* note 20, at 163.

¹⁴⁰ Nicol, *supra* note 20, at 162.

¹⁴¹ Ciccone, *supra* note 139, at 97.

¹⁴² *Id.*

¹⁴³ Coffman, *Part 1, supra* note 54, at 9.

¹⁴⁴ Taddeo, *supra* note 64, at 72; Nicol, *supra* note 20, at 162.

¹⁴⁵ Dee, *supra* note 95, at 23.

librarians simply dislike being chained to the screen waiting for a chat that may never show.¹⁴⁶

Handling who staffs chat and when can also be tricky. Some libraries have tried volunteer models, which seemed to fail over the long-term, as workloads shifted or individuals moved to new positions.¹⁴⁷ Whether chat reference hours count towards a weekly quota of “desk hours” influences how staff responds to the responsibility.¹⁴⁸ Night and weekend hours beyond when the physical reference desk is open, and/or beyond the normal working hours of the librarians proffers its own slew of complications:¹⁴⁹ will there be fewer staff available during normal hours, should more staff be hired at an additional cost, how will assignments be determined among the staff?

Whatever the particular struggles you encounter, it is likely that any library offering chat is going to (or has already) run into these sorts of staffing concerns.

Nonverbal Cues

Nonverbal communication accounts for about 65% of our communication with others.¹⁵⁰ With chat, all our nonverbal cues are gone, and we are left with only text, and often informal or garbled text at that.¹⁵¹ Librarians, especially adept reference librarians, tend to find the lack of non-verbal information “a major concern” when trying to negotiate chat transactions.¹⁵² Without the hundreds of subtle (or occasionally unsubtle) cues we can read off our users, we do not know if they are in a hurry, confused, mad, or frightened – no voice cues, no body language, and no facial expressions mean very little information about the user.¹⁵³ And to be fair, it means the same for the user trying to relate to the librarian. Word choice ends up meaning everything, letting the user know if we are eager to help or annoyed, knowledgeable or confused.¹⁵⁴ The reference interview becomes more than routine in chat transactions, it becomes critical.¹⁵⁵

Other Issues

These two concerns – staffing and lack of nonverbal cues – are the two most prominent issues raised in the literature now available. There are many other issues that have been offered, some of which may sound familiar to you.

¹⁴⁶ Steiner, *supra* note 29, at 43.

¹⁴⁷ Duncan, *supra* note 14, at 282.

¹⁴⁸ *Id.*

¹⁴⁹ Cohn, *supra* note 135, at 248.

¹⁵⁰ R. Subramani, *Insight Through Body Language and Non-Verbal Communication references in Tirukkural*, 10 LANGUAGE IN INDIA (Feb. 2010).

¹⁵¹ See David S. Carter, *Hurry Up and Wait, Observations and Tips about the Practice of Chat Reference*, 38 THE REFERENCE LIBR. 113 (2002); Shaw, *supra* note 14.

¹⁵² Buckland, *supra* note 64, at 15.

¹⁵³ Dee, *supra* note 95, at 19.

¹⁵⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵⁵ Radford, *Warmer*, *supra* note 13 at 261.

Librarians report feeling rushed when providing service via chat, due to a sense of impatience from the user, or due to the technology interface lacking an indication that an individual is typing.¹⁵⁶ Either party may experience frustration with technology.¹⁵⁷ The librarian may feel that they did not receive enough training, or that their skills are not complementary with the requirements of chat transactions.¹⁵⁸ Questions via chat generally take longer – sometimes much longer – to answer than they would in person.¹⁵⁹ Anonymity is a boon to many users, but the flip-side is the ability to harass the chat provider without easy reprisal;¹⁶⁰ the anonymity can be dehumanizing.¹⁶¹ Librarians fear a wasted effort; many students have expressed interest in extended hours, and night and weekend hours (when most chat options are not available) as that is when many of them are working on assignments and need assistance.¹⁶² Cost of programming can detract from other projects.¹⁶³ Ever watchful of users' privacy, there are concerns about how anonymous chat really is; depending on the program in use there are varying levels of confidentiality.¹⁶⁴ And of course, there are additional concerns related to professional pride – some librarians find that chat questions are not challenging enough, and can typically be answered satisfactorily by a team-member with less training, such as a student assistant;¹⁶⁵ on the other hand, questions can often be too complex.¹⁶⁶

As with any technology, relatively new or not, these types of issues are expected. The question is, how are they being resolved?

Fix It

Taken comprehensively, the available literature offers us the chance to review three predominant issues – low service usage, staffing issues, and lack of

¹⁵⁶ Powers, *supra* note 31, at 184; Perlin, *supra* note 37, at 21.

¹⁵⁷ (See: Boruff-Jones, *supra* note 75 (candid description of issues with two separate services); Kenney, *supra* note 1, at 50; Francoeur, *supra* note 36, at 202; Mu, *supra* note 21, at 127; Taddeo, *supra* note 64, at 69.

¹⁵⁸ Koshik, *supra* note 26, at 2006 ¶2; Radford, *Warmer*, *supra* note 13 at 262.

¹⁵⁹ Perlin, *supra* note 37, at 21; David Ward, *How Much is Enough?*, 10 INTERNET REFERENCE SERVICES Q. 89, 89–90 (July 2005); Ciccone, *supra* note 139, at 101; Coffman, *Part 1*, *supra* note 54, at 9; Dee, *supra* note 95, at 21.

¹⁶⁰ Ciccone, *supra* note 139, at 100.

¹⁶¹ Buckland, *supra* note 64, at 18.

¹⁶² Steiner, *supra* note 29, at 43; Taddeo, *supra* note 64, at 81; Duncan, *supra* note 14, at 290; Graybill, *supra* note 98, at 79; Kayongo, *supra* note 61, at 101, 102; Radford, *Multiple-Case*, *supra* note 105, at 531; Dee, *supra* note 95, at 25; Mu, *supra* note 21, at 122.

¹⁶³ Nicol, *supra* note 20, at 163.

¹⁶⁴ Duncan, *supra* note 14, at 281.

¹⁶⁵ Steiner, *supra* note 29, at 43; Powers, *supra* note 31, at 185. (It is worth noting that when chat becomes available, it serves as the “front line” for a virtual reference desk, increasing the odds of encountering directional or ready-reference type questions).

¹⁶⁶ See Francoeur, *supra* note 36, at 201 (for examples of situations where explanations are so involved as to become too difficult to convey over chat).

nonverbal cues – and consider what suggestions have been set forth in the hopes of improving the use of chat reference.

Marketing

Addressing low usage could merely be a matter of marketing. While users are accustomed to such convenience on the web, they may not yet expect the same from libraries – with our traditionally stodgy reputations.

Letting people know about chat is an obvious solution,¹⁶⁷ but one worth mentioning. New students arrive every year, faculty change, and there are only so many regular public patrons. Actively marketing the chat option through classroom visits, students newsletters, email bursts, or flyers keeps the news about yours services fresh.¹⁶⁸ Libraries that have focused on marketing have seen an increase in chat users, and some institutions have seen significant growth.¹⁶⁹

The name you use to bill the service is an important choice. The name should signify the function, and thus include a text statement rather than just a question-mark image.¹⁷⁰ Utilizing a straightforward name including words like “chat,” “ask,” or “contact us” seems to be the norm; more specific phrasing including the use of the word “librarian” helps users grasp that they are in fact being assisted by a professional.¹⁷¹

Access Placement

In the same strain as marketing, the placement of access points on the webpages can directly affect users’ awareness of the chat option. Most services libraries use offer a widget – a tool that allows the user to initiate a chat directly from the webpage, without downloading any software on their own.¹⁷² The links for these can be placed in a variety of locations – with an emphasis on the plurality.

Libraries that have experimented with access placement report that making the option more visible significantly increases traffic – in one case increasing visits by 400%.¹⁷³ It appears that placing an access point on the library homepage, as well as other locations that a user is likely to run into questions, will dramatically

¹⁶⁷ “Librarians commented that low chat service usage seemed to correlate with inadequate marketing of the chat service on the Web site.” Dee, *supra* note 95, at 27.

¹⁶⁸ Taddeo, *supra* note 64, at 73; Whisner, *supra* note 63, at 848; Nicol, *supra* note 20, at 167; Mu, *supra* note 21, at 126.

¹⁶⁹ Powers, *supra* note 31, at 172.

¹⁷⁰ Mu, *supra* note 21, at 126.

¹⁷¹ Mu, *supra* note 21, at 123; Taddeo, *supra* note 64, at 82.

¹⁷² Powers, *supra* note 31, at 171.

¹⁷³ “The increase in use of the IM and chat services after re-positioning the IM Qwidget to make it more visible was startling. The overall number of transactions (chat and IM) requested increased 389.8 percent, from 452 totally questions during Fall 2008 to 2,214 transactions during Fall 2009.” Graybill, *supra* note 98, at 78.

increase chat usage.¹⁷⁴ As of 2011, 85% of academic libraries with chat were placing an access point on the library homepage, but there are fewer reports of multiple access points.¹⁷⁵

Consortium

The issue of staffing, covering enough hours to make the service of benefit to the most users, is efficiently handled by participating in a chat consortium.¹⁷⁶ In fact, it is interesting to note that while some academic libraries are joining consortia, almost every public library that is offering chat is a consortia member.¹⁷⁷ The benefits include freeing up your own librarians from double duties, with only a certain number of dedicated hours per week committed to chat, and the service becomes much more flexible in terms of hours offered – especially if the consortium stretches geographically into different time zones.¹⁷⁸

A consortium may not be feasible for smaller libraries, if they cannot spare dedicated time to commit their share of chat coverage.¹⁷⁹ However, depending on the size of the consortium and the hours it is available, coverage commitments can be quite low.

Training

Librarians are concerned about the lack of nonverbal cues in chat transactions, and while the discomfort is not unfounded, it is manageable with training. One of the main factors contributing to chat success or failure is the quality of service;¹⁸⁰ chat transactions are not face-to-face transactions – they require the same skills, but must be applied in ways different than what librarians are accustomed to – training for chat can make a difference, in the quality of service provided and the librarians' levels of comfort.¹⁸¹ In analysis of chat transcripts, librarians only used follow-up questions half the time, and only a third of all the questions they posed were open.¹⁸² The reference interview format is still a valid approach to transactions, even if occurring on chat – asking questions helps the librarian produce a higher volume of correct answers that leave the user satisfied.¹⁸³ RUSA has training guidelines available, and most chat services offer chat tips – but awareness and practice will serve to build good chat transactions skills in the same way that time spent at the physical reference desk has for thousands of us.

¹⁷⁴ Graybill, *supra* note 98, at 85; Radford, *Multiple-Case*, *supra* note 105, at 534; Mu, *supra* note 21, at 122.

¹⁷⁵ Mu, *supra* note 21, at 122.

¹⁷⁶ Nicol, *supra* note 20, at 163.

¹⁷⁷ Francoeur, *supra* note 36, at 191.

¹⁷⁸ Kibbee, *supra* note 90, at 471.

¹⁷⁹ Perlin, *supra* note 37, at 21.

¹⁸⁰ Nicol, *supra* note 20, at 162.

¹⁸¹ Koshik, *supra* note 26, at 2006 ¶22.

¹⁸² Radford, *Warmer*, *supra* note 13 at 259.

¹⁸³ Radford, *Warmer*, *supra* note 13 at 260.

Conclusion

Chat is here to stay, at least until something even better comes along. We have touched on the evolution of chat, why users like it, why librarians do not like it, and some potential fix-its for chat issues. But this is all putting the cart a bit before the horse – though many law school libraries now offer chat,¹⁸⁴ it may be time to stop and ask if you really want to offer chat, and if so, then identify the goals and expectations of offering chat. Do our primary constituents want chat? Are there enough of them to create a return on investment? Do we need to offer chat in support of access to justice? Are we only offering it out of fear, that if we don't someone else will? How do we truly, best serve our users?

These are important questions, and each library will address them in their own time. Meanwhile, there is a call for more research. It is fortunate that our academic neighbors have been hashing out the chat issue for the last decade and a half, but perhaps it is time for some research of our own, specific to law schools. We are specialized libraries; it is entirely possible that not all the concerns of general academic libraries are transferable to our environment.¹⁸⁵

Now might be the best time for this discussion. Rumblings of a sea-change have been on the horizon for awhile. The future of the reference desk seems to be in question, at least in some institutions, and those librarians committed to chat seem to feel that foregoing the physical desk is possible and even preferable.¹⁸⁶ As libraries increasingly build virtual collections, this could become the heyday of the pajama researcher; and if those with questions need never come near the building, then perhaps the hardwood desk has outlived its usefulness.¹⁸⁷ Then again, perhaps not. Perhaps, for the moment at least, a blend of physical and virtual services is ideal. The only thing that is certain, is that the “ideal” is likely to change.

Chat is not necessarily the future. We may see a reference future full of Skype, or a virtual reality interface that has yet to be born. We could sit quietly and pass the time until the future answers the question of chat for us. But who wants to wait, when we could possibly make something great out of such a small service most of us are already offering?

¹⁸⁴ Author's own research. Additional research about the current presence and usage of chat in law schools is required.

¹⁸⁵ “The questions a law library gets are quite different, and not ones that you would find in a general academic library.” Perlin, *supra* note 37, at 21.

¹⁸⁶ “One librarian in the U.S. has come up with a system called “Librarian with a Latte.” This librarian takes a seat in one of the cafeterias on campus with his laptop, and answers reference questions via chat. During these sessions, he also invites student to stop by for help.” *Id.*, at 20.

¹⁸⁷ Stevens, *supra* note 115, at 207.