



## Moving Beyond the Reference Desk

### *An Annotated Bibliography of Digital Reference Services*

by Bernie Sloan

*The Professional Development Committee, which coordinates the PDC Desktop Learning Opportunity Series, encourages members to explore professional development offerings and opportunities at the local, regional and national levels. We welcome your comments and article suggestions. Please contact Lori Hedstrom at 651/687-5891 or [lori.hedstrom@westgroup.com](mailto:lori.hedstrom@westgroup.com).*



Digital reference is one of the hottest topics in librarianship right now. New technologies, such as e-mail, chat, Web forms and Voice over Internet Protocol, have prompted libraries to offer digital reference services. As these computer-based media continue to advance, librarians must become adept at delivering digital reference services to their users.

Here are some resources to help librarians become progressively more comfortable with this relatively new phenomenon.

#### Basic Sources to Get You Started

The following 10 articles review the fundamental elements of digital reference services.

- Coffman, Steve, and Susan McGlamery. "The Librarian and Mr. Jeeves." *American Libraries*, 31(5), 66–69. May 2000. Coffman and McGlamery examine commercial Web reference services, such as AskJeeves and Webhelp, and encourage librarians to "adopt the tools and strategies of our competitors and join our patrons on the Web."
- Ferguson, Chris D., and Charles A. Bunge. "The Shape of Services to Come: Values-based Reference Service for the Largely Digital Library." *College and Research Libraries*, 58(3), 252–265. Ferguson and Bunge discuss the service values that librarians must advance to ensure that the digital library works for all users.
- Francoeur, Stephen. "An Analytical Survey of Chat Reference Services." *Reference Services Review*, 29(3):189–203. 2001. Francoeur surveys chat reference services around the globe, analyzes trends in the provision of this new mode of assistance, and illustrates its advantages and limitations.
- Janes, Joseph. "Digital Reference: Reference Librarians' Experiences and Attitudes." *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 53(7), 549–566. May 2002. This article surveys the perspectives and patterns of librarians using digital and networked technologies in reference work.
- Lankes, R. David, and Pauline Shostack. "The Necessity of Real Time: Fact and Fiction in Digital Reference Systems." *Reference & User Services Quarterly*, 41(4), 350–355. Summer 2002. Lankes and Shostack discuss the current enthusiasm for live interactive digital reference services, questioning whether such reference services really need to be 100 percent "live."
- Lipow, Anne Grodzins. "Serving the Remote User: Reference Service in the Digital Environment." Keynote address at the Ninth Australian Information Online & On Disc Conference and Exhibition in Sydney, Australia, January 1999. <http://www.csu.edu.au/special/online99/proceedings99/200.htm>. Lipow issues a call to arms to reference librarians: "Rather than thinking of our users as remote, we should instead recognize that it is we who are remote from our users."
- Maxwell, Nancy Kalikow. "Establishing and Maintaining Live Online Reference Service." *Library Technology Reports*, 38(4), 3–78. July/August 2002. This 78-page report explores digital reference issues, such as administration and management, technical matters, and problems. It also includes case studies.
- Oder, Norman. "The Shape of E-reference." *Library Journal*, 126(2), 46–50. Feb. 1, 2001. Oder reviews state-of-the-art technology in reference services, including trends and suggestions for getting started.
- Rockman, Ilene F. "Internet Speed, Library Know-How Intersect in Digital Reference." In *The Bowker Annual: Library and Book Trade Almanac*. 47th ed. New York: Information Today, 2002, pp. 234–248. This section of the venerable *Bowker Annual* covers the basics of digital reference and includes a bibliography.
- Sloan, Bernie. "Service Perspectives for the Digital Library: Remote Reference Services." *Library Trends* 47:117–143 (Summer 1998). Prepublication version:

<http://www.lis.uiuc.edu/~b-sloan/e-ref.html>. This paper discusses the lack of a “service perspective” in digital library development and suggests that reference services are the perfect service application for the digital library.

## Further Reading

After reviewing the introductory materials in the preceding section, the reader will want to locate additional information. Locating relevant literature about rapidly changing technologies can be difficult. For one thing, the terminology used to describe the technology may not be standardized. Sources use many terms to describe these reference services, including virtual, digital, electronic, online, remote, real-time, e-mail, chat, live, synchronous and asynchronous. And there are many places to look for the relevant literature: online abstracting and indexing databases, online full-text journal article aggregations, and Web search engines. Many sources are subscription-based, and others (e.g., Web search engines) may offer a mixed bag of search results. Fortunately there are several free Web-based bibliographies dealing with digital reference services.

- Bernie Sloan’s *Digital Reference Services Bibliography* at <http://www.lis.uiuc.edu/~b-sloan/digiref.html>, September 2002, contains more than 450 items related to the topic. More than 200 of these items are available on the Web; the bibliography provides those links.
- John V. Richardson, Jr., a professor of information studies at the University of California at Los Angeles, has compiled *Virtual Reference Transactions: A Systematic Bibliography* at <http://vrhome.virtualreference.net/johnr biblio.htm>, April 2002. This bibliography contains nearly 250 items, including a number of items not listed in other digital reference bibliographies. Richardson compiled this bibliography while he was an Library and Systems Services Inc. presidential scholar.
- Joann Wasik of the Virtual Reference Desk, based at Syracuse University, maintains a bibliography with hundreds of resources at [http://www.vrd.org/pubinfo/proceedings99\\_bib.shtml](http://www.vrd.org/pubinfo/proceedings99_bib.shtml), April 2001. Wasik’s bibliography differs from other digital reference bibliographies in that the entries are organized by subject area: general

library and education, academic libraries, public libraries, special libraries, government information services/centers, general digital reference research, business, and real-time projects and technologies.

- Gerry McKiernan of Iowa State University maintains a general bibliography of digital reference resources at <http://www.public.iastate.edu/~CYBERSTACKS/LiveRef.htm#GenBib>, 2001. More than half of the resources in McKiernan’s bibliography are available free on the Web; the bibliography provides links to these resources.

## AALL Professional Development Program Competencies of Law Librarianship

- 1 Core Competencies
- Specialized Competencies
- 2 Library Management
- 3 **Reference, Research and Client Services**
- 4 **Information Technology**
- 5 Collection Care and Management
- 6 Teaching

This article addresses the AALL Specialized Competencies on Reference, Research and Client Services and Information Technology. The complete AALL statement of Competencies of Law Librarianship is online at <http://www.aallnet.org/prodev/competencies.asp>.

## Directory Sites

While reading articles on digital reference can give a better understanding of these services, directory sites can provide comprehensive information about digital reference.

- Francoeur, Stephen. Digital Reference at <http://pages.prodigy.net/tab01/digref.htm>. This resource is a part of Francoeur’s “The Teaching Librarian” Web site. He examines the various media used for digital reference, including e-mail, Web forms, chat, and customer-call-center software. His “Index of Chat Reference Services” lists libraries that already offer virtual reference services, with links to these services. The libraries listed are organized by geographic region, library

type and type of digital reference software used. This is a great tool to locate libraries in areas that offer digital reference or to find similar types of libraries and learn about their experiences using a specific vendor’s software.

- McKiernan, Gerry. LiveRef: A Registry of Real-Time Digital Reference Services at <http://www.public.iastate.edu/~CYBERSTACKS/LiveRef.htm>. McKiernan includes categories such as libraries using digital reference services by type of library, a list of about two dozen sources for digital reference software, a general bibliography, dates and locations of conferences and workshops dealing with digital reference, as well as links to several surveys and comparative studies.
- Sloan, Bernie. Bernie Sloan’s Digital Reference Pages at <http://www.lis.uiuc.edu/~b-sloan/bernie.htm>. This Web page has links to nine digital reference Web resources, including:
  - Live Digital Reference Case Studies: A Bibliography — A brief bibliography of articles, papers, reports and case studies that report people’s experiences with digital reference.
  - Collaborative Live Reference Services — A listing of collaborative live reference services, i.e., real-time reference services offered by two or more libraries.
  - Digital Reference Question Logs — Question logs from 10 digital reference services. It contains the types of questions asked by actual digital reference service users.
  - The Reference Interview in the Digital Library: A Bibliography — A brief bibliography dealing with the application of the reference interview in the digital library.

## Discussion Groups

E-mail discussion groups complement reading about digital reference services. While the articles and books listed in the various bibliographies help librarians learn about digital reference services,

(continued on page 24)

e-mail discussion groups help keep them up-to-date on current issues affecting digital reference services. Discussions are often lively, and arguments are not uncommon. These discussion groups help shape the field of digital reference as practitioners and researchers work their way through the issues.

- DIG\_REF — This is the first discussion group founded specifically for the discussion of digital reference issues. Described as “a forum for the growing number of people and organizations answering the questions of users via the Internet, [DIG\_REF] seeks to bring

together experts who answer questions, as well as librarians, organizations and associations dedicated to meeting the reference needs of their users via the Internet.” Sponsored by the Virtual Reference Desk at the Information Institute at Syracuse University, DIG\_REF boasts more than 2,000 subscribers. For more information, including subscription instructions, go to [http://vrd.org/Dig\\_Ref/dig\\_ref.shtml](http://vrd.org/Dig_Ref/dig_ref.shtml).

- LIVEREFERENCE — Unlike the DIG\_REF group, LIVEREFERENCE focuses on live interactive digital reference services. Owned and managed

by Lori Bell of the Alliance Library System in Illinois, LIVEREFERENCE has nearly 800 subscribers. For more information on LIVEREFERENCE, including instructions for subscribing to the group, go to <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/livereference/>.

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