Virtual Reference Service Census

J. (JL) Lange

School of Library and Information Studies,

University of Alabama

LS 567: Digital Reference

Prof. Mark Robison

June 18th, 2024

In this paper I will be comparing the virtual reference services offered by the University of Pennsylvania libraries with those offered by the New York Public Library, specifically looking at what services they offered and how those services were promoted in 2005, 2013, and 2024. I initially encountered some difficulties finding libraries whose virtual reference desk had been properly archived by the Wayback Machine's web crawler. Initially, I was going to go with Denver Public Library as the URL for their virtual reference desk hadn't changed and was archived going back to 2006, but as I had already switched which academic library I was using based on whether or not the services they offered in 2005 were properly archived, I decided that it would be better idea to be flexible with which public library I was using as well. After numerous false starts, I eventually had to abandon the idea of finding a public library where the URL for their virtual reference services had remained unchanged since 2005 and instead used the search feature on the Wayback Machine to locate the virtual reference services offered by the New York Public Library despite the URL being different for each of the three years assessed.

Currently the New York Public Library's Contact Us page, where virtual reference services are offered, is not a standalone reference page. When you first visit the site, the first grouping of links would allow you to connect with librarians who handle collection development, or programming and outreach by recommending a title, submitting a program idea, or requesting a class or community visit. The next section after the Connect with NYPL Staff is "Email Ask NYPL," with three different options, "General Questions," "E-books & SimplyE," and "Correo Electrónico." The section below that is for Live Chat customer support, offered weekdays from 10:00a through 6:00p, and beneath that the "Call or Text Ask NYPL" section which provides phone numbers for calling or texting. The two things that I most appreciate about how they promote their virtual reference services on this page are the Spanish language option,

and the fact that it provides the means to contact other teams or types of librarians other than just the Reference Desk, and as a result the reference librarians are not siloed off, but presented in a more holistic fashion as part of the larger library organism.

In 2013, the virtual reference services were more siloed off as part of a dedicated reference page. There is a main section broken into four parts, "Quick Answers," "For More In-Depth Questions and Research," "Need to Know," and "How to Do It Yourself." In the "Quick Answers" section the first contact method provide is the phone, followed by text, chat, mobile chat, "¡Información en vivo!" which I imagine is their Spanish language option for chat, and the final option is for email. To the left of the main text is a vertical menu bar which starts with "About Ask NYPL" and then offers links to pages containing the phone number, chat, Spanish language chat, email, Spanish language email, text, meet with a research specialist, interlibrary loan, and eBook central. So, the Spanish language options, and links to meet with other teams were available 11 years ago, but not highlighted as prominently.

In 2005, the URL for the New York Public Library's virtual reference desk was http://nypl.org/questions/index.cfm. I mention this because even 8 years after this in 2013 you are so much less likely to see an index page actually listed as an index in the URL. The virtual reference options are presented in the following order: phone, chat, email, Spanish language option, followed by a webform that would allow you to email the reference desk without needing to sign in to your email, and some questions about what you need the information for, which sources you've consulted already, where you live and whether you have an NYPL card. There are significantly less images on this site which makes sense if you consider what was involved in building a website at the time.

Currently, the University of Pennsylvania libraries virtual reference services are broken down into four options. The first option has a link to “Chat Online,” but also immediately provides a phone number that you can text to chat live weekdays 9:00a through 5:00p. Next, it provides a link to book a research consultation. Followed by a link to email them a question, informing you that they will answer within 24 hours. Finally, it provides a link to “find your personal librarian” which will take you to a directory of the different subject librarians. To the left there is a vertical dropdown menu with the options “Get Started,” “Menu,” and “Ask.” The “Menu” option provides a long list of links which would allow you to access a wide array of services offered by the library.

If you go back eight years to 2013 there were no fancy hover menus. You were presented with three options, “im,” “text” and “chat” with the text option requiring you to text “upennlib” to 66746.” Beneath “chat” you are provided with three “useful links”: “Contact a subject expert,” “AIM Express,” and “Sign in.” Leading me to believe that either their chat services were offered through AIM, or they offered AOL Instant Messenger as an additional live chat option.

In 2005, you are primarily just offered the option to live chat with their reference desk. Beneath this in a small font it asks, “Need help at other times?” and provides links which will take you to pages that offer information for how to ask by email, on the phone, or in person.

I’m a little above the recommended word count already, so I won’t spend too much time talking about it, but this assignment was incredibly illuminating. While I’ve spent a little bit of time lately thinking about how I relate to the internet, for the most part it’s kind of like water to the fish swimming in it. Going back and looking at the changes to how these services were offered and presented has made me stop and think about the information environment I exist in and how that might affect the way I interact with people when providing virtual reference.

Links:

New York Public Library, 2005:
https://web.archive.org/web/20050923001240/http://nypl.org/questions/index.cfm

New York Public Library, 2013:
https://web.archive.org/web/20131018044519/http://nypl.org/ask-nypl

New York Public Library, 2024: https://www.nypl.org/get-help/contact-us

University of Pennsylvania, 2005:
https://web.archive.org/web/20050908173838/http://refchat.library.upenn.edu/

University of Pennsylvania, 2013:
https://web.archive.org/web/20130328005916/http://refchat.library.upenn.edu/

University of Pennsylvania, 2024:
https://www.library.upenn.edu/services/ask-question