

# Establishing a Virtual Reference Service

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## ABSTRACT

The paper describes the concepts of virtual reference service and instant messaging. It explains how real-time communication works in a library setting, and introduces one free, easy-to-use software, i.e., Meebo for establishing a virtual reference service in a library.

**Keywords:** Virtual reference service, instant message, online reference service, Meebo

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Internet has revolutionised the way we now communicate. The ability to publish webpages and send e-mail communications changed our expectations on the ease and speed by which information is now being exchanged. Early on, librarians recognised the potential of Internet as a way to connect with their users, and e-mail reference quickly became a standard library service. Advances in technology further brought systems that enabled chat with users in real time. These early virtual reference systems varied in price and features, although most were quite expensive and fairly complex, and only a few libraries could afford the cost to implement these. Also, a handful of users were tech-savvy enough to care. The potential was there, but the technology was not ready<sup>1</sup>.

But now a new web generation has emerged. Central to the concept of Web 2.0, scores of free, easy-to-use tools have emerged to facilitate the rapid exchange of information. A number of tools such as Blogger, YouTube, Flickr and Del.icio.us where users post content as well as real-time communication tools, such as Trillian, Meebo, and Plugoo have changed the ways the communication is now been made. It is not just the teenagers who use them, real-time communication via the Internet is increasingly becoming a preferred communication method for many business professionals, too. Librarians can take advantage of these real-time communications tools also. No longer must virtual reference systems be expensive or

complex. With today's real-time communication tools, librarians can establish a virtual reference service with relatively little expense or technical expertise<sup>2</sup>.

## 2. VIRTUAL REFERENCE SERVICE

Virtual reference service is an online reference service that enables library patrons to ask reference questions through a library's website. The user may be at home, in office, at school, or in a library. Some virtual reference services also place answers to frequently asked questions (FAQs), selected reference tools, and access to selected databases on the website. The question answering service using Internet technology is the essential component, without which the use of the name "virtual reference" is misleading<sup>3</sup>.

Virtual reference is 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. Communication channels used frequently in virtual reference include chat, videoconferencing, Voice over IP, co-browsing, e-mail, and instant messaging.

While online sources are often used in provision of virtual reference, use of electronic sources in seeking answers is not by itself virtual reference. Virtual reference queries are sometimes followed-up with telephone, fax, in-person and regular mail interactions, even though these modes of communication are not considered virtual<sup>4</sup>.

### 3. INSTANT MESSAGING

Instant Messaging (IM) falls under chat, as it is a real-time text-based networked communication system. But it is distinct in that it is based on clients that facilitate connections between specified known users (often using "Buddy List", "Friend List" or "Contact List"), whereas Chat includes web-based applications that allow communication between (often anonymous) users in a multi-user environment. IM is a form of online real-time communication. It allows users to see whether their contacts are online, and to send them a typed message. It is similar to e-mail as a communication tool, but, unlike traditional e-mail, is instantaneous. Messages sent via IM appear immediately on the recipient's computer screen. In this way, IM is a truly synchronous (that is, real time) form of communication<sup>5</sup>. Some of the IM software are:

- ✂ Proprietary and/or single protocol: AIM, Baidu Hi, Digsby, Fetion, Gadu-Gadu, iChat, ICQ, IMVU, Lotus Sametime, NateOn, Qnext, Skype, Tencent QQ, VZOchat, Yahoo! Messenger, and Xfire.
- ✂ Open source and/or multi-protocol: Adium, Ayttn, BitlBee, CenterIM, eBuddy, Empathy, fring, Kopete, Mail.ru Agent, Meebo, Miranda IM, Nimbuzz, Palringo, Pidgin, Trillian, and QIP Infium.
- ✂ XMPP (Jabber): Gabber, Gajim, Gizmo5, Google Talk, JWChat, and Psi.
- ✂ .NET Messenger: aMSN, emesene, KMess, Microsoft Messenger for Mac, Windows Live Messenger, and Windows Messenger.

#### 3.1 Salient Features of Instant Messaging

- ✂ Instant messages: Send notes back and forth with a friend who is online.
- ✂ Chat: Create a chat room with friends or co-workers.
- ✂ Web links: Share links to your favorite websites.
- ✂ Video: Send and view videos, and chat face to face with friends.
- ✂ Images: Look at an image stored on your friend's computer.
- ✂ Sounds: Play sounds for your friends.
- ✂ Files: Share files by sending them directly to your friends.
- ✂ Talk: Use the Internet instead of a phone to actually talk with friends.

- ✂ Streaming content: Real-time or near-real-time stock quotes and news.
- ✂ Mobile capabilities: Send instant messages from your cell phone.

### 4. INSTANT MESSAGING AND REFERENCE SERVICE

Instant messaging enables libraries to provide a responsive, streamlined service that meets users "where they are", both technologically and geographically. Research indicates that IM is the communication tool of choice for an increasing number of people. By using IM to deliver reference services, libraries can meet their users on their own ground. Rather than asking (or expecting) patrons to come to libraries, libraries will be able to meet them at their point-of-need, which need not to be geographically restricted to a computer. While traditional chat services that employ proprietary, web-based chat reference software can only be accessed from a computer with an Internet connection, IM clients can be contacted on hand-held devices like PDAs and next generation mobile phones<sup>5</sup>.

### 5. STEPS OF CREATING VIRTUAL REFERENCE SERVICE

Although some virtual reference applications have more bells and whistles than others, they all are based on the real-time exchange of typed text. Two types, which librarians can use to establish a basic virtual reference service with little cost or technical skill, are instant messaging and embedded chat. With instant messaging, the patron logs into IM account, chooses the librarian from her/his contact list, types a quick message and sends it. In a few seconds, the message pops up in the librarian's IM window where he can immediately reply. It is really not that much different from e-mail, except that it happens in real-time. Although IM may be of second nature for some, not all will be comfortable with it. Fortunately, they don't have to be. Using embedded chat, users can still communicate with a librarian in real-time by using a chat box embedded on the library's webpage. User simply has to type message in the box and send it. The message is then directed to the librarian's IM account where he can reply in real-time. Unlike IM in which both the patron and librarian must have an IM account, with embedded chat only the librarian needs to have one. Patrons don't even need to know what IM is. Communicating via embedded chat requires the sender to have no more technical skill than filling out a simple web form<sup>6</sup>.

Once a library decides to establish a virtual reference service, the first step it requires is to register for an instant messaging account on behalf of the

library. Fortunately, most IM systems allow creation of accounts at no cost. The following factors need to be considered while establishing an IM account, and have been explained by using Meebo, and open source IM software.

## 5.1 Meebo

Founded in 2005, Meebo enables real-time social interactions with instant messaging and group chat at meebo.com, on mobile, and on partner sites across the web. Meebo users can keep in touch across dozens of IM platforms, including AIM, Yahoo!, MSN, Google Talk, MySpace IM, Facebook Chat, and more. Meebo is one of the web's fastest growing social media companies<sup>7</sup>.

## 5.2 Establish Accounts in Multiple Systems

Since IM systems aren't interoperable, it is beneficial to establish accounts in several systems. That way, no matter what system users are using, they will be able to reach you. You have to go to [www.meebo.com](http://www.meebo.com). The following screen (Fig. 1) will appear.



Figure 1. Screen shot of Meebo.

## 5.3 Naming

When establishing an IM account, you will need to choose a *name*, also known as a *screen name*. This becomes your IM address which users will add to their contact list. Therefore, choose a name that is descriptive of you or your library. To reduce confusion, consider choosing the same name in each IM system. Meebo is a web application, which makes it attractive to many librarians because they don't have to download anything. This is ideal for situations in which downloading applications is discouraged or prohibited. This too offers several advantages, such as not having to keep an extra browser window open and risk accidentally closing the window and the virtual reference service along with it.

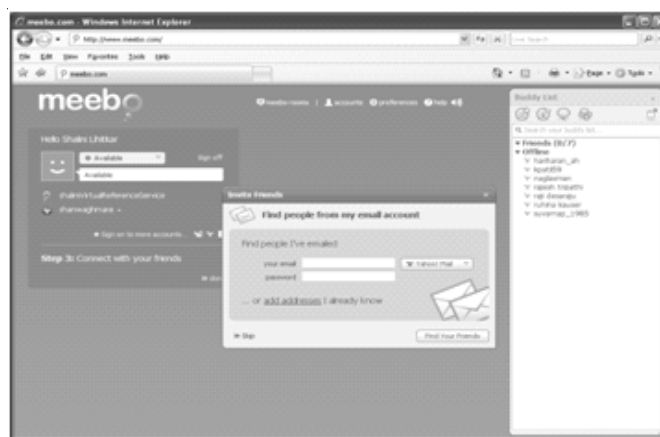


Figure 2. Screen shot of logging into Meebo.

## 5.4 Logging and Monitoring IM Accounts from One Place

Meebo allows to monitor multiple IM accounts from one application. It requires no installation. To monitor multiple IM accounts in Meebo, simply go to the Meebo website and login to all of your library IM accounts. Or, you can create a Meebo account, which will remember names of all your users and passwords for all your IM accounts; in the future, you only need to login to your Meebo account.

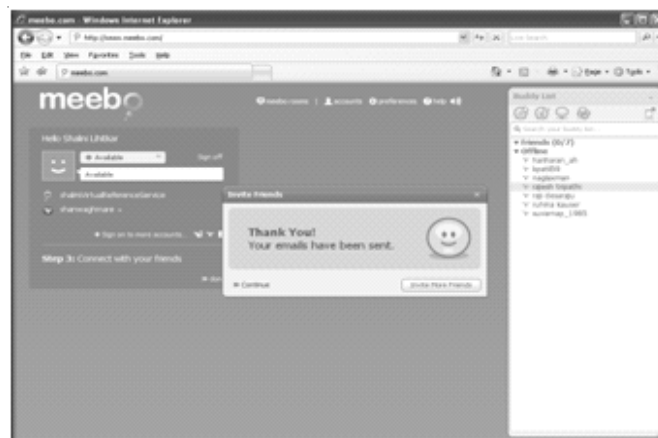


Figure 3. Screen shot of entering VRS into Meebo.

## 5.5 Entering Virtual Reference Service into Meebo

Once the website of library will be opened then automatically users' reference queries will pop-up. Librarian then have to choose the users name list, for creating a virtual reference service and sent to their accounts.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Technology has indeed revolutionised the way we communicate. More information is being exchanged faster than ever before. And as information experts,

librarians should have a central role in that revolution. Combined with more traditional methods of reference such as in person, phone and email, virtual reference opens up new avenues of communication and enables us to connect with a new generation of Web 2.0 patrons. More and more students and business professionals are communicating in real-time. IM and embedded chat facilitate quick, effective communication and can help improve customer service. Today's real-time communication tools such as IM and embedded chat are freely available and fairly easy to use.

Technological developments have affected not only the format and sources of the information libraries use to provide reference service, but also where we provide reference service. Libraries and their resources have partially moved to the virtual world of the Internet. As a result, library patrons can access the resources from outside the physical library also. In an effort to provide patrons access to a library via their computers, many libraries and library consortia are extending their reference service to include virtual reference.

Technology now allows users to submit their queries to the library at any time from any place in the world. Virtual reference is responsive to patrons' need for convenient access to reference service. IM is definitely the way forward for online reference service, the positive aspects of IM are that it is relatively easy, cheap to set up, flexible, and so can respond to changes in technology and the user's habits.

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