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2014

A Review of: Implementing Virtual Reference Services: A LITA Guide

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JOURNAL OF LIBRARY INNOVATION

Volume 5, Issue 1, 2014

Review

Implementing Virtual Reference Services: A LITA Guide

Beth C. Thomsett-Scott, editor. Chicago: ALA TechSource, 2013. 152 pp. ISBN: 978-1-55570-899-3. $70.00

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This edited volume consists of eight short chapters on various aspects of virtual reference. The first chapter presents an overview of important considerations for virtual reference services and commonly used technologies. Three chapters focus in more detail on specific technologies: Twitter, Google Voice, and various tools for instant messaging services. The remaining four chapters describe specific virtual reference services: a national text messaging service, a state-wide collaborative virtual reference service, an embedded academic librarian in a first-year university course, and the evolution of services at University of Nevada Las Vegas Libraries. References are included at the end of each chapter. There is also an index with key terms, features, institutions, and names of referenced authors.

This book is most directly relevant for academic librarians, since four chapters primarily describe academic library case studies, but its usefulness is limited by the narrow, anecdotally-driven character of the bulk of its case studies. In most chapters, the

authors are careful to include examples from public or school libraries, and several types of libraries are involved in the collaborative virtual reference and text messaging services. Even so, librarians from public, school, or special libraries may need to extrapolate and infer considerably in order to apply the examples from this book to their situation.

The intended audience is those who want to implement virtual reference. This could include librarians who have never provided virtual reference as well as those who want to add a new technology or a new component to their service. Librarians who have implemented any form of virtual reference service will not find much here that is new—the examples provided describe the status quo for virtual reference services and technology in North America—although they may come away with ideas for modifications to their library's services. For librarians who have never provided virtual reference, this book would be a useful guide to commonly used technologies, which are explained primarily by means of examples of how other libraries have implemented them. Both free and fee-based technologies are described.

Some of the technologies described are library-specific, such as LibraryH3lp, LibAnswers, and Tutor.com's Ask a Librarian. However, most of the technology described is in use by the general population; this includes Twitter, Facebook, text messaging, Skype, Second Life, and various Google applications, among others. A particular challenge of technology-related books is the currency of the technology being described; most of the technology in *Implementing Virtual Reference Services* is still current and in common use, although Second Life, in particular, has declined in popularity and relevance for libraries. Screenshot images are provided, which can be helpful even though they, too, will become outdated as companies change their interfaces.

While a focus on technologies is useful and important, the implementation of virtual reference services requires more than just access to technology. *Implementing Virtual Reference Services* also aims to provide "[i]nformation on staffing, training, and assessing the services" (ix). Unfortunately, these aspects are not covered comprehensively enough to be of any practical use to readers. For example, the book's editor rightly states that "techniques for each technology are perhaps the most essential—and sometimes the most difficult—part of the training" (p. 5), but the book fails to present specific techniques. Rather, authors list broad goals when describing their training programs, such as "[e]mphasis was on effective communication using IM" (p. 72). This is analogous to a book about physical reference services describing reference desk setup in great detail and omitting any explanation of the reference interview beyond a brief mention of its importance. Librarians who are new to virtual reference, or who are considering expanding virtual reference to a new technology, may not yet have a practical understanding of the established norms for communicating online. Yet the book fails to introduce or outline these techniques and norms, or even to offer reference to other sources. For a fuller discussion of virtual reference interactions, including specific strategies for virtual reference providers, I recommend the research

report, *Seeking Synchronicity: Revelations and Recommendations for Virtual Reference* (Connaway & Radford, 2011).

Similarly, the book's practical usefulness would have been greater if each chapter included specific guidelines or considerations for others. Most chapters rely on examples and anecdotes that describe what has been done in certain libraries. Only one chapter, "AskColorado: A Collaborative Virtual Reference Service," situates the example within the larger context of virtual reference services and therefore gives readers a clear sense of the range of issues they would need to consider when setting up a similar service. For example, there is a description of the AskColorado software selection process and how it evolved over time, as well as a list of guidelines for other consortia—guidelines that both include and expand on the AskColorado experience.

At the end of the book is a section offering Suggested Reading. The category 'Virtual Reference: General' is most directly relevant to virtual reference services. Several of the categories—Website Usability, Marketing and Advertising, and User Needs Analysis and Satisfaction Studies—are important for virtual reference services but also generally relevant for online library services. These topics receive only a passing mention elsewhere in the book. Finally, there is a Keeping Up With Technology section, which lists websites and listservs of interest.

In summary, *Implementing Virtual Reference Services* is a reasonable introduction to the considerations involved in providing virtual reference services, and it gives a useful overview of commonly used technologies. Individual chapters are likely to be more helpful than the book as a whole, especially for librarians who are interested in reading about examples of how a particular technology or type of virtual reference service was implemented. However, the contributed chapter format over-emphasizes anecdotes and individual librarians' experiences and therefore limits the book's usefulness overall as a one-stop source for information on virtual reference services.

Reference

Connaway, L. S. & Radford, M. L. (2011). Seeking Synchronicity: Revelations and Recommendations for Virtual Reference. Retrieved from OCLC Research website: http://www.oclc.org/reports/synchronicity.en.html

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