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The first issue of this new volume of 'Library Review' presents a collection of papers on digital reference services (DRS), or, as it is also called, virtual reference (VR). In its broadest sense, the concept of virtual reference implies any library enquiry service which uses technology to create a relationship with a user across the network or at a distance. Real-time chat software, email, and even call centre-type telephone systems can all be used to facilitate this form of remote service delivery. And many of these papers extend this wide-ranging view of DRS to tell us much about the traditional reference service context in which such digital services are situated.

An evaluation by Richard McCrea of library and expert reference services delivered over the web starts us off with a good summary of the recent past of DRS. His conclusion is that, in general the commercial approach to DRS provided less authoritative information. But libraries should not be complacent, since libraries now no longer enjoy a monopoly of provision of reference information. Commercial companies, with their more "human" approach, might be the resource of choice in future. Similarly, Karen Cloughly also looks at library and commercial services and finds that no one service can answer all the types of reference questions delivered from all types of users. A collaborative approach is essential to handle different types of questions based on subject, region, and available resources. Thus, the existing traditional library system, with its high premium placed on local, regional, national and international co-operation is in a good position to exploit these strengths as the basis for new forms co-operative virtual service.

Then, after a valuable initial overview of the digital reference landscape, Stephen Lochore's comparison of library-based and non-library expert services goes on to offer positive findings about both, saying that the DRS model in general delivers accurate information, although the time taken to do so varies both between services and within a particular service. However, it appears that the format for sending questions and uniformity in the provision of responses are the areas most needing attention and development. The generally good quality of services is noteworthy—especially given that those studied are free at the point of use – but, taking into account the fluidity of the contemporary library environment, the future of DRS is far from certain.

If the first three papers compare different types of service, the next author looks at a specific type of client to be served by digital reference, the young library user. With the exception of the University of Michigan's Internet Public Library (IPL) "Youth Ask a Question" service, Caroline Henley's investigation shows that, in general, digital service provision to children is less effective than it should be. If we are to engage the online communities of the future in Internet and web technologies, this is something that must be addressed. Gobinda Chowdhury and Simone Margariti's snapshot of current practices in Scottish libraries then takes a different slant again, looking at services within a defined geographical area. Their "snapshot" of DRS in some Scottish libraries concludes that digital reference works well in Scotland's academic, national and public libraries, but that its full potential has not yet been fully explored. More ambitious technologies for delivering and managing these services have yet to be implemented and many of the enquiries handled are relatively low-level. This means that the promotion of information literate use of the best digital resources still remains a challenge, since higher level digital reference interactions are required for this. And finally, the extension to the general public of the digital reference resources typical of

the academic library environment is the next step in the development of digital reference for the community at large.

Having looked at types of DRS, then a specific category of user, followed in turn by a particular geographical area in which DRS is developing, next Abdus Sattar Chaudhry and Chua Jeanne look at another geographical area, Singapore, and discuss a different type of technology that can be used to promote reference services at a distance – they examine telephone technologies and the call centre concept in enhancing reference services. Just as web and Internet technologies have not yet been fully developed in library practice, they find that the tools available to deliver telephone-based reference services in libraries are still underdeveloped. The development of knowledge bases and technology-based performance measurement were areas for further work, while training and mentoring of staff is also problematic.

And lastly, a paper from an Australian and Scottish collaboration supports Cloughly's assertion that finds that no single service can answer all the types of reference questions and that consortium approaches work best in DRS. The UTS/Strathclyde global DRS pilot shows that, both in terms of service enhancement and value for money, an expanded global reference consortium can offer the best path forwards.

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