



ASK NOW!

Penelope Layland examines the digital revolution occurring in the reference section of today's libraries

There was a time when the reference section of a library was set apart from the rest of the collection in one important respect: its books were not for borrowing.

Reference books were the volumes that never left the premises—the encyclopaedias and dictionaries and atlases that reduced the world and its facts to manageable chunks.

If you needed one of these volumes outside library opening hours, or if you couldn't physically get to a library, bad luck—the homework

would remain uncompleted, the essay would remain unembellished by a particular detail, the family argument over a date or a place name would remain unresolved.

But digital technology has revolutionised the work of libraries in recent years, and the hallowed reference section has been revolutionised along with everything else.

For the past 12 months reference librarians from the National Library, each of the state libraries, the Northern Territory Library and Information Service and the ACT Library Service have been collaborating on a reference service that could not have been contemplated until very recently—an online reference chat service.

AskNow! puts library users in contact with reference librarians who

AskNow! operators from the State Library of South Australia

left to right: Joanne Cook, Prue McDonald, Sharon Bubner and Tricia Darley

Courtesy State Library of South Australia

guide them toward a wealth of online resources, in real time.

An initiative of the Council of Australian State Libraries, the year-long trial of AskNow! formally concluded at the end of August but has been extended for a few months to give the libraries time to explore options for a permanent collaborative service.

'Collaborative' is the key word here. While it might have been possible for each of the state libraries and the National Library to attempt such a



AskNow! operators in the State Library of Western Australia
 Courtesy State Library of Western Australia



AskNow! live page

service on their own, none would have had the resources to offer the service for 50 hours a week. Together, helped by the peculiarities of Australia's time zones, they have been able to have reference librarians on call from 9 am until 7 pm AEST, Monday to Friday, for the duration of the trial.

At any one time three librarians, somewhere in Australia, have been helping AskNow! users—some of them thousands of kilometres away, some just around the corner—find the information they need.

In late May the National Library of New Zealand joined the AskNow! trial and the National Library of Singapore has also expressed an interest, though neither of these libraries plans to make the service available to their own constituents through their own websites at this stage. That said, there is nothing to stop someone in Singapore logging onto the National Library of Australia site, or the site of one of the Australian state or territory libraries, and accessing AskNow! through one of those sites. Alternatively the service can be accessed directly at <http://www.asknow.gov.au>. To that extent, the trial was always, theoretically, global.

And not just theoretically. A Western Australian using AskNow!

might be vaguely conscious that his or her query might be answered by a librarian in Sydney or Melbourne. But he or she is unlikely to be aware that that query will have travelled first to the server of the US Metropolitan Cooperative Library System, in the United States, which provided the software for the trial and which hosted the AskNow! service.

Fran Wilson, the Manager of Information Services at the National Library of Australia, has been deeply involved in the AskNow! initiative and believes the service is capturing users who might never otherwise have availed themselves of state or National Library resources.

Feedback from exit surveys of AskNow! users reveals that 32 per cent have been from regional Australia, for instance—users physically remote from the big state libraries and the National Library.

About a quarter of users have been aged less than 16—the homework crowd, presumably. Roughly another quarter have been aged 50 or over.

Wilson stresses that AskNow! is not in the business of spoon-feeding anyone—most particularly not school students looking for homework help. It aims to guide users towards the resources that will help them discover information for themselves. In the process, it helps users develop the

research skills that will prove useful next time around.

For example, a school student with a particular factual query might be helped to use a search engine such as Google or Teoma for the first time. A somewhat more confident user might be helped to use an engine's advanced search function, or to search more narrowly for documents of a particular type—government documents, perhaps, or pdf files. Inexperienced users might be helped to distinguish between reliable and dubious web content. In fact, the AskNow! link provides a range of information aimed particularly at school students (but useful for all of us) on just this subject.

To ensure that users play their part in the interaction, the AskNow! software has a co-browsing function that enables reference librarians to 'push' potentially useful web pages through to the user's computer, so that both the librarian and the user can peruse sources together, as their conversation progresses.

While each of the participating libraries has access to a vast array of web-based resources—including



AskNow! operators in the State Library of Western Australia
Courtesy State Library of Western Australia

Kinetica, the Australian bibliographic database—occasionally a user will ask a question that can best be answered by a particular library. This might be a local history question, or a question that can only be answered by reference to a manuscript held by a particular library. Because of the national nature of the service, there is no guarantee that a South Australian user, with a peculiarly South Australian query, connecting to AskNow! at a particular time on a particular day, will connect with a librarian from the State Library of South Australia. Indeed, the chances are high that he or she will end up chatting online to a librarian from the ACT or Queensland or elsewhere.

Fran Wilson says that in such cases, a user might be asked if they would prefer their request to be referred to the email service of the library best suited to fulfil it.

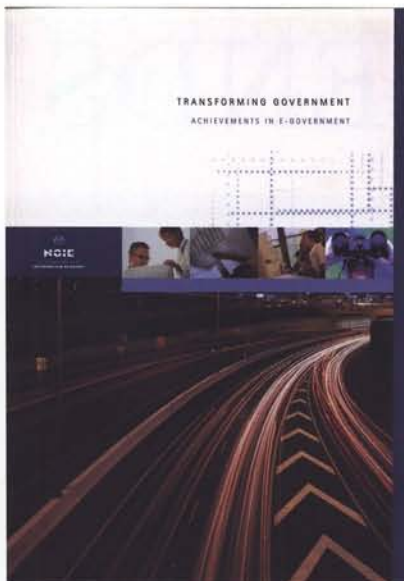
Generally speaking, however, speed is the key to the success of AskNow! With just three librarians on call at any one time, it was deemed important right from the start of the trial that queries be answered, and users be sent back to their homework or to their family arguments, as speedily as possible. Wilson says the aim has been to spend no more than 10 or 15 minutes with each user. Any longer, and the risk grows that other users will connect to the service, find themselves ignored, and drop off before they can be helped.

Similarly, as the trial progressed the libraries realised it was crucial to keep the conversation with users going, even if it meant resorting to occasional bland reminders that the librarian was 'still looking'. Users needed to be reminded that this was a live service—that at the other end, there was a real, living librarian, not a sorting machine.

Before the trial started, the libraries developed standardised service guidelines including scripted



Fran Wilson, Manager Information Services, Reader Services Branch, National Library of Australia
Pictures Collection



(above) Cover of *Transforming Government: Achievements in E-Government* (Canberra: NOIE, c.2003)
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(right) 'Librarians Have the Answers' page
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LIBRARIANS HAVE THE ANSWERS

AskNow! – www.asknow.gov.au
 National Library of Australia – www.nla.gov.au
 Council of Australian State Libraries – www.casl.org.au

A pilot project of the national, state and territory libraries of Australia.

AskNow! is an innovative online reference chat service. It enables librarians to respond in real-time to people's reference questions, reaching out to help all Australians, irrespective of their location, in an increasingly online information environment.

AskNow! is an initiative of CASL, the Council of Australian State Libraries, which comprises State and Territory libraries and the National Library of Australia. CASL promotes the creative and intellectual endeavours of Australians through the development of library services.

AskNow! is reaching out in a new way to existing library users, as well as introducing new users to the rich resources of Australian libraries. It has been particularly useful to users in regional and rural areas.

– Dagmar Schmidmaier, Chair of the Council of Australian State Libraries

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responses for dealing with different kinds of requests, including complex inquiries or abusive correspondents (these find their conversation is quickly terminated). The result has been a more streamlined service and one that has been easier to monitor for quality control.

So, what kinds of information have been sought from AskNow! over the course of the trial?

Anything and everything, says Fran Wilson.

'Can you provide some information on government policy-making in Singapore?'

'How can I find information on mine fields in Tasmania?'

'Who were the members of the 1938 Italian World Cup squad?'

'I am looking for a book on how to set up sails and rigging on a Cherub. Can you help?'

'I need a Russian translation of "Happy Birthday to You".'

With a month to go until the formal end of the trial, AskNow! had received more than 22 000 inquiries.

As with any technological innovation still in its infancy, there were challenges, expected and unexpected.

Wilson says that no matter how stable and well-controlled the conditions at the librarian's end, there was no way to control every factor at the user's end. Would a user's computer be powerful enough to cope with whatever was thrown its way during the course of the consultation? Only time would tell. Did the user have a high-speed broadband connection or a slower modem link? Would the user's computer be entirely compatible with the AskNow! software?

Then there were the potential logistical and legal challenges of providing information electronically, with individual libraries having to take care they did not breach their

own licensing agreements with publishers of electronic information resources.

The benefits of AskNow! to library users are pretty clear. The spin-offs for the librarians themselves have been more unexpected, though no less welcome. Fran Wilson says that one of the biggest benefits for the librarians involved in the trial has been the opportunity to learn more about the collections of other participating libraries.

And that knowledge, over time, will surely benefit all library users, not just those who choose a chatroom over a reading room as their preferred mode of doing business.

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