265010 JoynerRef:

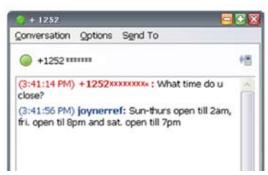## Text Message Reference Service @ ECU

by Mark Sanders

Over the past several years text messaging has changed the way people, especially young adults, communicate. According to a 2008 report from the Pew Internet & American Life Project *Writing, Technology and Teens*, 36% of teens send text messages daily.[1] One need only observe young people at the mall, at sporting events, or at on-campus events to confirm that at any given time many of them will have their heads down and fingers active as they receive and send text messages. Just as instant messaging (IM) surged into the mainstream more than a decade ago, so too has text messaging suddenly become a communication phenomenon, especially among the younger population.

Many libraries have embraced e-mail and IM reference service, but have yet to offer reference via text message. But like e-mail and IM, text messaging represents just another method among a suite of online options to meet the reference needs of library patrons. If a library is already able to receive IMs via America Online's Instant Messenger (AIM), then it already is able to offer text messaging as a free service. This article explains how a recent AIM modification, or hack, gives libraries and patrons access to a feature that was previously unavailable. AIM is by far the most popular IM client, with more than 55 million active users. A recent study found that students prefer using AIM because its familiarity allows multitasking and lacks formality. "The bottom line is comfort level."[2] It also examines East Carolina University's successful experience offering text message reference service during the fall 2008 semester.

Text messaging, or texting, is the term for sending and receiving messages between cell phones or other mobile devices. The technology is called "SMS," an acronym for Short Message Service, which is the standardized communication protocol that allows users to exchange messages up to 160 characters long. Although the technology has existed for nearly twenty years, only recently has it become nearly ubiquitous on telecommunication devices such as cell phones and personal digital assistants (PDAs).

Several commercial solutions allow libraries to provide text messaging reference service. One is Altarama Information Systems, an Australian company that supported one of the first libraries to offer text messaging reference service. Altarama uses redcoal.com, a provider of wireless Internet and mobile messaging products, to provide text messaging numbers and the means to convert SMS messages into e-mail and vice versa. Users send a text to the Library's dedicated number, the text is converted into an e-mail that appears in the reference desk inbox; the Library replies via e-mail; and the reply is converted back into a text message that is sent to the users' cell phones. In 2005, the Sims Memorial Library at Southeastern Louisiana University began a "Text-a-Librarian" service using funds from a Technology Fee grant.[3] In spring 2008, a similar system of converting a text message into

The patron-side cell phone view and the librarian-side instant message window.

e-mail and the reply e-mail into a text message was started by the University of Virginia Library using the Canadian company Upside Wireless.[4] Both libraries report that the service costs approximately $2,000 per year.

Another commercial solution, begun in 2008, is called, appropriately enough, Text-a-Librarian. The product allows libraries to establish a Microboard, which is compared to a secure, Web-based, password-protected message board where questions are stored. Patrons text questions to the Microboard using their cell phones. The questions are received via the library's existing e-mail or IM platform. Replies from the library are then sent to the patrons as a text message. An added value, in addition to the option of receiving messages on either the e-mail or IM platform, is that questions are archived and can be searched. The product also keeps patrons' phone numbers private. Text-a-Librarian has two pricing options, Standard ($1,200 a year) and Premium ($2,400 a year).

Finally, there is the option for the library to purchase a dedicated cell phone with a text message plan to use for reference service. Text message packages vary, but most cell phone plans provide either unlimited texts, a limited number, or a pay-per-message each billing cycle for a fixed price. These plans usually cost approximately $12 per month for unlimited texts, $5 for 250-500 texts, or $.15 per text. Purchasing a cell phone and text message plan was a solution implemented by librarians at Bryant University in September 2007.[5] It is reported to be very successful, as the library received 420 texts from its implementation to December 2009. The cost is also very low. The total cost using a pre-established relationship between the university and the telecommunications provider was $340. While these commercial solutions offer robust functionality, a recently developed text message hack works well for many libraries that already offer reference service via AIM. Patrons simply send a text message to 256010 and start the message with the library's screen name. For instance the text would be typed: "[AIM screen name] what time do you close?" The text message is converted

into an IM and appears in the library's IM window, whether the window is the proprietary AIM platform or one of the open-source, multi-network platforms such as Pidgin or Trillian. Librarians know instantly that the IM is a text message because the patron's screen name appears as his or her cell phone number prefaced by +1. Thus, an IM coming from screen name +11234567890 is easily identified as a text message question. Knowing that a question originated as a text message is important when sending a reply. No special commands are needed; replies to text messages are sent just like those for instant messages. However, librarians should be aware that there is a 160-character limit. Characters exceeding the limit will be omitted. Thus, longer replies from the library should be broken up into multiple transmissions. If a patron wishes to send another text message in response to a reply, there is no need to preface the message with the library's screen name again.

East Carolina University began offering text message reference service via the screen name "joynerref" in September 2008. Marketing efforts include placement at the top of the Ask-a-Librarian page at http://www.ecu.edu/cs-lib/reference/ask_a_librarian.cfm, an announcement on the library's home page, and mention by librarians during all instruction sessions. Given the 160 character limit, patrons are advised to keep questions brief and focused. Transcripts are archived along with standard instant messages on a shared network drive. A sample of transcripts appears below with patron telephone numbers omitted.

After the first semester of use, the text message reference service appears to be successful. As of March 2009, the Library had received 120 text messages, including several from repeat users. Users seem to understand that, in a way similar to IM, text message reference service is appropriate for short, quick questions. Students in instruction classes are often pleasantly surprised to learn that they can have basic questions sent from the palm of their hand. Just as e-mail and IM reference have offset recent years of declining in-person reference transactions, perhaps text message reference can help raise patrons' awareness of all that libraries can offer in the form of reference service.

References

[1]Amanda Lenhart et al., "Writing, Technology and Teens," Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2008. <http://www.pewinternet.org/~/media//Files/Reports/2008/PIP_Writing_Report_FINAL3.pdf.pdf> (February 15, 2009).

[2]Meredith B. Phillips, "The Advantages and Disadvantages of AOL Instant Messenger as a Chat Reference System" (Master's thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2004). <http://ils.unc.edu/MSpapers/2998.pdf> (March 1, 2009).

[3] J. B. Hill, Cherie Madarash Hill, and Dayne Sherman, "Text Messaging in an Academic Library: Integrating SMS into Digital Reference," *The Reference Librarian* 47, no. 1 (2007): 17-29.

[4] Keith Weimer, Personal interview, January 30, 2009.

[5]Laura Kohl, and Maura Keating. "A Phone of One's Own: Texting at the Bryant University Reference Desk," *College & Research Libraries News* 70, no. 2 (2009): 104-6.

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Conversation with +1252******* at 10/27/2008 8:38:44 PM on JoynerRef (aim)
(8:38:44 PM) 1252*******: where are there library book drop offs?
(9:17:10 PM) JoynerRef: by the huge flagpole, where the bus drops people off on the 10th st side
(9:17:18 PM) JoynerRef: it's a circular drive

Conversation with +1252******* at 10/30/2008 9:43:27 AM on JoynerRef (aim)
(9:43:27 AM) +12524123691: what is your toll free number?
(9:44:21 AM) JoynerRef: 1-866-291-5581

Conversation with +1252******* at 1/5/2009 2:22:57 PM on JoynerRef (aim)
(2:22:57 PM) +1252*******: Are pitt co school teachers allowed 2 check out laptops?
(2:23:20 PM) JoynerRef: no, unfortunately they aren't

Conversation with +1919******* at 2/11/2009 3:55:15 PM on JoynerRef (aim)
(3:55:15 PM) +1919*******: which database could I use to find info on current controversial issues?
(3:57:07 PM) JoynerRef: I suggest CQ Researcher, Issues and Controversies, Academic Search Premier, ProQuest Reference Library, and Lexis/Nexis Academic. You can find them all by clicking the Database Name tab.
(4:01:32 PM) JoynerRef: Does that answer your question?
(4:01:56 PM) +1919*******: Yes thanks
(4:02:07 PM) JoynerRef: Great. Have a nice afternoon.

Conversation with +13364163429 at 3/4/2009 4:19:49 PM on JoynerRef (aim)
(4:19:49 PM) +13364163429: Does this work?
(4:20:08 PM) JoynerRef: does what work?