

# Bibliotherapy

## AskNow! IM: taking reference services to the user's desktop

Kate Davis, National Library of Australia

Now in its fourth year of operation, the AskNow! ([www.asknow.gov.au](http://www.asknow.gov.au)) virtual reference service has recently been supplemented by a pilot Instant Messaging (IM) service. The pilot service, begun on 15 November 2006, operates in parallel with the existing AskNow!, offering users the option of submitting their question via the existing web form, or contacting us using their preferred IM client.

### What is Instant Messaging (IM)?

Instant Messaging (IM) is a form of online, real time communication. It allows you to see whether your contacts are online, and to send them a message. Messages sent via IM appear instantly on your contact's computer screen. In this way, IM is a truly synchronous form of communication.

IM interactions are facilitated by software called an IM client. These clients can generally be downloaded free from the web and provide a simple interface where you can see messages and lists of contacts. Popular clients in Australia include Windows Live Messenger (formerly MSN Messenger), Yahoo! Messenger and Google Talk.

### Why offer an IM service?

There are a number of reasons why we wanted to trial an IM service. IM is increasingly the communication tool of choice for many people. An American survey estimated that 75 per cent of teenagers and 42 per cent of adults with access to the internet use IM (see <http://data.webjunction.org/wj/documents/12473.pdf>). Use of IM is increasing and spreading into all sectors of society. Indeed, an article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in August 2006, described business people as embracing this 'presence technology' to remain in touch with colleagues and clients.

IM offers advantages over traditional chat services (such as AskNow!), which use proprietary chat reference software. It allows us to provide a responsive, streamlined service that meets clients 'where they are', both technologically and geographically. The user is able to use their client of choice to chat with a librarian, rather than having to access the AskNow! web page and submit a question using a web form. And, unlike web-based chat,

users are not geographically restricted to a computer – IM clients can be used on hand-held devices like PDAs and next generation mobile phones.

### The service model

The service currently operates from 1:00–6:00pm, Monday to Friday, and is staffed by librarians at the National Library of Australia. Multiple users can be serviced at once although only one librarian can be logged on at a time, due to current software limitations. An evaluation of the pilot phase will inform decisions about feasible service hours and staffing levels.

### Software

In order to offer a flexible and responsive service, we decided to cater for users of all the major IM clients. We use an open source client called Gaim (<http://gaim.sourceforge.net/>), which as a third-party client (also known as aggregator or multi-network clients) allows us to log in to accounts on many different networks simultaneously. It also has the potential to be customised and offers other useful functionality.

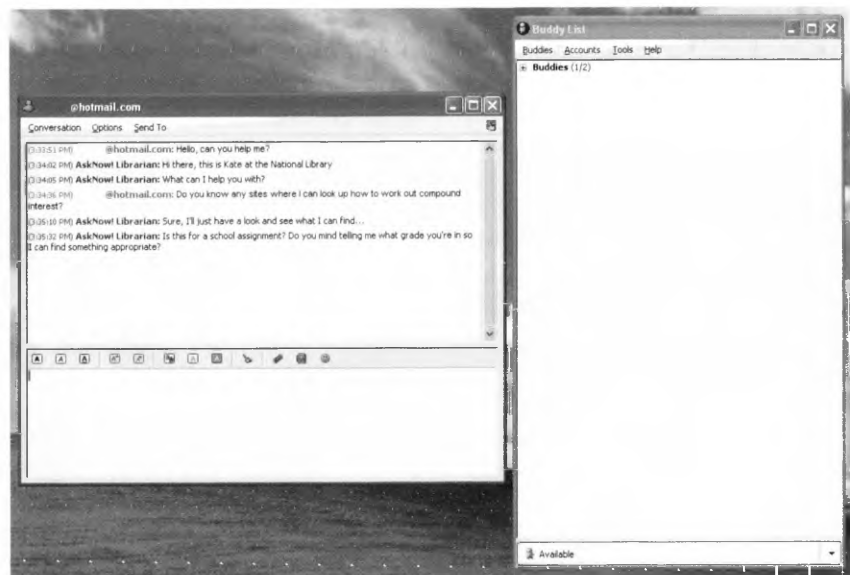
### Who is using the service, and what are they asking?

At the time of writing (early December 2006), we have handled 96 IM transactions. Students are the primary user group for the service, HSC students in particular. We have also had quite a number of enquiries from older users, aged 25 to 65, supporting the view that IM is increasingly being used by people of all age groups.

The range of enquiries we have received has also been varied:

- can you help me find out what % of Australia's energy is renewable?
- have to do a timeline showing the influx of migrants into Australia
- Will the book I just requested come to my town with the mobile library bus?

Encouragingly, 100 per cent of users who responded to our survey indicated that they would use the IM service again, and indeed, a large proportion of users have become repeat users in the short time that the pilot has been operating. Comments (quoted exactly) have been encouraging:



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'I preferred IM cause it was a lot more convenient then opening the website as i have windows msger open most of the time and its easy to click on asknow as a contact...very good and a lot easier to access the info'

'You have very high quality librarians, well the one tht helped me was very helpful and obliging to help me out. It put my mind at ease for my assignment research to know tht someone was there to help me out and the info they managed to obtain was extremely useful. A very good service.'

'You guys are cool :D'

Eighty-five per cent of users have rated the service level 'excellent', with no user rating the service as poor.

#### Implications for operators

Our operators went into the pilot with varying levels of experience with IM, although all operators had previously staffed the AskNow! service, and so were familiar with the principles of virtual reference. Training was relatively straight forward: a procedure manual was written, along with support materials (such as a list of common chat abbreviations and scripted messages), which have been made available on the pilot's administrative wiki space. Two training sessions were held, allowing operators to observe the software in action, and to try out the functionality without the pressure of having a 'live' user on the line.

Operators record their impressions on the wiki at the end of each shift, and comments have been very positive. One operator liked the 'speed and interact-ability' offered by the medium; another commented that 'It was so quick and easy. I really enjoyed it.'

#### Where to from here?

The pilot will continue until the end of February 2007, when we will undertake detailed data analysis and assess the suitability of the service model, hours of operation, and the software for an ongoing service.

#### Find out more

- Visit the AskNow! Instant Messaging pilot information page at <http://www.asknow.gov.au/instant-messaging-trial.html>
- E-mail the author: [kdavis@nla.gov.au](mailto:kdavis@nla.gov.au)
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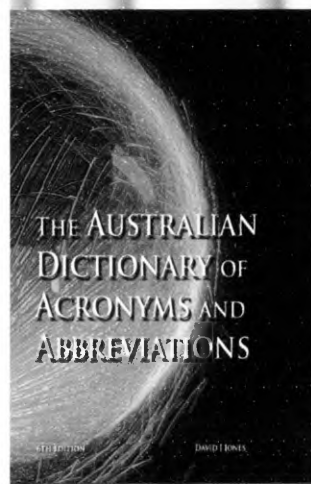
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