Library in a Box

Bar Ilan, Otzar HaHochma @ Fall Conference

Now, more than ever, Rashi and the Rambam will be a mouse click away.

AJL-NYMA's 2009 Fall Conference, held Monday, October 19th, at the Mendel Gottesman Library of Yeshiva University, offered an in-depth look at the popular databases Bar-Ilan Responsa Project and Otzar HaHochma. Appealing to librarians in school and academic settings, the conference introduced participants to the uses and capabilities of these two wonderful Judaic software programs. Rabbi Moshe Schapiro, Reference Librarian at the Mendel Gottesman Library (Yeshiva University) and Pearl Berger, Dean of Libraries (Yeshiva University) presented.

Screen Test

Rabbi Schapiro guided the audience through a tour of the well-known Bar-Ilan Responsa Project. While this software was originally created and is still often used in CD-ROM, participants learned about the capabilities of the online version, in particular its pros – more materials available, and the constant updating – and its cons – less ease of searches, greater reliance on wild cards. However, while the CD-ROM version, in contrast contains an index to periodicals, the online version has an equivalent through the COTAR website.

Rabbi Schapiro then demonstrated the new online trial version of the Otzar HaHochma database. A click reveals a charming portal of virtual bookcases; behind the "tall" shelves lurk over 40,000 works, ranging from classical rabbinic texts to periodicals and contemporary materials. While the older and more familiar Bar Ilan is still being used more often at Yeshiva University, and its pages digitized, the up-and-coming Otzar HaHochma definitely has its advantages, chiefly its greater amount of Judaica. Its breadth and search capabilities were presented, along with PDF images of the information sought. The advanced OCR technology allows for word recognition and a quick scans through reproduced pages. Indeed, having the Otzar

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HaHochma in the computer is very much like having an entire library in a box, although the database is not yet available to off-campus patrons.

Pearl Berger brought to light many of the administrative issues pertaining to the programs, noting technological standards and institutional needs, as well as cost and usage demand. She mentioned the type of subscription her institution had specifically wanted. Participants walked away from the session with an understanding of the scope of each program and potential uses within the wide-ranging library community.

NYMA News thanks the following contributors to this article:
TINA WEISS, Librarian, Hebrew Union College
RITA LIFTON, Cataloger, Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary
HALLIE CANTOR, Acquisitions, Yeshiva University

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Ms. Pearce mentioned a prophecy uttered over 20 years ago by an information expert that messaging would be limited to 160 characters. (Close enough: Twitter allows for 140.) This past year, outside the library world, the percentage of text messaging has not only increased, even among the older, "computer-immigrant" generation, but has now exceeded that of regular phone calls.

NYU's Bobst Library has incorporated these technologies, some by now quite known, such as Instant Messaging (IM), Blogs, Wikis, Ask a Librarian Services, Twitter, and Chat, to field reference librarianship queries. Showing actual samples of questions taken from students, Ms. Pearce described the quick contact between the librarian and patrons, and even the scholarly breadth of the questions. By collecting statistics and transcripts, the staff could monitor the use of these services and figure out which worked best in satisfying customers. Thus the reference staff learned that continuity in message threads was an important element in quality of service.

Ms. Pearce also discussed the pros and cons of using a vendor. NYU libraries ultimately decided not to use the vendor option. They have since then moved to "libraryh3lp," an integrated IM/web-chat help system designed specifically for libraries. She ended by sharing on screen a transcript of one of the reference interviews, which clearly demonstrated the potential of text messaging to enhance traditional reference services. An audio recording and Ms. Pearce's PowerPoint presentation will be available at *www.ajlnyma.org*.

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