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A Hitchhiker's Guide to Chat

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A Hitchhiker's Guide to Chat

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Librarianship is going gray. A 1999 Readex survey, drawing from the same year's ALA Survey of Librarian Salaries, tells us that 45 percent of responding librarians were between 45 and 54 years old. Only 13 percent were younger than 35 years old, which puts Annie (33) and me (29) in the minority camp. And while it's not the years in your life that count so much as the life in your years, it's been interesting for us to compare notes on starting our careers at the University of Oregon. There are some small but noticeable differences between our generation of librarians (we are both 2002 MLIS graduates) and the librarians who are mentoring us. Our mentors may default to print more often than we do, while we turn first to electronic resources, or even the Web. They know bushels about the history of the library, the university, the publishers, our vendors. We know XML. They pick up the phone or type an e-mail. We chat.

Well, actually, some of our most senior reference librarians chat, and we've been known to use a telephone now and then. So the distinctions aren't really that clear. But online chatting (and text messaging, the analogous form of communication on cell phones and PDAs) is widely considered the hallmark of gadget-loving, tech-savvy, attention-deficient Generation Y-ers, and to a certain extent, this perception may be fair. Online chatting, or instant messaging, as it's also called, evolved in tandem with online bulletin boards, discussion groups, and listservs. Chatting is still a favorite means of communication for millions of college students and their party planners. It's instantaneous, highly informal, and most of the time it requires little to no intellectual investment. It's electronic gossip. A typical workplace chat message is a one-liner fired off to a colleague in the middle of the day, commenting on a problem or asking for some feedback. (I just sent a chat message to Annie, asking how old she is, because I needed to know for this article and couldn't remember.) A

typical recreational chat session is a virtual kaffeeklatsch, during which the conversation may range from international politics to recipes for crême brûlée, and during which any or all participants may be doing several other things at once.

Resistance may not be exactly futile, but chat and similar technologies are here to stay. And there's no disputing chat's usefulness. When one of us worked at a dot-com, our computer screens were visible to all and we had little privacy—chatting was the fastest, most private way to discuss important things like why the CEO was selling stock during a supposed blackout period. In a high-tech courtroom where a friend worked, the judge maintained a chat session with her clerk throughout a trial. The clerk was able to ask the judge procedural questions as the trial was going on, taking advantage of the instantaneous and relatively unobtrusive nature of chatting. Librarians in small institutions may find chat a cheap or even free way of providing digital reference service. And if you use software that permits more than two people to chat at the same time, the difference between e-mail (quick) and chat (instant) suddenly makes virtual meetings a workable reality.

Obviously, chat has both potential benefits and drawbacks. Regardless, it's finding its way into workplaces and universities from the ground up, and we're better off knowing what it is and how our patrons are using it, than we are sticking our heads in the sand. So, in the spirit of eager techie catholicism that is one of the best qualities of Generation Y, Annie and I offer you a highly informal Hitchhiker's Guide to Chat.

ICQ History Log For: 331978649 kmunro
Started on Tue Mar 18 16:36:44 2003
(See Annotation 1)

kmunro 3:01 PM ready when you are, chica.
zed 3:14 PM whoops. i here now
kmunro 3:14 PM excellent! shall we begin?
kmunro 3:16 PM ok, so we wanted to chat
a little to show howit's done.

Annotation 1

Both Annie and I let our typos remain in this chat's transcript to give a better sense of how rapid and informal the exchange tends to be (and how much interpretation can be required).



kmunro 3:16 PM or how not to do it, maybe.
 kmunro 3:16 PM first things first?
 zed 3:16 PM that's right. i set my comptuer up and thenyou signed up and i had to authorize you inorder to get this going.
 kmunro 3:17 PM we're using icq, a free download fromthe internet.
 kmunro 3:17 PM i'm using the lite version, annie's got thefull meal deal.
 zed 3:17 PM after typing each message ihave to click thesend button which i totally hate*ANNOYED*
(See Annotation 2)
 zed 3:18 PM ok the lite version is at <http://www.icq.com/download/>
 zed 3:19 PM i went all out and down-loaded the pro versionfor some functionality.
 kmunro 3:19 PM hang on a second, i've got a colleague here.
(See Annotation 3)
 zed 3:20 PM AIM from AOL is a big product. i jsut hatedoing anthing with AOL. and one of the reveiws of ICQ said it was for the "birkenstock" crowd.;-)
 kmunro 3:21 PM ok, i'm back.
 kmunro 3:21 PM why is icq for birkenstockers?
 zed 3:21 PM no problem. i was actually emailing someone as well. i like that i can do whatever adn when there's a message from you it starts a thingy blinking on my toolbar.
 kmunro 3:22 PM yes, you get the blinky thing because you turned off the sound.
(See Annotation 4)
 zed 3:22 PM no idea why ICQ is for the birkenstock crowd. i like to think it means we're smarter, more discriminating
 kmunro 3:22 PM it's cute, but a little startling.
 kmunro 3:22 PM funny cross-post.
 kmunro 3:22 PM that happens a lot with chat, i find.
 kmunro 3:23 PM i find it's a good idea to over-explain what i'm saying, thinking, doing...while i'm doing it.
 kmunro 3:23 PM and it works better to parse thoughts into smaller bits, send

them one bit at a time, so i don't get too far behind in the flow of htngs.
 zed 3:23 PM jeez. smaller bits?
 kmunro 3:23 PM also, most chat apps don't let you send huge chunks of text all at once. or they slow down, at least.
 kmunro 3:24 PM smaller bits, yeah.
 kmunro 3:24 PM like this. one thought at a time.
 zed 3:24 PM you ran into a text limit once. right? how many lines, you think?
 kmunro 3:24 PM the text limit on icq is a character limit, i think. i could try to hit it...
 zed 3:25 PM well...the suspense is killing me. how many lines?
 kmunro 3:25 PM ok, jsut did it. it's 450 characters.
 zed 3:32 PM if you were a student asking a reference question. and I used a database like, lexis, when I showed it to you the i'd have to explain more about lexis, which form exactly i'm using, how i'm getting in, and so on. we could co-browse.
 kmunro 3:33 PM or browse simulta-neously, at least. i think co-browse is an imprecise term to use here.
 zed 3:34 PM co-browsing/simultaneous browse would be good, unless there were network problems or whatever. can be painfully slow. and other technical issues, like authentication, log in, etc.
 kmunro 3:34 PM well, i was just thinking that if we're already chatting, as a student and a librarian, it would be simple for us both to go to online sources and for the librarian to walk the student through them.
 zed 3:35 PM let's say i asked for an article from *The Oregonian*
 kmunro 3:35 PM for instance, i could tell you that i'm in Lexis Academic (and walk you through getting into it in the first place), and tell you that I chose Western News Sources and specified *The Oregonian*
 zed 3:35 PM librarian can walk student through them, but it can be time consum-ing. helps to ask student. describe what

Annotation 2

In our actual chat, this was a graphic emoticon; a picture of a person looking annoyed, that Annie included by clicking on it in the ICQ menu of emoticons.

Annotation 3

An interruption is another common event in chat; from "RL," or "Real Life." It's considered good etiquette to explain what's going on if you're going to be distracted for more than a minute or two.

Annotation 4

ICQ provides audio alerts when another chatter sends you a message.



Annotation 5

Chat slang for “Lots of Laughs” or “Laughing Out Loud,” meaning the chatter is amused.

Annotation 6

There are a variety of ways of sending folks your contact information. Chat software makes it easy to exchange the numbers and screen names of friends. Some people even put this information on their business cards—both the paper and electronic PDA versions.

you see... so you know they are on the same page you are.

kmunro 3:36 PM yes, exactly, getting the student lead the safari is a much better mode.

kmunro 3:36 PM on the bright side, you can do things like paste in the lexis disclaimer:

kmunro 3:36 PM Access to certain freelance articles and other features within this publication (i.e. photographs, classifieds, etc...) may not be available.

kmunro 3:36 PM easy-peasy.

zed 3:36 PM we are also using a lot more complete sentences and grammar than most folks.

kmunro 3:37 PM plus, our speling is beter. *GIGGLING*

kmunro 3:37 PM but chat can be fun adn useful for librarians to do P2P as well.

zed 3:37 PM is P2P different from f2f?

kmunro 3:37 PM not just as a teaching or reference tool, but as peer support. i, for instance, have used icq to get your opinion on several things recently.

zed 3:38 PM yeah. i sometimes i even respond! LOL

(See Annotation 5)

kmunro 3:38 PM hee. i misused p2p, i think. i just meant in the general sense, peer relationship building. not file-sharing.

kmunro 3:38 PM your responses have been wonderfully helpful, actually.

kmunro 3:38 PM you've reviewed a Web page I was working on, in real time as i made changes.

zed 3:39 PM you can use chat as email, really.but faster. still, if i'm not at my desk, you'd be in the same situation.

kmunro 3:39 PM true, if you're not at your desk i could send your cell a text message using icq or another chat software

kmunro 3:49 PM icq is nice because it's pretty light, pretty trouble-free, but there are always snafus. and because chat speeds up teh interaction, waiting for the computer to unfreeze can seem really...long.

zed 3:50 PM or for teh student to stop emailing or chatting with someone else or....the lag time can be really annoying
kmunro 3:50 PM one of the joys of the reference desk.

zed 3:53 PM in my other job, folks found that except fot he delays, bad grammar and typos doing reference this way was a lot like any reference interview.

kmunro 3:53 PM and you can vary your font size, style, and color (and use the emoticons, if you're bold), for emphasis and so on. as in a conversation.

kmunro 3:54 PM you can also change the background of the field where you type your text in. mine's a restful taupe.

kmunro 3:56 PM so, we set this up by downloading the free software and installing it on our ocmputers.

kmunro 3:57 PM all right. and then we were assigned an icq number. mine is ***** [9 digit number]. it's not easy to remember.

(See Annotation 6)

kmunro 3:58 pm but you get to choose your own icq name, right?

zed 3:58 PM yeah. you get a name. actually i think you can even use ones that are taken now. not sure.

kmunro 3:59 PM the ID number and online name of the person you're chatting with appear at the top of the ICQ window while you chat. the ICQ window only takes up a small part of your screen, so you can see other programs at the same time.

zed 3:59 PM make sure you keep everythign as private and generic as possible. otherwise you'll be getting a lot of bored folks “chatting” with you. and with those fun blinking things on your toolbar [and beeping uh-ohs] it can be annoying to get rid of someone trying to sell you 6 months of viagra
kmunro 3:59 PM your own ICQ number displays on the little window that disappears into the taskbar. it's like the control panel.

kmunro 4:00 PM now...can anyone icq you



if they know your number, or do they have to be authorized?

zed 4:01 PM anyone can try to chat with me, but first i'll have to authorize them. its a setting too.

zed 4:02 PM comes as a "system notice"

kmunro 4:02 PM can you block people from icqing you?

kmunro 4:02 PM the way you can block email addresses from sending to you?

(See Annotation 7)

zed 4:02 PM uh. wait. until i authorize, i think i don't see even a message. and you can block folks from chatting with you.

kmunro 4:03 PM so there's a balance of privacy and accessibility. can you de-authorize someone who gets out of line?

zed 4:03 PM yup. and you can send folks other icq numbers.

kmunro 4:05 PM okay, that's so you have easy access and can just click on our user names to start chatting with us, right?

zed 4:07 PM you can put folks on an "ignore list" to boot them off.

kmunro 4:08 PM keep me posted. brb.
(See Annotation 8)

kmunro 4:20 PM ok, just to recap (without ever having closed out this chat session), we're recording the session by....? annie? how are you doing this? the full version of icq has better transcript capacity than the lite version, i think.

zed 4:21 PM in the "pro" vesion i actually have a history button in the middle of this chat screen. and when i click it i see our conversation, but in reverse. very surreal actually. I can then save this as a text file.

kmunro 4:23 PM and can you email the transcript to someone?

zed 4:25 PM yup. its now on my desk top. i'll email it to you.


kmunro 4:26 PM great. i just got your email, and i have the entire log of the chat.

kmunro 4:34 PM don't know. anything else we should cover?

zed 4:35 PM nothing i can currently remember. see ya!

kmunro 4:35 PM cu.

(See Annotation 9)

zed 4:35 PM okcubye 

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Annotation 7

There are actually several different ways to avoid folks, everything from total banishment to fluctuating "visibility" depending on user preferences.

Annotation 8

Chat slang for "Be Right Back."

Annotation 9

Chat slang for "See You."

Ebsco ad to go here

