

Trillian vs. Meebo in a Library Setting

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INTRODUCTION

Virtual reference (VR) using instant messaging (IM) and embedded chat tools has become a major trend in recent years. Proprietary reference applications have some perceived advantages—they allow librarians to maintain a database of common queries, to “push” web content or “co-browse” with users, and to document sessions automatically. However, these applications are also expensive, and may not have proven their worth. In many studies, users have been put off by unwieldy interfaces or the need to download proprietary clients in order to use virtual reference.

In response, many libraries have been moving toward IM and embedded chat. Benefits are numerous: patrons can either use the IM software they already have installed or a chat widget built into the web page, and the back-end software is generally free or low cost as well. Several case studies (see bibliography below) have shown that reference sessions can increase dramatically when libraries move from proprietary VR software to IM and chat.

One issue, however, is that most IM systems are not interoperable. In order to avoid maintaining multiple programs in order to serve all their users, libraries have begun using multi-network programs, such as the commercial Trillian desktop client, the open source Pidgin, and the web-based Meebo, all of which allow communication with various networks (MSN, AIM, Yahoo, ICQ, etc.) using one interface. Meebo and Trillian also both allow libraries to embed a chat widget on their website, allowing users to communicate directly from a browser window, without requiring an IM client or account.

This paper will present a comparison of Meebo and Trillian.

FEATURES AND PRICING

	Trillian Astra	Meebo
Platform	Client software, Windows only, but a premium web-based add-on is currently being tested	Web-based, cross-platform
Widget/Embed on site?	Yes (new)	Yes
Networks	Windows Live, AIM, Yahoo!, Google Talk, Serverless (Bonjour, iChat), ICQ, Skype, MySpaceIM, IRC, Jabber/XMPP, Facebook, Twitter	AIM, Yahoo!, MSN (offline messages not supported), Google Talk, ICQ, Jabber, Facebook
Other Services	Supports POP, IMAP, and major web-based email services (displays messages and allows click-through to mailbox), video and audio chat. (Some features only available in "pro" version).	Notifier (Windows only), browser plugin (Firefox only), webcam and voice chat

Price	Free "light" version, \$25 for "pro" version that allows multiple logins from different device, activity history options, bookmarks, message rules or "highlighting", additional theme and file transfer options, and more. Web-based version will be part of the "pro" package.	Free (advertiser-supported)
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MEEBO AND TRILLIAN IN A LIBRARY ENVIRONMENT

The following articles and websites discuss varying aspects of Meebo and Trillian, including some comparisons between the two:

Bedwell, L. (2009). Making chat widgets work for online reference. *Online* 33(3), 20-23.

This article describes a Canadian consortium's transition from commercial virural reference software to an IM-based service using Meebo chat widgets embedded in the libraries' websites. They found that the code was easy to install (expect in the OPAC), that reference sessions increased sixfold, and that users were generally happy with the service. Negatives included occasional "bugs" in the widgets and some problems with the entire Meebo service going offline for hours at a time.

Boeninger, C. (2009). *The chocolate and peanut butter are mixed again: Using Trillian Astra with Meebo Widgets*. Accessed 16 November 2009 from <http://libraryvoice.com/technology/the-chocolate-and-peanut-butter-are-mixed-again-using-trillian-astra-with-meebo-widgets/>

This blog post features step by step instructions for making an embedded Meebo chat widget interact seamlessly with the Trillian desktop client.

Brown, E., Maximiek, S. & Rushton E. (2006). Connecting to students: Launching instant messaging reference at Binghampton University. *College & Undergraduate Libraries* 13(4), 31-42.

In this case study from a U.K. academic library, the authors found Trillian easy to install, configure, and use, and were happy with its role in implementing an IM-based service.

Cerulaen Studios (2009). *All features - Trillian Astra*. Accessed 16 November 2009 at <http://www.trillian.im/learn/tour-features.html>

This is a detailed feature list for Trillian Asrta, provided by the vendor.

Clements, C. (2009). *Implementing instant messaging in four university libraries*. *Library Hi Tech* 27(3), 393-402.

This case study on implementing IM-based reference includes discussion of the Meebo widget (which was selected for the program) and the Trillian client (which was rejected due to “extraneous features”, the best of which were only available in the paid version).

Ciocco, R. & Huff, A. (2007). Mission IM-possible: Starting an instant messaging service using Trillian. *Computers in Libraries* 27(1), 26-31.

This article discusses a small academic library’s move from proprietary chat reference software to Trillian. Musselman Library wanted an option that didn’t require users to download a proprietary client, and would allow reference librarians to address questions from all the major IM services. The service was launched incrementally, with more promotion as librarians became more comfortable using it. The staff found that reference questions increased dramatically and that students were quite satisfied with and grateful for the service. The only negatives were the inability to authenticate users or to compile a database of “canned” responses to common questions.

Gordon, R. & Stephens, M. (2007). Embedding a librarian in your web site using Meebo. *Computers in Libraries* 27(9), 44-45.

This article provides instructions for using meebo and embedding a Meebo widget in a library web page.

Meebo. (2009). *Meebo products*. Accessed 16 November 2009 at <http://www.meebo.com/products/>

This is a vendor-supplied overview of Meebo and its related products, including the notifier, chat rooms, widget, and mobile applications as well as the browser plug-in.

Northrup, L. (2008). MeeboMe! For embedded chat reference: Patron-initiated encounters without downloads or accounts. *College & Undergraduate Libraries* 15(3), 357-363.

This case study from Samford University addresses the issue of using Meebo’s embedded chat widget as a means of making chat/IM reference more accessible and attractive to faculty, staff, and older students who may be less comfortable with traditional IM software.

Online Reference - Library Success: A Best Practices Wiki. (2009). Accessed 22 November 2009 at http://www.libsuccess.org/index.php?title=Online_Reference

This wiki includes listings of publications on SMS and embedded chat reference, as well as lists of libraries using each option.

Spanbauer, S. (2008). Best free IM clients. Accessed 19 November 2009 at <http://windowssecrets.com/reviews/2-Internet-and-networking/126-Best-free-IM-clients/>

This review of free IM clients, including Trillian, Meebo, and Pidgin compares features and ultimately concludes that Trillian is ahead of the others. Its reviews are not library-specific, but include general information about each.

Tuttle, B. Meebo. (2008). *Journal of the Medical Library Association* 96(4), 395-396.

This review of Meebo by a medical librarian at Dule University touches on its features, security issues, and related products as well as its role in a library setting.

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

Most of the discussion of Meebo vs. Trillian, specifically from a library perspective, has not involved direct feature-to-feature comparisons. In fact, discussions of Meebo are almost overwhelmingly about the use of its embedded chat widget on library web pages rather than the use of its back-end chat/IM interface. That said, each program has its own set of strengths and weaknesses.

Platform

Currently, Trillian is limited to several versions of the Windows operating system. There is no Mac or Linux version of the desktop client, and the web version is still in development and beta testing, according to the company's website. Meebo, on the other hand, is entirely web-based, and is therefore largely platform independent. However, being a web-based product does tend to limit its potential features. One particularly important feature that is enabled at least in the paid version of Trillian is the ability to save each session transcript automatically. This may not be possible with Meebo, and it is a feature that reference librarians feel is important.

Widget/Embed Feature

Until recently, only Meebo offered an embedded chat widget (called MeeboMe), which allows users to initiate a session within a browser window without requiring access to an IM client or account. Many practitioners consider this very important, particularly because faculty, staff members, and older users may not have an IM client installed and may be reluctant to use virtual reference if one is required. In fact, a majority of the professional literature about Meebo concerns embedded chat rather than its use

as a back-end program. Trillian has recently added an embeddable widget, but there is very little discussion of it to date.

Other Services

Trillian does appear to offer a richer set of features than Meebo, including email integration (POP, IMAP, and web-based services) and transcripts. One review from 2008 also noted that Trillian's audio-video capabilities exceeded Meebo's, which—at that time at least—involved a third-party link using Flash technology. Of course, many of the advanced features in Trillian are not available in the free version, and require paying the \$25 fee (per installed machine?). The upcoming web-based version will be included among the paid only features.

One problem with Trillian's advanced features, though, is that things like the file transfer option may cause security holes and may even be blocked by firewalls because of this fact. Also, more features make for a more complicated interface, which is a training issue.

CONCLUSIONS

In the end, the question may not be so much whether to use Trillian or Meebo, but how to use both.

Trillian seems the clear winner with respect to features, and the cost to upgrade to the professional edition is minimal. However, it is currently not an option for any library that is using an operating system other than Windows. Until the web version is complete and fully developed, Trillian is also tied to one specific machine, where Meebo may be used on any web-enabled computer, no matter which OS. Additionally, Meebo's chat widget has been implemented in numerous libraries and may be seen as something of a "standard" at this point; a library best practices wiki (see bibliography) lists nearly 120 libraries of all types and sizes that use MeeboMe.

Some libraries seem to be opting for Meebo's chat widget and Trillian as the back-end program. Pending further study of Trillian's new widget and the unveiling of a cross-platform Trillian option, this may be the way to go.

