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Digital Reference: A New Library Paradigm or the Emperor’s New Clothes

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Every so often the library profession loses its head over some peripheral issue and goes bonkers, often suggesting that current collection development practices have to be revamped, overhauled or possibly scrapped. It is like that now, if you have been following some of the profession’s fascination with digital reference service. The term “digital reference service” isn’t easy to define, but it can best be understood as reference in “which people submit their questions and have them answered by a library staff member through some electronic means (email, chat, Web forms, etc.), not in person or over the phone.”

The champions of this new form of virtual reference aren’t shy about their new-fangled alternative, nor are they about to downplay the magnitude of the changes that they fancy are upon us. The more rhetorical among them argue that reference, as we know it, is about to change forever. They insist that the user culture has altered drastically. Fiber optics, the Internet, and patron expectations have overturned everything. In fact, the new way of approaching things is so fundamentally different from the old that reference librarians will have to transform their role radically. The new revolution will mean altered codes of conduct and altered modes of operation.

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eration. And librarians who support reference service through collection development will need "new sets of values and beliefs."  

Implications for Collection Development

Of course, it should come as no surprise to those working in building and maintaining library collections that these new sets of values and beliefs will have an enormous bearing on existing collection policy and practice. Consider but three of the possible ramifications:

1) If virtual reference wins the day, as its proponents claim, reference collections will likely become largely digitized. Even if libraries continue to purchase specialized print reference tools, who is going to use them? Are we really to believe, as some virtual reference defenders have argued, that our new age virtual patrons are going to wait patiently while reference librarians scan in a dozen printed pages? No, it is far more likely that no one will want to purchase traditional print resources in an increasingly virtual environment. Reference print collections will quickly become obsolete and become speedily replaced by a host of electronic resources at a relatively high cost.

2) Then there is the potential question of electronic licensing. Currently electronic resources are purchased with license agreements that serve specific user communities. But with the expanded clientele that virtual reference entails, will libraries run the risk of additional spiraling costs? That is to say, will the expanding virtual service inevitably imply ever-expanding licensing agreements at an ever-expanding cost?

3) Finally, electronic resources constitute one of the most volatile dimensions in acquisitions budgeting—more potentially inflationary than journals. Presently the price volatility of online resources is held in check to some degree by both the large scale that print purchases still play in most reference collection budgets and the possibility that librarians can always shift their budgets to print, if online resources become too expensive. But in the new virtual reference paradigm, both of these checks will no longer hold true. The brave new world of virtual reference could well bring with it an accompanying acquisitions nightmare. With the vast majority of our reference budgets going to purchase electronic resources and with print resources becoming rare or obsolete, our acquisitions budgets could become captive to a single unpredictable, but generally increasingly expensive, format—electronic resources.

Keeping Things in Perspective

Now before we uncritically embrace this new paradigm for reference and its accompanying new approaches to building reference collections, all of us in the profession would do well to remind ourselves that we have been down this road of seemingly radical revolutionary change before. These less-than-balanced calls for an overhaul of the profession and incautious clamors for a total realignment of library services seem to occur in cycles.

In the sixties, librarians argued that various microproducts (film and fiche) would render library building expansion unnecessary. Libraries wouldn't need more shelf space. In the eighties, library administrators contended that debilitating properties of acidic paper would soon destroy vast percentages of our bound holdings. The "slow fires" of acidic paper would devastate much of what our libraries contained by the turn of the new millennium. In the nineties iconoclastic technocrats argued that digitization would render print collections obsolete. Print was dead or soon would be.

In all of these cases, the sense of crisis far exceeded the actual realities of change. Collection development librarians, in particular, were often challenged to adjust their policies and practices to fit the new crisis, only to find that after a few years things were indeed changing but not quite in the way that the experts predicted.

Important Caveats

Right now the current advocates of digital reference are telling us that we have to come up with a new paradigm, evolve into a higher species of reference animal (with an accompanying approach to collecting reference resources) or lose our place in the information food chain. Like their esteemed colleagues of the past, the no-expansion librarians, the acid-resistant librarians, and the proponents of an all-digitzed future, the new revolutionaries are victims of their own hyperbole. The world is not as revolutionary as they suggest. The changes abound are not as great as they contend. The proponents of the supposed "new paradigm" of reference are consequently off base, overstating their case, and losing their heads. It is time to regain our bearings and recover our sanity. Or to put it more succinctly and to the point, we need to recontrol and aerospace the strengths and dynamism of traditional reference and traditional reference collection development.

Now don't misunderstand us. Librarians ought to be exploring Email Reference, Instant Messenger chat, and a host of the other interactive technologies that promise to help us get information into the hands of our users and knowledge into the minds of our readers. Digital chat and Instant Messenger reference, especially some of the new more interactive products such as LSI and 24 X 7, certainly have their place in the reference librarian's wardrobe. They are the kind of outfit you may need to wear on special occasions, but the value of such apparel can all too easily be exaggerated. It may be too much to say that in regard to digital reference the emperor is wearing nothing at all. He isn't in the buff, but he certainly isn't as well dressed as his admirers insist.

Digital Reference: Some Clear Disadvantages

In considering the advent of digital reference, three key service issues give us pause. They also cause us to assert that traditional reference is still beyond a doubt the best way to serve our users and that our current reference collection policies won't require a radical, far-reaching overhaul. Far too much is being made of the digital reference alternative, and its concomitant implications for collection development.

First of all, almost all forms of digital reference are slower—slower than telephone discussions, slower that one-on-one, face-to-face interaction.

Librarians at the University of Illinois report that the average digital reference transaction runs nearly ten minutes, more time than would probably be the case were the interview in person or even over the phone. The reference staff at Lippincott Library of the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania experienced a length of service similar to that of the University of Illinois. They concede that digital reference interactions take them considerably longer than other forms of reference. Chat has what they call a "different pace" than telephone conversations.

In combination with the extra time needed in such transactions, one has to face the added administrative difficulties that the alternative service entails. Even a casual exploration of the literature regarding the new service reveals that librarians are candid about the extra burdens the service involves. They note a plethora of new challenges: additional software to master, new procedures to adopt, extra protocols to establish, significant new costs to explain, and new ways of dealing with their regular users—ways that are often neither effective nor helpful.

Of course, for large libraries, implementing virtual reference will mean adding, at the very least, an extra service point—a virtual service desk that runs concurrently with traditional reference. For smaller libraries, however, virtual reference will entail extra work and possible service conflicts. As one author wryly conceded, "When engaged in [virtual reference] chat, it can be awkward explaining to a patron walking up to the desk that the librarian is in fact helping another patron, not just checking e-mail or ignoring them."

All of these drawbacks—enormously significant in the difficult world of limited resources and growing librarian responsibility— dovetail with what we consider the biggest limitations of digital or virtual reference. In
the final analysis, virtual reference is only limitedly effective. For all of the hype about reaching out in extraordinary ways and in unusual times, virtual reference fails our users. It doesn’t meet their information needs efficiently, and it doesn’t deepen their research capacities.

To be sure, the service allows librarians to pander to our readers’ addiction to the new world of 24/7. We can connect with them to a degree at their convenience and on their terms, but the seeming advantages fail to outweigh the service’s genuine shortcomings. Virtual reference doesn’t give us, as public service librarians, the kind of in-depth contacts with our users that will enable us to build relationships or develop our reader’s searching capabilities.

In traditional reference service, librarians offer assistance that is face-to-face, locally based, and decidedly human. Let’s be frank. In-person, genuine real time reference involves moral and emotional elements that are virtually impossible through disembodied online interaction. Consider just one aspect of these moral and emotional elements: the well-recognized educative functions of reference service. Whether we are practitioners at a small liberal arts college or librarians at a large public library, our role is the same. We are cultivators as much as disseminators of knowledge. We model habits of information trolling, gathering, selection, and dissemination. This modeling is almost impossible to develop over fiber optics.

Moreover, any reference librarian can attest to the relationships that develop over time with students or readers who come back repeatedly to the librarian/mentor who first provided the service and inspiration to tough out a difficult research assignment. These relationships require contact face-to-face over time in a given place.

This is why fiber optic reference as a complete service has serious limitations. The Internet (for all of its advantages and wonders) is only minimally interactive. Anyone who has been part of a chat-room, a listserv discussion, or an instant messenger conversation knows the limitations of these relative even to a telephone conversation.

Online interaction can be ultimately dehumanizing and disembowering in ways that even the telephone is not. It may be too much to say that digital reference service is always decontextualizing, dehumanizing, or necessarily fleeting, but certainly this is often the case.

Yes, librarians should be exploring the potentials of digital reference. We should be open to anything that enhances user services and enables us to serve our readers better. Digital or virtual reference should be part of the librarian’s wardrobe. We should be clear about that. We certainly need to open the door. Nevertheless, we should keep our heads and shun the high-flown rhetoric. The seemingly advantages of virtual reference as a full-service approach to reference fail to counterweigh its deficiencies. The emperor would have been better off avoiding the tailor’s rhetoric as well as the tailor’s new clothes. The emperor’s less flashy and more substantive wardrobe had served him well enough.

Public service librarians, we argue, face a situation similar to that of the emperor. We have a substantive, non-virtual wardrobe of powerful and effective reference apparel. There is certainly no need to revamped our approach to collection development or begin to weed our print resources that may prove less accessible to our potential virtual users. Despite the revolutilonary rhetoric to the contrary — revolutionaty rhetoric that seems to emerge in decade-like cycles in library circles — virtual reference can only serve as a complement to the regular clothes of library public service. Virtual online service modules and electronic resources can never equal the potency and effectiveness of on-site, in-house, in-place, and wholly-interactive traditional reference practice and time-honored paradigms of reference collection development.

Endnotes
6. We acknowledge our indebtedness to this section to the trenchant case made by Diekens and Caddell in their recent article regarding the limitations of virtual education. See Diekens, David and David Caddell, "The Significance of Place: Sociological Reflections on Distance Learning and Christian Higher Education," Christian Scholar’s Review XXXI: 2 - 169-184.

Rumors from page 26

about the place of university presses in our current marketplace.

When I got this email just now I couldn’t help myself. My time is so spent with serials/journals continuations and the special headaches they engender, that sometimes a good ole book is just what the doctor ordered. And this one is from one of my favorite people/publishing companies, Lynne Riener Publishers! — Is Hilary Headed for the White House? Madam President? The question is not if, but rather when the United States will elect a female president. With insightful analysis — enhanced by telling profiles of Shirley Chisholm, Elizabeth Dole, Geraldine Ferraro, and Pat Schroeder — Anticipating Madam President, March 2003, ca. 270 pages, ISBN: 1-58826-137-9 / cloth $55, ISBN: 1-58826-113-1 / pb $19.95 <triennerpub@hotmail.com>.

Heard from the affable Jim Gerard <gerard@ashgate.com> (Brooklyn Marketing, Inc., Suite 703, 131 Main Street, Vernon, Mont 05401) who has retired from the Presidency of Ashgate (’Ya’ll remember that Barbara Church took over a couple of years ago) and started a consulting business helping publishers (mostly European and small North American) market their books in the USA and Canada via direct mail, electronic booksellers, book review sources, mail list acquisition, special sales, direct sales calls to librarians, advance book information, space advertising, listing books with major jobbers, BIP etc., etc.. Jim says that the Charleston Conference is an important adjunct to this work and is good fun as well. Anyway, Jim says he is looking forward to coming to the Conference this year.

There has been a lot of discussion on liblicense and other listservs about Sage Publications’ decision not to renew its house licensing contracts with ProQuest and EBSCO when they expire at the end of 2002. Apparently, Sage has for several years been concerned about the impact of database aggregations on their subscription business, and recent research confirmed that Sage should plan now to discontinue participating in these aggregations. Because of this long held concern, the Sage agreements with ProQuest and EBSCO have for several years been one-year, renewable contracts. The liblicense archives http://www.library.caled.org/liblicense/archives/2007/msg00069.html is a good source for this. Also, upcoming in The Charleston Advisor 4/12 is an interview with the fantabulous Blaise Simqu about the ramifications of this decision for libraries.

Please send in your nominations for the ALCTS Acquisitions Section Leadership In Library Acquisitions Award. This award of $1,500, donated by Harrassowitz, is given to recognize the contributions by and outstanding leadership of an individual to the field of acquisitions librarianship. This recognition is made for individual achievement of a high order in the area. For nomination information, contact Nancy Gibbs, Chair, Library in Leadership in Library Acquisitions Award Committee, Box 90187, Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham, NC 27708-0187. Phone: 919/660-5894; Fax: 919/684-2978; email: <nancy.gibbs@duke.edu> <http://www.ala.org/ alcts/awards/leadership.html>.

That’s all we have room for this time. See y’all in November! <http://www.against-the-grain.com>