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Digital Reference: A New Library Paradigm of the Emperor's New Clothes

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Online Auction Services Orders: from page 32

Specialist (who then works out the payment, order replacement and shipping logistics).

At that point, it appeared that the **OLAS** gods were smiling on us—a long overdue smile. **PayPal**'s "Initial Spending Limit" fortuitously and mysteriously vanished—or, to be more accurate, was raised—when I logged into my account in August 2001 (I concluded from this that the limit is apparently cyclical, though I was initially given the impression that it was permanent). And, in one transaction (to my pleasant surprise) the selector persuaded the seller to ship us the item prior to receiving payment, so I could bypass both **PayPal** and **BidPay** (the latter has a smaller limit of \$500 per item) as well as the classical prepayment process. The **OLAS** gods did not smile on us, however, when I attempted (on behalf of the Music Library) to place a bid for a manuscript autographed by **Robert Schumann** that was being auctioned on **Sothebys.com**. After completing the basic registration process, I discovered that I needed to complete a "signature lot registration application" (apparently, a separate and special registration process) and furnish a letter of reference from a financial institution. We considered the option of having an agent place the bid for us, but then decided not to proceed with the bid after learning that we did not have enough money in the selected fund to purchase the manuscript. Incidentally, **Sotheby's** Website has since apparently merged with **eBay** (the new URL is <http://sothebys.ebay.com/>). This online partnership is described as a "joint online destination."

Many of the frustrations we experienced with **OLAS** have resulted from imposing the standard firm order placement, receipt and

payment procedures (established, in many respects, to satisfy stringent auditing requirements) on the dynamic, 24/7 realm of online auctions where buyers and sellers have three days (after the auction closes) to work out the payment/shipping logistics, and sellers almost always expect to be promptly paid in advance. Fortunately—and thanks to the efforts of our Director of Financial Planning and Administrative Services—we were finally granted permission to use third-party online organizations such as **PayPal** (which was recently acquired by **eBay**) to pay the sellers under certain circumstances. The **OLAS** policy and procedures evolved in a trial-and-error process, as a result of consulting with various departments and trying to conform to university procedures.

While much attention has justifiably been focused on electronic resources, there appears to be a dearth of literature and discussion on the challenges faced by a library trying to purchase material won on an online auction such as **eBay**. Given the great variety of rare material offered in online auctions and the needs of special collections to acquire these esoteric items, I think more focus on **OLAS** is called for and hope this article might be useful to other acquisitions professionals and paraprofessionals preparing to take the plunge into **OLAS**.

Other acquisitions librarians and paraprofessionals planning to take this plunge would be well-advised to work out the procedures in advance, and clearly define the roles of all relevant parties. Based on our experience (which may or may not be applicable in other institutions), I can outline the following basic steps:

- Selector identifies item for the collection and places bid (or requests that acquisitions staff place the bid) and notifies acquisitions staff mem-

ber responsible for coordinating **OLAS** orders

- Selector forwards any email notification from **Online Auction Service** regarding status of bid—especially, after auction's close—and indicates fund to use

- Acquisitions staff member contacts **OLAS** seller and negotiates payment logistics (stating preference to receive the item with an invoice, but not expecting seller's agreement to supply in this manner)

- Acquisitions staff member creates an order record in the automated acquisitions (or integrated) system to encumber funds and to provide bibliographic control

- If prepayment is necessary, Acquisitions staff member opts to prepay with a library-issued credit card if seller is willing and able to accept a direct credit card payment

- If the seller is not willing and able to accept a direct credit card payment, Acquisitions will use **PayPal** or **BidPay** to indirectly pay seller (if this is an acceptable option for all concerned), or prepay seller with a check

- Acquisitions staff member conveys purchase order number and ship-to address to the seller and requests receipt and/or packing slip indicating order number with the material

Finally, I urge you to determine if using **PayPal** or **BidPay** to indirectly pay sellers are acceptable options for your institution prior to your first transaction. These Websites are valuable and reliable resources—if you are permitted to utilize them. Good luck with **OLAS!**

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

by **Steve McKinzie** (Social Science Librarian, Waidner-Spahr Library, Dickinson College, Carlisle, PA) <mckinzie@dickinson.edu> and **Jonathan D. Lauer** (Library Director, Murray Library, Messiah College, Grantham, PA) <jlauer@messiah.edu>

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."¹

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 op-

continued on page 36

eration. And librarians who support reference service through collection development will need "new sets of values and beliefs."²

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 few 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 part 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 refer-

ence 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 reinvention 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 acidic paper alarmists, and the proponents of an all-digitized future, the new revolutionists are victims of their own hyperbole. The world is not as revolutionary as they suggest. The changes abroad 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 rediscover and reassert 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 **LSSI** 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 slow – slower than telephone discussions, slower than 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 they admit than would be the case were the interview in person or even over the phone.³ 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.⁴

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 extras 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."⁵

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

continued on page 38

Digital Reference: from page 36

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 those 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.⁶

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 rela-

tionships 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 disembodied 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 wardrobe. We should be clear about that. We certainly need to be open to change. Nevertheless, we should keep our heads and shun the high-flown rhetoric. The seeming 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 re-vamp our approach to collection development or begin to weed our print resources that may prove less accessible to our potential virtual users. Despite the revolutionary rhetoric to the contrary — revolu-

tionary 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

1. Joseph Janes, David S. Carter, and Patricia Memmott, "Digital Reference Services in Academic Libraries," *Reference and User Services Quarterly*, v. 39, no. 2 (Winter 1999), p. 145.
2. R. David Lankes, John W. Collins III, and Abby S. Kasowitz, *Digital Reference Service in the New Millennium*. New York: Neal-Schuman, 2001. p. 11. See further Carol Goodson, *Providing Library Services for Distance Education Students*, New York: Neal-Schuman, 2001, pp 3-6.
3. Jo Kibbee, David Ward, and Wei Ma, "Virtual Service, Real Data: Results of a Pilot Study," *Reference Services Review*, v. 30, no. 1 (2002), p. 33.
4. Linda Eichler and Michael Halperin, "LivePerson: keeping reference alive and clicking: Chat technology for reference services at Lippincott Library," *EContent* v. 23 no3 (June/July 2000) p. 63-6.
5. Jo Kibbee, David Ward, and Wei Ma, "Virtual Service, Real Data: Results of a Pilot Study," *Reference Services Review*, v. 30, no. 1 (2002), p. 35.
6. We acknowledge our indebtedness in this section to the trenchant case made by Diekema and Caddell in their recent article regarding the limitations of virtual education. See Diekema, 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 Rienner 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 <lrienerpub@hotmail.com>.

Heard from the affable **Jim Gerard** <jgerard@ashgate.com> (**Brookfield Marketing, Inc.**, Suite 703, 131 Main Street, Burlington, Ver-

mont 05401) who has retired from the Presidency of **Ashgate** (Y'all 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, mailing 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 database 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.yale.edu/~llicense/ListArchives/0207/msg00099.html> is a good source for this. Also, upcoming in *The Charleston Advisor* (v.4#2) is an interview with the fabulous **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 this area. For nomination information, contact **Nancy Gibbs**, Chair, **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>>