November 2013

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

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Recommended Citation  
DOI: [https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.3793](https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.3793)
Online Auction Services Orders:
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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” for-
tuously 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 Sotheby’s. 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://sotheby.s.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 member 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 asks 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 McKzie (Social Science Librarian, Waidner-Spahr Library, Dickinson College, Carlisle, PA) <mckzie@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.”

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 this 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-

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<http://www.against-the-grain.com>
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 part that print purchases still play in 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.

**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 acrid paper alarmists, and the proponents of an all-digitized 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 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 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 slow—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 they admit than would be the case were the interaction a face to face interaction. 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
usual times, virtual reference fails our
users. It doesn’t meet their information needs
efficiently, and it doesn’t deepen their re-
search 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
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 con-
tacts with our users that will enable us to build
relationships or develop our reader’s search-
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 in-
volves 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 ref-
ence 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 informa-
tion trolley, gathering, selection, and dis-
semination. This modeling is almost impos-
sible to develop over fiber optics. 6

Moreover, any reference librarian can at-
test to the relationships that develop over time
with students or readers who come back re-
peatedly to the librarian/mentor who first pro-
vided 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 com-
plete service has serious limitations. The
Internet (for all of its advantages and won-
ders) is only minimally interactive. Anyone
who has been part of a chat-room, a listserv
discussion, or an instant messenger conver-
sation knows the limitations of these relative
even to a telephone conversation.

Online interaction can be ultimately de-
humanizing and disembosing 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 ser-
ices 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 be open to change. Nevertheless,
we should keep our heads and shun the
high-flown rhetoric. The seeming advan-
tages 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 rho-
tic 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 ward-
robe of powerful and effective reference
apparel. There is certainly no need to re-
vamp our approach to collection develop-
ment or begin to weed our print resources
that may prove less accessible to our po-
tential virtual users. Despite the revolu-
tionary rhetoric to the contrary — revolu-
tionary rhetoric that seems to emerge in
decade-like cycles in library circles — vir-
tual reference can only serve as a comple-
ment to the regular clothes of library pub-
lc 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 tra-
ditional reference practice and time-hon-
ored paradigms of reference collection de-
velopment.

Rumors
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about the place of university presses in our cur-
rent marketplace.

When I got this email just now I couldn’t help
myself. My time is so spent with serials/jour-
nals/continuations and the special headches they
engender, that sometimes a good old book is just
what the doctor ordered. And this one is from one
of my favorite people/publishing companies,
Lyrm Riemer Publishers — isn’t Hillary Heading
for the White House? Madam President? The
question is not if, but rather when the United States
will elect a female president. With insightful anal-
sis—enhanced by telling profiles of Shirley
Chisholm, Elizabeth Dole, Geraldine Ferraro,
and Pat Schroeder — Anticipating Madam Presi-
dent, March 2003, ca. 270 pages, ISBN: 1-58826-
$19.95 <triennerpub@hotmail.com>.

Heard from the affable Jim Gerard
<gerard@ashgate.com> (Brookfield Marketing,
Inc., Suite 703, 131 Main Street, Vermont,
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 con-
sulting business helping publishers (mostly Euro-
pean and small North American) market their
books in the USA and Canada via direct mail, elec-
tronic bookellers, book review sources, mailing
list acquisition, special sales, direct sales calls to
librarians, advance book information, space ad-
vantising, listing books with major jobbers, BIP
e., etc. Jim says that the Charleston Confer-
cence 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’ deci-
sion not to renew its baseline 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 data-
base aggregations on their subscription business,
and recent research confirmed that Sage should
plan now to discontinue participating in these
agreements. 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.cas.edu/~license/lst/archives/2007/
nsg00009.html is a good source for this. Also,
upcoming in The Charleston Advisor (v.44/2)
is an interview with the fantabulous Blaise
Simont (http://www.against-the-grain.com>

Endnotes

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Carol Goodson, Providing Library Services
for Distance Education Students, New York:
3. Jo Kibbee, David Ward, and Wei Ma,
“Virtual Service, Real Data: Results of a
4. Linda Eichert and Michael Halperin,
“LivePerson: keeping reference alive and
clicking: Chat technology for reference ser-
ices at Lippincott Library,” EContent v.
22 no 3 (June/July 2000) p. 63-6.
5. Jo Kibbee, David Ward, and Wei Ma,
“Virtual Service, Real Data: Results of a
6. We acknowledge our indebtedness to this
section to the trenchant case made by
Diekema and Caddell, in their recent article
regarding the limitations of virtual educa-
tion. See Diekema, David and David
Caddell, “The Significance of Place: Socio-
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and Christian Higher Education,” Christian