Evolution or Entropy? Changing Reference/User Culture and the Future of Reference Librarians

Article begins on next page

Evolution or Entropy? Changing Reference/User Culture and the Future of Reference Librarians*

By
Myoung C. Wilson**
Alexander Library
Rutgers – The State University of New Jersey
New Brunswick, NJ 08901-1163
Email mywilson@rci.rutgers.edu

I. **Introduction**

Where have you gone Lloyds of London? In a recent article in the Economist, it was stated that the famous and venerable firm of Lloyds faces a fundamental, perhaps insoluble, problem. This comes from "electronic rivals doing what they do but faster and more cheaply; Lloyd's has to explain why what it does is worth doing at all."[1] The same question might be asked of reference librarians; why is it that what we do is worth doing?

Culture is defined as socially transmitted values, attitudes and beliefs. Micro-culture refers to a particular relationship pattern while macro-culture is the overall configuration of various micro patterns.[2] I submit that the advance of information technology, particularly the Internet, has altered the values, attitudes and beliefs of contemporary library users and, as a consequence, the micro-culture of library users. These changes affect user valuations of reference services and call for a revised service model that will offer optimum services appropriate for the Information Age.

This paper addresses issues that relate to the changing functional relationship between the reference librarian (the services s/he offers) and the user. In order for any service (including reference service) to be provided effectively, it must relate to the needs and expectations of those who use it. There must be a reciprocal relationship between the values and attitudes of those who provide services and the values and attitudes of those who use the service. Without this, the relationship will cease to be reciprocally interactive. Calls for the reinvigoration of the role of reference librarians or assertions that reference librarians must be the keystone of future libraries, and/or of the information environment,[3] thus miss the point. The only way that reference librarians can define their

future role is to ascertain in what ways the reciprocal relationship between themselves and users is evolving.

II. <u>The Traditional Reference Desk</u>

In the past two years, conferences such as this one have been organized where reference librarians have collectively searched for an appropriate future role.[4] In virtually all of the papers it has been reiterated that traditional reference services are here to stay, modified only by the use of improved tools. I argue instead that something has decisively altered in the user culture and that we must comprehend this changed culture and fundamentally transform our role to accord with it.

The traditional reference desk (and reference service) existed in an environment where information resources were highly concentrated and where the reference librarian was knowledgeable about the content, location and accessibility of these resources. The relationship between the librarian and the user was a hierarchical one with the reference librarian functioning as a gatekeeper to these resources. In these traditional libraries, users and reference librarians formed an important and stable micro-cultural relationship via the reference desk. In the process of gaining information (by the user) or providing access to information resources (by the reference librarian), reference services had a clearly defined, major role in information provision. Individual users at their desktops had virtually no choices regarding metadata, information resources and information access. In these libraries the reference desk was one of the few places where users could obtain help. Interaction patterns were highly structured and predictable. The key to this relationship was that it favored those users who were most comfortable in a hierarchical context in which reference librarians were accorded expertise regarding information

resources and access. Independent and individualistic users (these are not mythical people as described in some papers) often chafed over the constraints that this kind of relationship imposed. All reference librarians who worked in traditional libraries are familiar with the type of user who was uncomfortable asking questions and having to participate in the reference service process.

III. <u>The Changed Reference Environment</u>

It has been reported that reference desk statistics are generally decreasing in American academic libraries. At my own unit library at Rutgers, reference statistics declined 21% during the academic year 1997/98 (equivalent to one out of five individual requests) and 24% during the academic year 1998/1999. Many other institutions report a comparable decline in the numbers of those who seek assistance.

At the same time that there has been a decline in reference desk statistics, many libraries have created electronic reference services, most frequently referred to as "Ask A Librarian".   At Rutgers, the Ask A Librarian service logged almost 2,500 queries during the academic year 1998/1999.[5] The quantitative measurement of reference services as such, therefore, should not be confined to the reference desk alone. Many reference questions now come via individual reference librarians' email, either from students seeking further assistance for classroom work or from faculty members who are on research leave or are working in their offices. At my own institution we have quantified these requests through a new statistical form that reflects reference activities away from the reference desk.

Consider for a moment the past when users would come to the reference desk with simple requests, such as for a map of a country or even for a zip-code. Now, E-

Reference collections provide this information (or other ready reference responses) directly to homes or workstations. In the past, interlibrary loan requests at my unit library at Rutgers were verified at the Reference Desk. Now, users can place a self-help online request via a homepage. Rutgers users also can renew their own books and can get reference or, as mentioned earlier, other assistance via "Ask a Librarian" from wherever they are. Thus, we have transferred information that was once provided at the reference desk to an Internet homepage; in other words, the keys formerly held in the hands of reference librarians that were the basis for their gatekeeper function have now been transferred to library homepages and are beyond the direct control of reference librarians. Is it any wonder then that librarians are noticing a decline in reference desk activities? Clearly, given the decrease, it should be no cause for dismay when people ask if it is not about time to right size the reference desk, both physically and figuratively?

In the post-Internet age of decentralized and distributed information resources, reference librarians no longer have a franchise as sole providers of information at the reference desk.[6] Consequently, the importance of the reference desk as a central node has in recent years been questioned. Users have begun to make direct connections to information sources via the new media (via networked databases or email, chatrooms, newsgroups, etc.).

IV. <u>User Cultures</u>

The anthropologist Mary Douglas has suggested that individuals in all societies choose one of five different ways of life for themselves. This theory, called Culture Theory, has received a great deal of acclaim as well as vigorous criticism. It is beyond the scope of this paper to elaborate the theory in detail. Suffice it to say that individuals

choose ways of life that have been variously termed fatalistic, hierarchical, individualistic, egalitarian, and communitarian. The importance of these ways of life, or sub-cultures, in any society is ascertained by research into the relative prevalence of these behavior patterns. I contend that the way that users interact with the reference desk can be better understood by linking patterns of user behavior with the categories advanced by Culture Theory. The ways that users seek and use information resources is then more readily characterized.[7] In the relationship between the reference librarian and the user, it thus becomes crucially important to ascertain what types of user orientations are most congruent with the relationship context. Only then can reference librarians begin to design appropriate service models and define their new role.

V. Convenience Quotients

Ann Lipow, in her thought provoking paper entitled "Serving the Remote User: Reference Services in the Digital Environment",[8] argues that convenience is what governs the choice of where to go for assistance. To elaborate this argument, I view the relationship between the user and the reference librarian in terms of a concept that can be called a "convenience quotient." In other words, who is it that is most comfortable within a given type of relationship and who regards the services that are provided as convenient. I suggest that in the traditional reference service structure, individuals with hierarchical orientations were most comfortable while others, especially those with individualistic and egalitarian orientations (i.e. those who enjoy working on their own and those who desire greater equality in the way that users and reference librarians interact), fared less well. In other words, the culture of reference services overall favored a pattern in which those whose orientations were hierarchical were best served, with the

user in the role of supplicant and the reference librarian in the role of gatekeeper. This does not mean, of course, that reference services were unavailable to others. It does mean that those who were not hierarchical in orientation were less comfortable in the reference situation (i.e. they had a low convenience quotient). Hence, for them, how reference services were provided could often be decidedly inconvenient.

With the advent of the Internet, the situation has been radically reversed. The type of users best served in this new context are those who are individualistic or egalitarian. In this context it is the hierarchical individual as supplicant who is now on the periphery while individualistic/egalitarian users have taken center stage. Concomitantly, there has been a drastic decline in the gatekeeper function of reference librarians.

In the new context it is the autonomous users of Internet resources who find the new reference relationship pattern most congenial. In fact, the undue intrusion of reference librarians into the new reference context may be felt by many such users to be both inappropriate and inconvenient; previously, of course, it was individualistic and egalitarian users who were uncomfortable intruding on the time of reference librarians. At the same time, users who attempt to reassert a hierarchical relationship may be perceived by reference librarians as lacking computer literacy skills.

Regardless of the type of user, reference librarians must enhance their role as technological gatekeeper, guiding users through overloaded information sources. In order to perform this role, not only must reference librarians improve their technological skills, they must also learn about the new types of users who have taken center stage. Koyma suggests that cyberspace users "prefer anonymity to in-person, over-the-desk

delivery of reference service and feel free of the captive nature inherent sometimes in the personal interview controlled by the librarian"[9] These are the very type of unreachable users who might have shied away from the traditional reference desk. Reference librarians now have an opportunity to interact with them via cyberspace. The context, however, will be radically different from the one reference librarians knew in the past.

VI. <u>Conclusion</u>

The context of reference service has changed. If functional reciprocity is to be reclaimed between the user and the reference librarian, it can only occur if reference librarians understand and accept the changes in their role that have taken place. The advent of the Internet has so decisively altered the user culture, and has so decisively changed the relative importance of different user types, that no effort to reassert a traditional reference librarian role can possibly succeed. Bemoaning the loss of the traditional relationship pattern is no substitute for reconceptualizing what the new role of reference librarians must be in the context of the new reference service that has come into being.

The first step is to recognize that reference service with regard to information resources has three components: the first is service that provides users with information about information (metadata) as well as factual information from the ready reference sources. This service is being rapidly bifurcated (and is thus a source of confusion for users) between reference services and the products of companies like Yahoo. It is also the area that is being aggressively explored by e-commerce enterprises and software vendors. Modeling themselves after the well publicized electronic auction company E-bay, a new commercial venture called InfoRocket will launch a web-site allowing anyone to buy and

sell answers to questions over the Internet.[10] You can imagine all of the issues of reliability, accuracy and copyrights that may be associated with this venture. Nevertheless, the commercial provision of much of this traditional type of ready reference service will continue to be explored by for-profit entrepreneurs.

The second component is training users to access and evaluate information sources. The ability to access and evaluate the validity of information sources is a key element in developing information literacy. The role of reference librarians in training users has been on the rise, either in person, in classroom situations or, increasingly, via cyberspace (the theme of this conference). In fact, so important has this function become that a good argument can be made for the provision of teaching positions to libraries.

The third component is what lately has been called the "invisible function" of reference librarians. This aspect of service is grounded in the fact that many users are not clearly aware of their initial information needs. Nardi uses the expression "information therapy" [11] to describe the time-honored reference interview process. While components two and three have always existed, it is now clear that they are increasingly becoming the most important aspects of service for reference librarians.

It is not the case, as some aver, that reference librarians will become an extinct or endangered species. It is the case that the advent of new technology has changed the behavior of users in a way that requires a reciprocal change in the behavior of reference librarians toward greater emphasis on components two and three. Librarians in the future will need to be flexible, adaptable and conversant with how the new type of individualistic/egalitarian user seeks information. Unfortunately, little study or research has been done by reference librarians to understand how this category of user seeks and

uses information in the electronic environment. What is ironical is that it is the very

technology that individualistic users apply that actually can enable librarians to gather

information about them.

Only by identifying and forging a new relationship between users and reference

librarians (both at the reference desk and beyond) can reference culture be re-calibrated.

The emergence of a digital (and distributed) information environment has temporarily

unhinged a relationship that has been stable for the past one hundred years. The

continuing viability of reference librarians now depends on how reference librarians and

users mutually adapt as librarians affirm a role as providers of assistance on how to

access information and how to clarify in users' minds an awareness of their information

needs. Until then reference librarians around the world will continue to be adrift over the

relatively sudden and massive alterations that have occurred in the reference culture.

> "Changes in micro-culture occur when there are "shifts by individuals
> away from allegiance to one pattern … as a consequence of a cumulative
> mismatch between the promise and the performance of a particular
> relationship pattern."[12]

If we are to maintain user allegiance to the value of reference service, we need to

 align with the new reference/user cultural reality. Some reference librarians are

beginning to fine-tune their virtual reference interview skills[13] in order to add a human

element to the new machine dominated environment; they have begun as well to develop

new ways to reach out to once unreachable users by creating and developing new

electronic reference services. The topics of this Conference are evidence of these

endeavors. All these activities, in my view, point to an exciting future for reference

librarians who are just beginning to forge links with the next generation of users. These

emerging new micro-cultural aspects of relationship patterns between the user and the

reference librarian will define the attributes of the macro-cultural structure of future

reference services.

References

1. "Clubhouse for Sale," *The Economist*, 14 August 1999, 59
2. Richard W. Wilson, "The Many Voices of Political Culture: Assessing Different Approaches," Unpublished ms., 1999, 9.
3. Bonnie A. Nardi and Vicki L. O'Day, *Information Ecologies: Using Technology with Heart*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), 80
4. One such conference was *Finding Common Ground: Creating the Library of the Future Without Diminishing the Library of the Past* organized by the Harvard Library and the other was the Library of Congress Institute: Reference Service in A Digital Age, both held in 1998. Many similar themes have been the focus of other conferences.
5. For a more detailed analysis of these queries, see the *Annual Report "Ask A Librarian"* complied by Natalie Borisovets, Rutgers Ask a Librarian Coordinator, available at url: http://newark.rutgers.edu/~natalieb/ask9899.htm
6. *Buildings, Books and Bytes: Libraries and Communities in the Digital Age*, (Washington, D.C.: Benton Foundation, 1996), 13.
7. Wilson, *The Many Voices*, 8
8. Anne G. Lipow, "*Serving the Remote User: Reference Service in the Digital Environment*," available at url http://www.csu.edu.au/special/online99/proceedings99/htm, 5 of 9.
9. Janice T. Koyama, "http://digiref.scenarios.issues [implications of remote reference service} paper presented at the LC Institute, Reference Service in A Digital Age, June 1998], *Reference and User Services Quarterly* v. 38 no.1, 51.
10. Kevin Maney, "Site to Auction Information," Tech Report, USA Today, 9 Sept.,1999, available at url http://www.usatoday.com/life/cyber/tech/ctg076.htm.
11. Nardi and O'Day. *Information Ecologies*, 85-92.
12. Wilson, *The Many Voices*, 9.
13. Ann Viles, " The Virtual Reference Interview: Equivalencies: A Discussion Proposal," Paper distributed at the IFLA Discussion Group on Reference Work, Bangkok, 1999.