

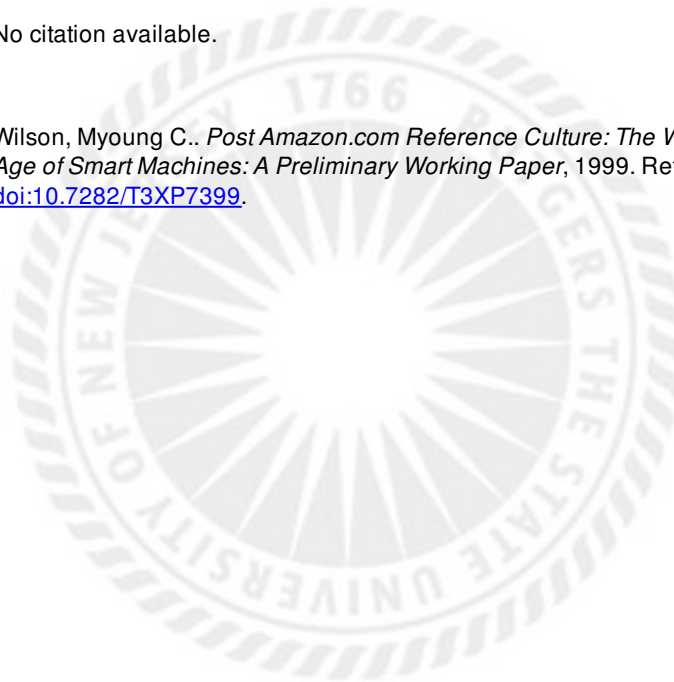
Post Amazon.com Reference Culture: The Work of Reference Librarians in the Age of Smart Machines: A Preliminary Working Paper

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**POST AMAZON.COM REFERENCE CULTURE; THE WORK OF REFERENCE
LIBRARIANS IN THE AGE OF SMART MACHINES**

A Preliminary Working Paper

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POST AMAZON.COM REFERENCE CULTURE: THE WORK OF REFERENCE LIBRARIANS IN THE AGE OF SMART MACHINES

A Preliminary Working Paper

“The Internet is turning business upside down and inside out. It is fundamentally changing the way companies operate, whether high-tech or metal bashing. This goes far beyond buying and selling over the Internet or e-commerce, and deep into the processes and culture of an enterprise. (Business and the Internet Survey, *The Economist*, June 26, 1999, 1)

I. BACKGROUND

At the Amsterdam IFLA Reference Discussion Group (DG) meeting in 1998, we heard about where Reference Departments reside generally in the overall organizational structure of libraries. Many of us reported that the Reference Department has been reconfigured or restructured within the parent organization. While the changes are not as tumultuous as in e-commerce, reference librarians reported both positive and negative developments from the impact of information technology. In particular, the Internet has fostered both organizational change and a transformation in the work of reference librarians. An international survey that addressed this issue obtained results from nineteen national libraries, eight public libraries and nine academic libraries; these results were reported and discussed at the session.

This working paper continues the discussion from last year by further exploring the cultural impact of technology on the work of reference librarians. It was clear from the Amsterdam session that reference librarians around the globe are searching for a new model of reference service appropriate for an age when so much information is readily

available via a multitude of formats and channels. Several respondents from last year's survey summarized these sentiments. Three examples are indicative: the Head of Reference Services at the Lund University Library in Sweden, Peter Berry, stated that although the number of users of reference services is increasing, particularly among undergraduates, it has become difficult to maintain reference services for advanced users. His solution is to extend services "outside of the reference desk to areas where questions are likely to appear." Creating roving librarians is one solution to this problem. In the same survey the Head of the Leiden University Medical Center Library in the Netherlands, J. Lisman, stated that "the more that network connections are growing, the less people visit the library." Consequently, users do not ask for help and reference staff no longer have an opportunity to review whether literature searches are conducted properly. Another librarian, Hans Rudolf Kull of the City and University Library of Bern in Switzerland, reported the following:

We offer many CD-ROM and Internet (Swetscan) databases to the public, most of them over the net of the University of Bern. That is why online database researches with our subject specialist lose importance because many students can conduct their searches themselves.¹

This paper follows-up these observations. An informal pre-test questionnaire was sent to a different set of libraries in an effort to identify the most significant traits of the emerging reference culture. Six academic libraries (one from Japan, one from Sweden, four from the United States, one special library from Germany, the Royal Library of Sweden and the Russian State Library) responded.² My intent was to reveal general trends rather than to identify specific issues. However, although, academic libraries (or those national libraries that serve as academic libraries such as the Royal Library of Sweden) are sufficiently large that emerging service patterns can be identified, the limited number of libraries that were surveyed make it impossible to provide anything but

preliminary observations about the reference culture of the next generation. How re-configuring/re-engineering/restructuring reference services can revitalize the traditional value of reference work in the new digital environment is obviously the ultimate goal. Below is a summary of the information that was provided by the libraries that responded.

II. Summary of the Survey

1. All of the libraries that were surveyed offer traditional reference services with print resources; reference is also increasingly responsible for providing training and access to online databases (CD-ROM, net-based information sources, etc.).
2. All libraries offer an online catalog on the Web. The degree of integration of information and services that are available on each library homepage varies. Some systems offer an advanced self-service module which allows users to check library loan records and make direct (i.e., without staff assistance) requests for materials either from closed stacks, from regional and campus libraries and/or by interlibrary loans.
3. There was a mixed response to the question regarding the increase and decrease of reference desk statistics. While European libraries in general (and one Japanese) indicated an increase in reference desk statistics, American academic libraries reported a slight decrease. The Russian State Library reported a sharp decline from 387,000 inquiries in 1996 to 241,00 in 1998. At my own unit library at Rutgers, reference statistics declined 21% (1997/98 academic year) and 24 % (1998/99 academic year).
4. Reference Desk

- Regarding new and discontinued reference services offered from the reference desk, examples of discontinued services are verification of ILL requests, SDI (Selected Dissemination of Information) services conducted on Dialog and decreased reference desk hours. Regarding new services many web-based services and instructions for OPAC and online resources have been added; additionally, the Japanese library reported an increasing number of inquiries by its users for foreign sources (outbound) whereas the Royal Library of Sweden reported an increase in the number of inquiries from overseas (inbound).
- With regard to the physical reference desk, many librarians reaffirmed that the reference desk is still a central location where users can gain access to valuable resources. This is particularly the case for national libraries where collections are particularly strong and unique. In European libraries, the staffing of the reference desk is done largely by professional librarians whereas in some academic libraries, particularly in the United States, staffing through a combination of various service points (or a mix of professional and non-professional staffing) is being examined.

5. E-reference (Online reference)

All four U.S. academic libraries offer e-reference through their homepages. The University of Iowa Library offers advanced e-reference through a “Request Consult” service on its homepage. All four libraries refer to e-reference as “Ask a Librarian.” The only other library that provides e-reference is the Royal Swedish Library that offers “Ask the Librarian” on its English language homepage.

6. Mediated Online Search Services

Among the nine libraries surveyed only two offer mediated online search services. Clearly this is a service that is not commonly offered at the present time.

7. Statistics and Staffing of e-reference

While statistics are kept on this service, this is a relatively new service for many institutions. Therefore, no significant numbers have yet been compiled. Private institutions such as New York University limit e-reference to the NYU community whereas at public institutions, such as my own, e-reference is open to all. Other public academic libraries reroute some e-reference queries to local public libraries. In three U.S. academic libraries e-reference staffing is done by para-professionals or reference associates (individuals who hold an advanced subject degree but not an MLS, a degree required for professional status by many academic libraries in the United States). Reference librarians field e-reference questions at the Royal Swedish Library. At Rutgers, e-reference is coordinated by a professional librarian.

8. Library Instruction

To a large extent library instruction is the responsibility of the reference service staff. Reference librarians consider that this instruction (either individual instruction at the reference desk or for a class) constitutes an increasingly large portion of their responsibilities. At Ohio State University User Education is a separate unit although many reference librarians participate in the program.

III. Post Amazon.Com Reference Culture

Culture is defined as socially transmitted values, attitudes and beliefs. I submit that the advance of information technology, particularly the Internet, has influenced the values, attitudes and beliefs of contemporary 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.

In cultural studies micro-culture refers to a particular relationship pattern while macro-culture is the overall configuration of various micro patterns.³ In pre-Internet libraries, users and reference librarians formed an important and stable micro-cultural relationship via the reference desk in the process of gaining/providing access to information resources. Reference service was clearly defined and played a major role in information provision. Individual users did not have too many choices in terms of information resources and information access. In these libraries the reference desk was the only place where users could obtain help. Interaction patterns were highly structured and predictable. In the post-Internet age of decentralized and distributed information resources, reference librarians no longer have a franchise as sole providers of information.⁴ Consequently, the importance of the reference desk as a central node has in recent years been increasingly questioned. Users have begun to make direct connections to information sources via the new media (networked databases or email., etc.).

This shift does not mean that the importance of reference work has diminished. On the contrary, as reaffirmed by our colleagues around the world, the value of reference service *per se* is highly prized in the new information environment. In fact, Nardi and O'Day view librarians, particularly reference librarians, as specialists (Nardi and O'Day use the term "keystone species") who may literally mold the emerging information ecology.⁶ Nardi and O'Day use libraries as a case study for their research on the impact of technology on society in the twentieth century. They make the following observation:

The classic ecological pattern of invasion and succession that can transform biological ecologies so radically and rapidly is all too possible in information ecologies. A much better approach is to

encourage mutual adaptation, fostering new relationships between the technologies, and the practices of librarians and people who are trying to find information.⁵

I argue that it is the identification and forging of new relationships between users and reference librarians (either at the desk or beyond) that will become the hallmark of the future reference culture. The emergence of a digital (and distributed) information environment has temporarily unhinged the once stable relationship that characterized interactions between the user and the reference librarian for the past one hundred years. The continuing viability of reference librarians will depend on how reference librarians and users mutually adapt as we reaffirm our fundamental role as providers of information about information. From the surveys of the last two years it is clear that reference librarians around the world are seeking ways to adapt to the relatively sudden and massive alteration that has occurred in the reference environment.

It has been reported that reference desk statistics are generally decreasing in American academic libraries.⁶ While some argue for the elimination of the reference desk I submit that the quantitative measurement of reference services as such should not be confined to the reference desk alone. It is my personal observation that more reference questions come by email than ever before, either from students seeking further assistance from the classes that I teach or from faculty members on research leave. At my own institution we have made an attempt to quantify these requests through a new statistical form that will reflect reference activities away from the reference desk.

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.”⁷ If we are to maintain user allegiance to the value of reference service, we need to create a new cultural reality

that will meet changing user needs. The increasing importance of infomediary in e-business,⁸ for example, is one type of service concept that reference librarians should seriously consider.

The online bookstore Amazon.Com symbolizes the beginning of user options (and confusion for undergraduates) regarding choices. The post-Internet reference culture will be similar. It will be characterized by the expansion of online bookstores, e-reference collections and services, online courses and Internet libraries of all sorts and by redefinition of the relationship between users and information providers. All of these changes will become part of a new reference culture where technology will redefine user behavior in tandem with a redefinition of the services that reference librarians provide.

Notes:

- 1 These statements are taken from an unpublished survey entitled *The Organization of Reference Work: Report from Academic Libraries* compiled by Yolanda Maloney (University of Colorado, USA) and distributed at the Reference Discussion Group at the Amsterdam IFLA Conference, 1998.
2. The following libraries responded to my survey. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the following individuals: Helga Schwarz, Ryuichiro Takahashi, Birgitta Fogelvik, Marjatta Hauska, Becky Johnson, Lissa Lord, Nancy Courtney, and Tatiana Maistrovich
 - Germany
Ibero-Amerikanisches Institut Preussischer Kulturbesitz
 - Japan
Gakugei University Library
 - Russia
Russian State Library
 - Sweden
Royal Swedish Library
Stockholm School of Economics Library
 - USA
New York University Bobst Library
The Ohio State University Libraries
Rutgers University Libraries

University of Iowa Libraries/Main libraries

3. Richard W. Wilson, "The Many Voices of Political Culture: Assessing Different Approaches," Unpublished manuscript. 1999, 10.
4. Bonnie A. Nardi and Vicki L. O'Day, *Information Ecologies: Using Technology With Heart*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), 80
5. *Buildings, Books and Bytes: Libraries and Communities in the Digital Age*, (Washington, D.C.: Benton Foundation. 1996),13.
6. Susan Szasz Palmer, "Creating Our Own Roles as Reference Librarians of the future: Choice or Fate?" "in *Racing Toward Tomorrow: Proceedings of the Ninth National Conference of the Association of College and Research Libraries*, April 8-11, 1999,(Chicago: American Library Association, 1999), 143
7. Wilson, The Many Voices, 10.
8. "The Rise of Infomediary", in the *Business and the Internet Survey*, The Economist, June, 26, 1999, 21-24.