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Reference Use Statistics

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Online databases: reference use statistics

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TRADITIONALLY, librarians track activity at the reference desk by counting every question posed to the reference staff. A total monthly and yearly number may be reported to upper administration to show how busy the reference area is, to justify increased staffing, or to demonstrate to funders the importance of reference. The report may be a simple total, or may be refined by categories, e.g., ready reference, in-depth reference, directional ("Where are the magazines?"). Some libraries translate these categories into time spent with a patron, such as under two minutes or over ten minutes.

In this era of electronic reference sources and end user searching, most librarians would agree that the reference room has gotten busier. Recently, I surveyed academic reference librarians to find out about their use of electronic reference sources and how things have changed in the last few years (see "Plagued by Our Own Successes," LJ 3/1/98, p. 39-40). Many commented on the increased activity in their reference areas. According to one university librarian, "Electronic resources have increased use of library reference services, increased time spent with individual users, increased need for staff training, increased staff time spent on troubleshooting, and increased need for user instruction."

New functions and resources

Part of this increased activity is due to new reference functions and resources. In addition to in-person reference services and telephone reference, E-mail reference has found a place in libraries of all types. If a library offers remote access to resources, E-mail reference is a logical and necessary next step. It is better than telephone reference for in-depth questions and, unlike telephone reference, questions can be posed and answered at times more convenient to both parties and a record can be made of both question and answer.

Offering remote access to sources may require instructional classes and reference services at the user's site. An academic librarian told me that "since users have remote access, librarians are spending more time in academic departments assisting faculty and staff." In a public library that may mean on-site at local government offices (does anyone do house calls yet?); in a special library, that may include branch offices or remote locations. Even in-house reference services librarians are finding themselves more mobile, spending less time behind a static reference desk and more time roving through the reference workstation areas.

Another reason for increased activity is the time spent on each question and the expectation that an answer must exist somewhere. Many librarians report such sentiments as, "We often go much further with a question before giving up," and "Clearly, the technology has enhanced our ability to provide timely information to patrons; however, it has increased the intensity of questions and caused frustration by raising patron expectations that cannot be met." Reference interview's may take longer as librarians need to know the level of a patron's computer skills, what print and online resources they have already checked, in addition to the typical questions about the topic, purpose of the search, and so on.

Though reference staff are busier, traditional statistics that count number of interactions with patrons may not reflect this increased activity--or the need for additional staff. One reference librarian reported that "we find that our transaction statistics have declined as we spend more time with individuals--precisely because of electronic resources." Another explained, "Like others, our statistics are down and our workload is up. We can do more so each question takes longer as we explore and teach the varied resources.... The technologies allow us to do more and provide more information to patrons."

Limits of traditional methods

Traditional counting methods do not explain what resources are most helpful or which formats require increased time with users. This more detailed information would help guide user instruction and provide information on the impacts of resource changes and technology in the library. Busy library staff members usually don't have time to collect such detailed statistics. If done at all it should be done randomly rather than continuously.

To begin to get a picture of how different formats are being used, I asked academic reference librarians to estimate what percentage of their reference questions are answered by what medium. Some pointed out to me the folly of my question--that they rarely use only one source or even only one medium anymore, that "any percentage filled in here would be meaningless because we do not keep statistics like that."

Others tried their best guess, but sometimes warned that the figures could be misleading because they "subscribe to a large number of electronic resources through an Internet/World Wide Web connection" or they make use of several media to answer questions.

Ranking the sources

Reference librarians from 44 university libraries estimated for me the percentage of reference questions answered by the variety of options available today (or the percentage of sources they "make use of" when dealing with a reference need). Every option I asked about is used by at least some of the libraries, but clearly some are more common than others. (See Figure 1.)

FIGURE 1: PERCENTAGE OF LIBRARIES THAT USE EACH OPTION TO ANSWER AT LEAST SOME REFERENCE QUESTIONS

# of Libraries	% of Libraries	Option	Libraries (total)	Ranking this #1
98	43	24 (55%)	Print	98% 43
17	39%	CD-ROM	95% 42	8 (18%)
91%	40	2 (5%)	World Wide Web	91%
84%	37	4 (9%)	Commercial Online(*)	84%
82%	36	0	Telephone	82%
32%	14	0	Listservs	32%

(*) Includes end user online such as FirstSearch, intermediary online such as DIALOG, and locally or consortially loaded databases from publishers such as H.W. Wilson Company

A top ranking for any option may say more about entrenched habits of both reference librarians and patrons in a particular setting than the usefulness of the resources. Most likely patrons ask the questions they think can be answered by the resources they associate with the library; librarians turn first to familiar resources.

Some resources are used much more than others, but the popularity of each varies from library to library (and perhaps from librarian to librarian within each library). The number of titles and specific products each library has available on each format is unknown but obviously would affect the usefulness of the medium.

A library's online catalog answers the largest percentage of reference questions in the most libraries, followed closely by printed reference books (see Figure 2). Since the online catalog is used mainly to point to appropriate materials in the larger print collection, the continued utility of print is evident. As electronic resources are added to the OPAC, their use should increase.

FIGURE 2: PERCENTAGE OF QUESTIONS ANSWERED BY EACH OPTION IN LIBRARIES

Option	Averages	Ranges
Online Catalog	33%	10-85%
Print	28%	5-80%
CD-ROM	16%	1-40%
World Wide Web	10%	1-40%
Commercial Online	12%	1-40%
Telephone	5.5%	1-20%
Listservs	2.25%	.5-5%

Librarians may use more than one to answer a single reference question

Internet's impact on instruction

Although the World Wide Web is used to answer only about ten percent of all reference questions, many more patrons turn to the web first. Teaching good web searching skills (and, more broadly, Internet skills) occupies a big chunk of a reference librarian's instructional time these days. Nearly all of the 68 academic research libraries that responded to my full questionnaire offer onsite Internet training, while over half also offer training assistance for remote users (for more details, see "The Digital Reference World of Academic Libraries," scheduled for Online magazine, July 1998).

More than one instructional method is the rule, rather than the exception. Of those libraries that offer onsite Internet instruction, 95 percent do point-of-use instruction for individuals (one-on-one instruction), 89 percent include instruction about the Internet in regular group classes, 72 percent have special group classes dedicated to Internet topics, and 69 percent produce printed guides to the Internet.

From automated to one-on-one

More automated solutions, such as computer-assisted instruction or videotapes, are much less common, although approximately 20 percent of these libraries offer some form of computer-assisted instruction. Although none of these libraries explicitly mentioned that they point users to web-based instruction developed by companies or other organizations, they may choose this as an alternative to creating their own instructional materials.

In the libraries that offer Internet instruction for remote users, one-on-one instruction is still the most popular, with printed guides second. Special Internet instruction classes for remote users are offered by a third of the libraries, while 21 percent provide computer-assisted instruction for their remote users. Clearly instruction--and all reference services--for remote users remains a challenge but one that librarians must meet creatively.

Librarians are working to find the best ways to reach remote users and to work with the systems staff and subject specialists. As one university librarian told me, "New technologies have helped but have created a variety of complexities and challenges. How do you assist remote users at the point of use? Specialization becomes crucial, while at the same time team work is critical."

A busier place

The busy atmosphere in reference departments is not likely to go away--nor do we want it to! Whether users are remote, in-house, or both, the mixture of technologies, the constant change, and the steady stream of new resources guarantees a busy place. Librarians will continue to take longer to answer individual questions, go further to find answers, and spend time instructing users on new technologies.

Libraries are finding creative solutions to doing more with less. One way is to borrow the "physician's assistant" model from medicine. Paraprofessional staff are now handling many routine reference duties, taking charge of hardware and software troubleshooting, and assisting more on the reference desk. It is a solution that helps spread limited professional resources and allows the professional staff to concentrate on instruction and more in-depth reference questions.

Reference departments must be careful, however, and not succumb to the HMO trend of severely limiting the time a doctor is allowed to spend with a patient. Most librarians surveyed enjoy their jobs in this electronic age precisely because of the new challenges and enhanced chance of getting a correct answer to difficult questions. Relying too much on usage statistics and counting interactions can take the joy out of the job.

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