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Plagued by Our Own Successes

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Abstract:
Reference librarians are required to provide more patron support in the last few years because of increased electronic reference sources and services. The overwhelming array of options may lead to 'technostress', which some librarians view as counterproductive, while others see it as exciting.

Full Text:
Despite their overall enthusiasm, many librarians have mixed emotions about the rapid addition of large numbers of electronic reference sources and services to their libraries in the last few years. The capacity to provide more and better reference services may be counterbalanced by the rising demands of patrons and the seemingly overwhelming array of options.

A university reference librarian summed up the conflict:

I believe that technologies are

allowing us to do more, but they are

also driving us to do more. Many

traditional tasks remain while new

demands are made on time. Many

staff members feel as though the

"goal posts are moving." Overall,

new technologies advance our

abilities to provide information, but

the more, the better, the quicker and

the easier it gets, the more demand

is created. We are plagued by our

own successes.

This comment was one response in a survey -- the third in a decade -- on electronic reference sources I sent last year to the heads of reference in university libraries that are members of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL). The full results of the newest survey will be published in Online magazine later this year.

Librarians were asked: "Please comment on how your library's use of electronic reference services has changed over the past two to three years and how the job of the reference staff has changed. We would be especially interested in your views on whether new technologies help or hinder reference services." Responses touched on many important issues and themes.

Changes in instruction

In my first survey in 1991, a few librarians predicted that formal instruction would no longer needed in libraries. No one expressed that opinion this time. Most echoed librarians who said, "There has been an increase in instruction-with more librarians assuming the role of teacher/trainer," and "Teaching users both in the classroom setting and one-on-one is becoming more important. Were providing compulsory courses for some colleges and for some individual professors."

Many librarians commented that their library instruction focuses on search strategies. including the ins and outs of particular system, or search engines, and technical details. "We have a mind-boggling array of sources," one wrote. "However, the challenge to keep on top of it all has grown, too. [Beyond] what went into the reference interview in the past are demands co instruct users at all skill levels on how to format a diskette, how to mark and print citations, how to respond to error messages and printer malfunctions...on and on."

Still, respondents now feel less of a need to emphasize technical details, as "many more end users need less and less instruction but need to be guided to appropriate sources."

With different interfaces and search methods for multiple CD-ROM systems, online services, web-based systems, and locally loaded databases, users and librarians alike must learn to interact with inconsistent and ever-charging sources. The web has become the standard platform, which improves this chaotic situation, allowing some librarians to see the beginnings of a shift toward more instruction in source selection and less on die technicalities of specific interfaces. "We are in a transitional time, with both old and new skills competing for limited instructional opportunities." one librarian stated, but as students get used to online resources, the focus of instruction shifts to content and use of materials.

Partly this is because, as one librarian wrote, "We have moved from the `information explosion' concept to one of `information access options explosion.' When we mediated searches we were able to work with the user to find the best electronic resources. Now, they are confronted with too many possibilities on their own -- and the number of possible resources has grown tremendously."

The need for librarian guidance to sources is becoming critical, as another librarian emphasized: "[Electronic sources] undoubtedly increase the effectiveness of the reference librarian. Whether they are equivalently effective tools for individual students and researchers is less clear to me: too many different systems and platforms, too much confusion. Integrating most of these into web interfaces will help some but still leaves the problem of selection of the appropriate databases."

Impacts of technology

With so many new sources, the reference librarian must keep up. One head of reference services wrote, "With 25 professional and paraprofessional staff scheduled on the main reference desk, the digital services have presented a tremendous staff training challenge, given the number of databases, range of software, fairly frequent change of vendors (software), and the move from Mac to DOS emphasis."

Of course, keeping up has always been a part of reference work, another librarian added, as reference librarians always had difficulty remembering most of the sources in the print environment. The problem has been magnified with the addition of more electronic resources, many of which employ different search strategies. And the print sources haven't disappeared. We are required to know a lot about how data files are organized and to have knowledge of technical matters such as what patrons need to do to access library resources from their homes and offices."

Almost all agree that the addition of electronic resources has added to their workload but mostly in a positive way. Another responded, "While a lot of information is easier to locate and more up-to-date, our workloads have actually increased because of the amount of instruction that has to be done and other factors. I don't feel that service has been hindered in any way. We have to spend some time dispelling the myth of the Internet, but we can now offer reference service online, instruct online, etc."

And another reported, "Enhanced searching capabilities plus the addition of material we never had access to makes it more difficult to give up on a question. We often go much further...."

Academic librarians employ many strategies for dealing with their increased workload, as witnessed by these comments:

* "Electronic services librarians are the reference librarian's best friend. Troubleshooting machinery is the biggest nuisance and hindrance to good service."

* "A focus of our reference work has been to improve and expand user aids in response to needs. This includes both print and online formats."

* "Nonprofessional staff and student assistants provide more reference service, particularly basic assistance in using electronic sources."

* "Librarians [are] moving more toward specialized research and instruction service."

Not all impacts are positive or can be seen positively. One librarian regrets the impact of technology on collection development: "Considering digital reference collection development, reference staff often feel like they are losing control. Because of cost (often shared) and consortial arrangements, reference staff cannot always have the database or vendor (software) they evaluate as best. It is often out of our hands, unlike the case with print."

A few librarians mentioned additional ways the reference librarian's job has been negatively impacted:

* "Reference is less a skill as it has become a trade. The reference librarian more and more is technical support rather than a resource." There are "overwhelming numbers of new (digital) tools and interfaces to master for staff: this forces us to allocate significant time for training, puts the emphasis (too often) on the medium rather than the content, and widens the gap between subject specialists and desk service specialists."

For more information on how technology has impacted academic reference librarians, Anne Nolan, assistant head of reference at Brown University, presented a poster session at the last LITA/LAMA conference. See:<http:www.brown.edu/Facilities/University_Library/publications/Anne Nolan/contents.html>.)

Rising expectations

Almost all of the students and a majority of the faculty who use academic libraries have become or are becoming enthusiastic users of electronic reference sources. This, in turn, leads to heightened expectations: "More and more users expect to be able to find everything online, full text. Technology lets us do much more, but it also increases expectations."

Another librarian wrote that the biggest change in the last three years has been "more services with greater expectations that a service does exist that will answer the question and that it is available immediately. Readers expect they will not need instruction and don't want to use Help screens either."

Sometimes this can be used to your advantage, as one librarian humorously observed, "Electronic services probably make reference librarians look more knowledgeable in the eyes of the patrons because a librarian can flee to online searching while trying to think of the right way to find an answer!"

Still, another librarian reported, "New technology is a two-edged sword. It allows us to access materials in new ways and exposes us to ideas that we may not otherwise have access to. The downside is that everyone (including librarians) is so eager to use the new source, we forget about the older tools that can provide the same information.

Perhaps it is time to retire at least some printed tools, commented one librarian, since "although we use subject encyclopedias, print directories, and other basic print factual sources, we rarely touch print indexes any longer. Even if we get patrons over to the print index section, it is clear they are not interested unless they are doing historical retrospective searching."

Still, observed another, "When the software, hardware, and telecommunications systems are all working as they should, [the digital library] is a real marvel of human creativity and cooperation (just like the nontechnological library!)"

Technostress?

Rapid and constant change almost always brings some level of stress. While I conducted my survey, Lisa Ennis <ennis_la@mercer.edu>, now librarian at Mercer College, surveyed all ARL reference librarians for indications of "technostress." One stressed-out reference librarian told Ennis, "The rapid proliferation and changing nature of electronic resources is creating an enormous amount of stress for reference librarians and a crisis for professional and staff development. Librarians are really struggling to keep up with developments and stay a-head of users in knowledge of resources and skills to use them." But stress doesn't have to be negative, as many of the respondents reported. Academic librarians are tackling and, most often, embracing the stress and excitement of change.

Two respondents sum up the joy that a bit of technostress can bring to die job of academic reference librarian. One wrote, "The advent of electronic reference service has greatly added to the challenge of the job by multiplying the potential avenues of research. It has simultaneously increased the chances for the successful resolution of man reference questions and the demands these resources place on the librarian's skills. I have been a professional reference librarian for 17 years and would have become bored with the work if electronics had not revolutionized the work."

The other observed that "it's more fun to go out to the desk now -- we can find so much with the little bits and pieces patrons provide us. I don't miss the big red Library of Congress Subject Headings volume a bit. I feel liberated with the ability to do keyword Boolean searching, for example. A huge improvement!"

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