The Future of Reference and Information Services in a Virtual World

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Introduction, Background, and Research Questions

Over the past few years, reference and information services have increasingly moved away from library reference desks and away from libraries' print collections out into the virtual world. A number of studies have examined virtual reference services, focusing on issues such as collaboration during the research process (e.g. Aldrich, 2008; Pomerantz, 2006; Stover, 2004; Summey & Akers, 2006), question answering success (e.g. Hyde & Tucker-Raymond, 2006; Kwon, 2007; Radford, 2006), and teaching practices surrounding virtual reference services (e.g. Adkins, 2006; Mon et al., 2008). Fewer studies have looked more broadly at the general state of virtual reference and information services, or at likely future directions. This study addressed two research questions related to these issues:

RQ1: How have reference and information services changed with the increasing influence of online information and information environments?

RQ2: What are the likely next developments in virtual reference and information services?

Methods

Data were gathered using two methods. First, the researchers conducted a series of three focus groups at the ASIS&T and ALISE annual meetings from January 2008 through January 2009. The focus group attendees were professors and instructors who teach reference and information courses at ALA-accredited universities in the U.S. and Canada. There were a total of 16 participants from 13 universities.

Next, the researchers collected data from audience members at a town hall-style meeting of faculty and others interested in digital reference education at the ALISE 2009 annual meeting. Approximately 55 audience members took part in the town hall meeting, at which the presenters briefly discussed their current reference and information services-related research and then asked the audience members to address four research questions, two of which are addressed in this poster.

The data were analyzed using the constant comparative method, the most common method for analyzing qualitative data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The constant comparative method involves repeatedly reading through a set of data, grouping and regrouping individual pieces of data into multiple sets of smaller groups until the set of groups that best answers the research questions is found.

Preliminary Findings

Data analysis showed that virtual reference and information services, and reference and information services in general, have changed greatly due to the influence of the electronic information explosion and of the steady stream of new information technologies as well. Six major themes relating to the current and future state of virtual and face-to-face reference emerged:

1. The convergence of multiple modes of reference.

Rather than viewing face-to-face reference, chat reference, IM reference, email reference, telephone reference, etc., as unique services, the trend seems to be to view them all as subsets of "reference and information services" in general. While each type of reference may require variant skills and techniques, they are all part of what one focus group participant labeled "the reference continuum." This convergence of reference modes is creating multitasking problems for many librarians. Indeed, today's reference librarians must multitask on a nearly continual basis. As one of the focus group participants said: "If you're on the desk, you're also answering the phone. You may be doing chat while you're also having to monitor email…and there's no opportunity to handle just one patron at a time."

2. The burgeoning range of information resources.

Because the bulk of the sources reference librarians are using are now digitally-based, the sources for digital and face-to-face reference tend to be the same, and they cover a wider range of formats and types than ever before. As one participant explained: "The person in the public library used to [be able to use just

print resources] because every information universe used to be covered in that small print collection. Now [independent of the] environments in which they're functioning, librarians have all these modes of answering questions, and in many cases, a much wider range of resources that they have to make sense of."

3. Reference as a collaborative process.

A number of the focus group and town hall meeting participants thought that reference in the near future is likely to become "a more collaborative process." They suggested that collaboration is already beginning to occur more frequently at all stages of the reference process and among all types of reference participants. This includes collaboration between multiple users working together to ask questions of shared interest, between multiple librarians working together on formulating answers to give to one or more users, and even between users and librarians collaborating during the question answering and research stages.

4. Reference in the library 2.0 mode.

The study participants saw a shift toward library 2.0 in reference and information services. That is, not only are the question answering and research components of reference services increasingly collaborative, users are playing an increasing role in information production. Just as library 2.0 means library services provided via the internet that encourage feedback and participation from users, reference 2.0 means that users are acting as information providers as well as information seekers. Since many users are now fairly proficient at finding information, they are moving toward providing information for others, by creating blogs, adding to library collaborative blogs and wikis, reviewing materials to be posted on library websites, answering questions, and so on, as a part of what one town hall meeting participant called "the people's network."

5. The shift from librarian-as-searcher to librarian-as-evaluator.

Now that many users have become more adept at finding information, some of the participants saw a shift in the reference librarian's role from a focus on the librarian-as-searcher to a focus on the librarian-as-evaluator. In this newer model, librarians teach users how to evaluate source quality and credibility more than how to locate sources. As one participant said: "One of the key components [of today's reference work] is our ability to evaluate what is a valid site, what is valid content, and how does it relate to the question that was asked." Another explained that: "Today it is more important than in the past to teach people how to evaluate the information and then [to] ask them how they will use it."

6. The possible demise of ready reference.

Lastly, some of the study participants suggested that due to the wider availability of information on the Internet, "Ready-reference is dead." This means that "Reference questions are turning into research questions, and that makes librarians and information professionals more important, not less important." This also means that, from a teaching standpoint, "It's really important to be thinking about skills sets, as opposed to physical settings, like libraries or even reference departments, because…everybody has turned into a reference librarian." Others disagreed and suggested that while ready reference may be on the decline or even extinct in other types of libraries, it is still alive and well in public libraries.

Conclusion

These six themes indicate a continued shift away from a linear reference process in which the librarian is the information provider and the user is information receiver, to a more interactive, collaborative reference model, in which the reference librarian and the reference user both play the roles of information seeker, information receiver, and information creator. As these roles continue to evolve, the challenge will be to design and implement technologies that can support and enhance them.

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