THE INTERNET PUBLIC LIBRARY'S *ASK AN IPL LIBRARIAN* SERVICE:

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF THE USERS AND THE QUESTIONS THEY ASK

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BACKGROUND

The Internet Public Library (IPL) offers a digital information service to Internet users through an asynchronous question answering enterprise. Since its launch on March 17, 1995, the IPL has maintained records of reference questions posed to the *Ask An IPL Librarian* service, approximately 77,000 to date.

This exploratory study was undertaken to examine the self-identified demographic characteristics of the *Ask An IPL Librarian* users, and explore the types of questions posed by users to the free question answering service.

The findings of this study allow IPL staff to develop responsive services and collections, and prepare participating library/information science students to meet the needs of global information users.

METHODOLOGY

In 2007, 13,368 questions were submitted to the *Ask An IPL Librarian* service. The service uses web forms found on the General Adult and KidSpace sites that collect the submitted question, as well as contextual information surrounding the nature of the question and users' self-identified demographic characteristics.

A systematic sample was generated using reference data obtained from the IPL's cleansed question logs. For the purposes of this analysis, a 5% sample was collected for a total sample size of 668 questions.

The researcher adhered to content analysis and question classification schemes for coding all free-form responses from users for data analysis. There were also discrete responses from users that were classified in a consistent manner.

ABOUT THEIR QUESTIONS...

This study finds that users and IPL librarians agree on the assignment of a subject code 84% of the time. The subject matter of the questions users pose to the *Ask An IPL Librarian* service shows that History, Education, Science, Literature, and Other/Misc. are prominent categories. Of the questions submitted using the KidSpace web form, 48% were science-related.

The questions posed to the service were analyzed using A.C. Graesser's (1994) typology of questions. Thirty-three percent of the sampled reference data was used for an analysis of question type (n=222). Using Graesser's typology, a majority of questions were categorized as follows: *Concept Completion* (22%), *Procedural* (12%), *Verification* (12%), *Feature Specification* (11%), and *Interpretation* (8%).

Of the 668 questions from 2007 reviewed for this study, 36% were not answered by IPL librarians. Of those unanswered questions, 45% were due to the immediacy of the patron's specified need-by date, 26% because the service did not have enough volunteer reference librarians to answer the questions, and 12% because the content of the questions fell outside the scope of the service's guidelines.
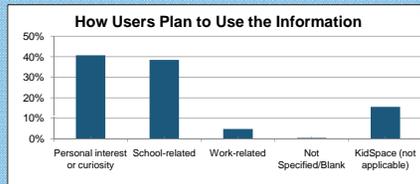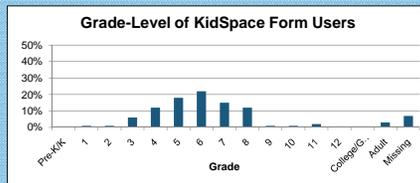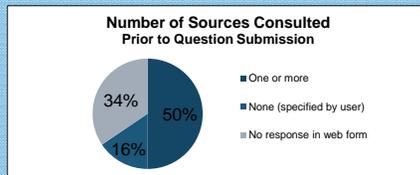
Subjects Assigned by IPL Librarians

Question Type by User Location
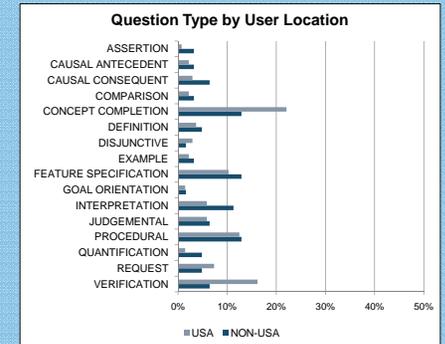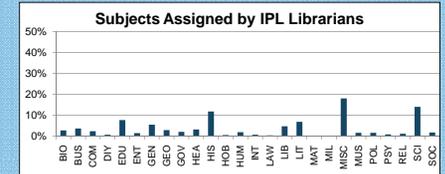
ABOUT THE USERS...

The IPL's *Ask An IPL Librarian* service provides information assistance and instruction to a global community: this study finds that 28% of the service's users are located outside of the United States, from 49 different countries. Of these, the most highly represented countries include India (5%), United Kingdom (2.54%), Nigeria (2.4%), and Canada (2.25%).

Eighty-four percent of users posed a request for information through the General Adult web form, followed by 16% usage of the KidSpace web form, and 0.3% direct email contact. Further, 46% of the General Adult web form users indicated that they planned to use the response to their informational request for a school assignment.

Seventy-two percent of questions submitted via the KidSpace web form (n=107) were claimed by users to be school-related.

Users who reported consulting outside sources prior to contacting the IPL stated having referred to a specific or general Internet source (such as Wikipedia or the IPL's digital collection) (34%), the Web (23%), a search engine (22%), an academic, public or school library (6%), and another person, teacher or librarian (4%).

Number of Sources Consulted Prior to Question Submission

- One or more — 50%
- None (specified by user) — 16%
- No response in web form — 34%

Grade-Level of KidSpace Form Users

How Users Plan to Use the Information

RECOMMENDATIONS

The reference interview in an asynchronous, digital reference environment necessitates that information professionals improvise methods for understanding the true informational needs of users. From this study, it is recommended that information professionals focus on the composition of a reference question intake form that will gather information from users, to provide for an exemplary response and a better understanding of users for service provision. This feedback loop provides for continual process improvement.

The reference question intake form should seek to collect information that profiles users on their demographic characteristics and subject matter needs. A redesign of the reference question intake form should be undertaken to gather data in a consistent, reusable manner, facilitated by the use of radio buttons, drop-down menus, and cue/trigger words.

FUTURE RESEARCH

As typical with exploratory studies, our examination raises many more questions than answers. While this study examined current IPL *Ask An IPL Librarian* service users and their questions, the data can serve as a powerful tool for further exploration. Other avenues for research include a comparative analysis of users' questions over time, the development of a rigorous question typology, user satisfaction studies, library and information science education in a global information environment, and automatic question answering.

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