

Crossing Borders: The Internet Public Library as a Global Information Service

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Introduction, Background, and Research Questions

Since its inception in 1995, the Internet Public Library (IPL) has remained an online information enterprise consisting of a question answering service and a collection of approximately 40,000 critically-selected, authoritative digital resources in the form of links. As reference and information services have travelled into digital spaces and away from physical reference desks and print collections, the IPL is just one of many sources available on the Web for meeting users' information needs. Traditional bricks-and-mortar libraries draw their user community from their surrounding physical environs; but, as the IPL has no physical counterpart, its community of users spans all parts of the world.

Previous studies of IPL users' information needs have focused solely on painting a picture of users of the email-based question answering service and the questions they ask (e.g., Ryan, 1996; Carter & Janes, 2000), as well as users' satisfaction with the question answering service (Chang & Holland, 2005). To-date, there has not been a holistic examination of the IPL's two services, question answering and digital collections, nor a focus solely on the use of those two services by a community of users located outside the borders of the United States. This study addresses research questions related to these issues:

RQ1: What are the characteristics of global information users of the IPL's question answering service and digital collections?

RQ2: What are the information needs and behaviors of the IPL's global information users?

Methods

Data pertaining to each IPL service were gathered separately. First, the IPL's archive of cleansed reference transactions from one year, 2007, was mined to retrieve reference data from the *Ask an IPL Librarian* question answering service. A 5% systematic sample of the total number of reference questions posed to the service during 2007 was collected for a total sample size of 668 reference transactions. All sampled reference transactions were analyzed to develop a profile of IPL users based on self-reported characteristics, including users' location, grade level in school (if applicable), intended information use, and sources consulted prior to question submission. Only users who self-identified their location as outside of the United States were included for the study (n=185). Additionally, all of the sampled questions submitted to the service by non-U.S. users were examined to determine the subjects of the questions posed, as well as the types of questions posed based on a classification using A.C. Graesser's typology of questions.

Second, to investigate use of the IPL digital collections, usage reports from Google Analytics were generated for the calendar year January 1, 2007 to December 31, 2007. The usage reports were analyzed to determine where IPL's users were located, how they found the IPL on the Web, and what collections were accessed once they arrived to the library. Google Analytics tracks data on users' location (e.g., country, city, continent, region) and native language, their methods exercised to access the library (e.g., direct visit, referral from another website, keyword search via search engine), and their

seeking behavior upon arrival (e.g., which digital collections were accessed, search terms used within the library's search engine, time spent in the library).

Implications for Practice and Future Research

Understanding the characteristics of international users of the IPL's question answering and digital collections services is important for a working, virtual library because it informs decision-making about the provision of reference and information services in many ways. First, many more non-U.S. users visit the IPL's digital collections than submit questions to the *Ask an IPL Librarian* service. There may be several reasons to explain these results, such as: the growing self-help trend, the perception of libraries and reference assistance in places abroad, language barriers, or the accessibility of the question answering service's web form for receiving users' questions. Further research is needed to explore these issues.

Second, by identifying the information needs and behaviors of the specified user group, the IPL may focus on building a collection of digital resources to meet users' information needs, and design the organization of those digital resources in a manner which facilitates browsing, searching, and resource discovery. For instance, the IPL may consider building a digital collection that is specifically tailored to the information demands of the international community. In regards to the question answering service, the IPL may consider collaborating with international organizations that specialize in multicultural, multilingual digital reference services.

Third, and most importantly, as the Web extends its reach to places near and far, the number of potential international users may continue to increase. This information environment creates an opportune situation for the IPL's two services, question answering and digital collections, to truly cross borders and meet the information needs of a global group of users.

References

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