

## The Uncertain Realities of Reference Service

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HAVE YOU EVER NOTICED that Nobel, Pulitzer and other noteworthy prizewinners flaunt a casual appearance? While Alison Lurie would have us believe "looseness and disorder in dress are erotically appealing,"<sup>1</sup> one suspects a more practical explanation is that the victors discovered a relaxed way of dressing. Just because Ms. Lurie or an advertising agency confuses loose clothing with steaming sex don't make it so. Just because we are pounded by loose and unobservant conclusions about reference services and librarians don't make it so either.

At least some of those who write or speak about reference services and reference librarians seem to betray a bewildering confusion of ideas. A few are over-inclined toward dependence upon the consecrated social sciences, others to no more than the pagan and authoritative voice. Among their variety of special, vague myths are:

1. The reference librarian violates the pursuit of human origin, and is, in fact, a stereotype created to make a point, to transform an argument into a battle cry.
2. The whited sepulcher of technology allows librarians to shed tradition rapidly and evolve into profoundly oppressive stereotypes of another variety.
3. No longer haunted by reality, the reference librarian may turn a collective back on the community and bow to the lords of sheer and unmitigated power, e.g., those who have the dollars.

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It is argued here that the reference librarian is an intellectual, peculiarly equipped to have technology work for the librarian rather than the librarian for technology. Furthermore, it is a conviction that all people, not just a celebrated few, must be served by reference librarians.

The text for the discussion of these assumed truths is found in the words of Russell Baker, a fearful and portentous sage: "An educated person is one who has learned that information always turns out to be at best incomplete and very often false."<sup>2</sup> For example, when the founding fathers first wandered into Bismark, North Dakota, they had a special kind of information. Bismark was to be the center of the world. And to celebrate, the lads built a gigantic state capitol. Something went wrong, and today the building is a monument to bad information. It equally is a reminder that certain petrifying notions about reference services have created other oppressive monuments.

The first is the peculiar idea the public is supposed to have about the reference librarian. According to this curious stereotype, the librarian is a "fussy old woman of either sex, myopic and repressed, brandishing or perhaps cowering behind a date stamp and surrounded by an array of notices which forbid virtually every human activity."<sup>3</sup> The professional view is hardly any more winning, or convincing. Here the reference librarian may be a technocrat who "admires innovation and emphasizes quantifiability above all things," or a mandarin "who prefers conventional formats of information to non-traditional ones...[and is] concerned primarily with the preservation and organization of the collective wisdom."<sup>4</sup>

The stereotype varies from writer to writer, year to year, although in general, the end result is a social horror. No matter how this character is created, it is impossible to locate a living person for an actual photograph. Even the public which supposedly takes such a dim view of the librarian knows better. Among high school students the image is seen as "quite favorable" and they have a "fairly positive picture" of the librarian.<sup>5</sup> Most user studies confirm that people don't want to shoot the librarian, and even are relatively confident of the librarian's mental capabilities.<sup>6</sup>

The corrective truth is that your average reference librarian is a human being with mind and sensibilities of an individual. Approach a librarian rather than a statistic and you find a born artist and nonconformist. Emerson reportedly said: "Whosoever would be a man [or woman], must be a nonconformist." To this, historian Perry Miller added: "He never in his own life and conduct showed himself other than exemplary."<sup>7</sup> Much the same is to be said for the average reference librarian whose individuality is apparent.

## *Uncertain Realities*

Equally apparent is the artistic nature of the experienced reference librarian. Reference service is an art form which draws from the raw materials of all subject areas. No set of rules, no matter how carefully considered, will get the reference librarians from question *A* to answer *B* unless they understand this quotation from Ben Jonson: "He hath consumed a whole night in lying looking at his great toe, about which he hath seen Tartars and Turks, Romans and Carthaginians, fight in his imagination."<sup>8</sup> Substantive knowledge is a must, a liberal education a help, a scientific and technological background useful, but imagination is indispensable.

In fact, the corrective of the image might be taken one step further. Why not call the reference librarian an intellectual?

Who or what is an intellectual? Jacques Barzun's snappy answer is it is anyone who carries a briefcase. A group of French and American scholars arrive at a somewhat different definition:

In the word's broadest sense, an intellectual can be defined as anybody who accomplishes an intellectual act, that is who reflects on what he does. The problem with this definition is that it's a bit fuzzy. But try to make it any sharper and you run into endless difficulties. In the end, one is tempted to agree with Edgar Morin that whatever an intellectual is, his existence is justified because his task is to become "the guardian of general, generic, and generous ideas" in the face of a world of technocrats, scientists, and administrators who no longer manage to see beyond the narrow confines of their specialty.

In his famous study, Richard Hofstadter shows the problems of designation, and concludes there is a gap between the intellectual and the person who is vitally dependent upon ideas. To paraphrase him: "The heart of the matter...is that the professional lives off ideas, not for them. His professional role, his professional skills, do not make him an intellectual. He is a mental worker, a technician."<sup>10</sup>

The definition is, to say the least, confusing. And it is hardly necessary to switch from "reference librarian" to "intellectual librarian," yet it seems important that the profession would do well to consider the reference librarian as an intellectual, or if you wish, a "mental worker." Unfortunately, in a reign of administrators and technocrats "who no longer manage to see beyond the narrow confines of their specialty," the intellectual aspects of reference often are lost, overlooked, or more likely, frowned upon as less than necessary. Here one is reminded of a leading library periodical which returned a manuscript to an author with the curt note that the journal readers are "not interested in philosophical matters." Nor, apparently, is *Library Literature*. The only use of the term in this index is as an adjective, i.e.,

"Intellectual freedom." A cursory examination of the index since its inception in 1921 reveals the same pattern. Conversely, a related H.W. Wilson publication, *Education Index*, is not so shy. Here one finds such descriptors as "Intellectual development," "Intellectual life" and even "Intellectuals."<sup>11</sup> The *Reader's Guide* has several cross references from "Intellectuals and intellectual life," including "United States—Intellectual life" where, significantly enough, one finds *see also* references to such things as "Books and reading," "Colleges and universities," but never to libraries.<sup>12</sup>

The *Library of Congress Subject Headings* indicates that at least some professions, here and abroad, are familiar with the term. LC provides for such headings as "Intellectual cooperation," "Intellectual life," "Intellectuals" and even "Inefficiency, intellectual."<sup>13</sup>

The automatic assumption that *intellectual* is a synonym for *inefficiency* and, to quote a well-known wowsler, a member of the "effete corps of impudent snobs"<sup>14</sup> is to explain its lack of attachment to the reference librarian. In America the intellectual is suspect. If Hofstadter and other social historians are correct, the average American is an egalitarian who evaluates by the numbers. This is "to the despair of American...intellectuals, who always lose to the masses, even when the mass market takes them up."<sup>15</sup> An intellectual is seen as an elitist who has withdrawn to a prepared position of relative insensitivity to the needs of the numbers.

The attitude has influenced reference librarians who are in daily contact with the public. Anxious to be considered democratic, certainly not a zealot elitist, the librarian is likely to conform to the American pattern of suspicion concerning intellectual tags, if not achievements.

Even librarians with a somewhat broader world view than the wowslers are suspect of intellectuals, primarily because they associate the term with dictation of taste. This, to be sure, is another battleground with different players, yet serves to make the point that when you are selecting descriptors, be sure you choose those with the widest support. No one suggests that *intellectual*, then, be substituted for *reference librarian*, but certainly intellectual ideas might be more broadly considered in defining the reference librarian's role. What would be some of the advantages of this type of orientation?

More stress on enthusiastic intellectualism would do much to improve the deplorable amount of misinformation, or no information, given by at least some reference librarians to innocent readers. Lacking self-confidence, time, resources, and, one suspects, a good and continuing education, about 50 percent of the librarians seem to strike out or at

### *Uncertain Realities*

least foul when giving answers.<sup>16</sup> And there are other decided benefits, which will be considered shortly.

Stress on developing intellectual ideas about reference librarians and their services of course won't *make* it so, but this seems much better than the peculiar method others have of directing the librarian's future. Here the focus is not on content, but on title. The trend is to recreate another stereotype with such winning descriptors as "product line manager," "information broker," or the more common "information manager." While it is sometimes difficult to tell the real Dr. Jekyll from the sometimes Mr. Hyde, the terms are acceptable because they are tied to the jargon of business and technology. A superior who may never have been inside a library feels as comfortable with this place name map as with substitutes for *library*, such as *media* or *learning center*. Pauline Wilson notes the terms are not working well because they are too ambiguous. "Persons using the name...are asking what the term means...and complaining about lack of status."<sup>17</sup>

The terms mean nothing because there is nothing behind them but incredibly bad grammar. Apparently neither disturbed by intellect or even common sense (albeit the two terms are not mutually exclusive), the dragons of the literature strong-mouth their way to proud ambiguity and empty form.

Library literature has suffered much neologistic turmoil, e.g., as Swanson observes in his review of one of the essays in *The Role of the Library in an Electronic Society* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Graduate School of Library Science, 1980): "the authors fling themselves into a sea of metaphor and thrash about wildly. In the span of their first page alone the library is transformed from an anchor to a beacon to barnacle."<sup>18</sup>

It is one thing to believe in the importance of knowledge and its twin, information. It is another to confuse crippled metaphors with realities of budget, lack of job opportunities, and improved services.

It is not unusual to find the same people who use the terrible terminology quoting at length from other members on the damp beach of the future. Call it sentimental, call it a touching faith in the cudgeling of another's brains, but the literature seems filled with the quaking verbiage of such future freaks as Kahn and Toffler. McLuhan apparently is no longer about, and Bell grows old, but there are others with a sherry flask waiting to bring them back to the crystal ball.

One may consider the honest approach to economic difficulties by reading such cogent and sensible advice as found in Betty Sellen's *What Else Can You Do With A Library Degree* (New York: Neal Schuman,

1980). Or one can turn to the library educators, from Sam Rothstein and Robert Stueart to Robert Taylor, for some sound advice and a bit of sunshine. It takes this type of reading to appreciate the “fa, la, la” predictions of, say, *The Third Wave*. Here one critic observes it ain’t so much the metaphor as it is the lack of content and sensibility:

Does a hint of [the level of content] gleam from the eager anticipation “that instead of merely watching some Archie Bunker or Mary Tyler Moore of the future, we are able to talk to them and influence their behavior in the show”? Realizing such an ambition may indeed delight the mind and spirit of the people surfing on the Third Wave.... Nor does he say how information will fill the needs of a world hungering for effectively integrative ideas. Only thinking produces—and then not always—the synthesizing notions that give an age its basic unity and invest it with meaning....Tasks may entail high technical competence, but conceptual thought and its risks appear lost in the electronic shuffle.<sup>19</sup>

Well, the reference librarian is quite lost in that electronic shuffle. True, general ideas and reflection seem to disappear or are devalued, and the result may be a disaster. The librarian is one of the few professionals capable of reconnecting the analytic processes of the mind to imagination: “Both [must be] restored to a place of dignity....Opinion must be expressed in dialogue.”<sup>20</sup>

The dialogue may be translated into the famous verse which opens with: “The reference librarian is the mediator between the user and the information needed.” The moment someone discovers there is a slight difference between masses of citations and actual knowledge, the reference librarian should be there to start the dialogue.

The reference librarian will know a field(s) as well as the subject expert, but will have the added advantage of being familiar with related areas, particularly through a knowledge of reference materials, publishing practices, online databases, and specific sources of information which may help the user to evaluate and synthesize. One may argue convincingly that subject knowledge comes first, yet it is really not a matter of ranking. The peculiar skill of the reference librarian is the ability to link and to interpret, and that comes only with a thorough knowledge of what Messrs. Walford and Sheehy have between their covers.

These days, too, the reference librarian must be able to differentiate between a bus and a computer terminal. One might say it is a fatal error to dismiss technology and the computer, but this is somewhat analogous to trying to replace the light globe with a candle. Like it or not, we are all slaves to technology. As a famous historian put it:

## *Uncertain Realities*

Man, as he searches for the strength and the means to live a free life, at the same time subjugates himself. In every act of mechanization of the life of the community, a quantity of human freedom is tied fast. As soon as the bow is invented, it is not only the man who uses the bow but also the bow which compels the man to use it....The process of improving civilization is indivisible from the process of mechanization....Every school, every doctrine, every form of government and business, puts man into a harness and limits his activities.<sup>21</sup>

The assumption is that improving reference services is "indivisible from the process of mechanization." Simple observation, as well as more objective studies, indicates this is hardly the truth. In fact, after all the terminals have been installed, the fee schedules posted and the librarians dutifully trained, the level of service is not necessarily any better (or worse?) than before.

Reasons for this vary, although one suspects two basic explanations:

1. One may quickly pull, say 155 citations from databases, but the problem of relevancy remains. And relevancy requires individualized consideration which, at least at this point, is somewhat beyond the machine.
2. Enamored by machines, both librarians and users tend to forget that originally, an individual had to feed the machine the data it digests and the results are no better than those original data. Computer terminals are marvels at retrieving, but are virtually useless at creating basic information.

As the terminals become more prevalent, easier to use, and within the economic range of the average library, the basic problem of reference service is likely to shift dramatically. Today that problem is finding the fact, the relevant bit of information, the general book or magazine article. A skillfully programmed computer with access to several thousand databases (rather than the mere 100-150 today) will locate the facts almost instantaneously. The reference librarian of the next generation, then, is likely to be more concerned with knowledge than information, more involved with assisting the less-than-expert user with determining what bits of data will solve problems.

Lancaster and others note this possible result of technology which will tend to make the librarian more and more an intellectual. He sees the reference person no longer in a library, but, more radically: "affiliated directly with academic departments, working as equal members of research teams in academia, in health care, in industry, and elsewhere. I also expect to see the appearance of greatly increasing numbers of

freelance librarians....The librarian of the electronic age could become a valued professional colleague of chemists, physicists, physicians, attorneys, educators, and other professionals.'<sup>22</sup> Confusion between types of library service has Lancaster convinced the library as such is likely to disappear. One may take strong exception to that notion—after all, over 50 to 75 percent of public library users read novels and avoid much informational help—without detracting from the basic conclusion that librarians must exercise their intellectual capacities more than possibly in the past.

Having taken a rightful place as intellectual and arbiter of knowledge in the information arboretum, the reference librarian must consider the dimensions of services. Who is, or is not, to be served?<sup>23</sup>

While over the years there have been and will continue to be countless surveys of who does or does not use the library, who reads or does not read books, and who goes to bed eating peanut-butter sandwiches, little seems to change. The 1949 Public Library Inquiry revealed that about 20 percent of the adult public visit a public library, but only about 10 percent of the same public borrow 98 percent of the books. By 1981 the figure was approximately the same, as was the profile of the library users—essentially an elite group of better-than-average middle-class Americans. Other studies have found that two-thirds of those who don't use the library, when asked what it would take to get them inside, replied "nothing."<sup>24</sup>

The "nothing" is street talk, which seems to escape some otherwise astute observers, for hopeless resignation. You can say you are not an average American because you don't watch 6.5 hours of television each day, and if asked what would win you over, your reply could be "nothing." You long ago gave up on television improving.

The fact that only 10 or 20 percent of the public uses the library drives librarians to different conclusions. (Incidentally, translate those percentages into numbers and they are somewhat more impressive, e.g., 22 or 44 million people is a respectable audience for even the world's most celebrated television drama.) Still, if tradition shows only a set group coming to the reference desk, why try to change? This seems a particularly good question when budgets are slashed and it is difficult enough to serve those who are accustomed to using reference services.

Swanson suggests the following argument for limiting reference services to the information aware. He makes the valid point that we are not equal, share only the human condition in common. It is an error, he adds, to suppose all can ever have equal opportunity, and it would be dangerous to attempt to equalize the country economically:

## *Uncertain Realities*

Clearly a leveling of wealth and income would do away with all of the usual incentives to undertake ventures that entail new products and services, or to engage in risky, exploratory behavior in trying to discover the most suitable niche in the economic ecosystem for one's own special abilities and interests. *In short, the successful pursuit of equality of economic condition or outcome can bring entrepreneurial evolution to a stop.* We can all agree no doubt that it is unfair for someone to cheat in a poker game—and that everyone should be treated equally under the rules of fair play—but there are many nowadays who seem to believe that it is equally unfair if someone wins. If winnings are automatically redistributed it becomes unclear as to who would then be willing to play the game. Evolution breeds both winners and losers; the only certain route to equality of condition is to arrange it so that we are all losers.<sup>25</sup>

This is a more blatant, some would say honest, justification for limiting reference services to even the smaller number of so-called information literates who are “winners” and make up about 800,000 to slightly over a million of those who do research in technology, business, government and for war and for peace.<sup>26</sup> Unfortunately for the librarians who would limit service, there are several million other Americans out there who have an inconvenient: “tendency to want information. THIRST FOR KNOWLEDGE and NEED TO KNOW are both clichés extracted from reality....To the scenario of a knowing-commodity exchange, one really ought to add an image of starving masses pounding at the gate, demanding grain.”<sup>27</sup>

It is another cliché to say this is a much more complex civilization than a decade or two ago. It is a tragedy to add that millions of people, primarily as much for lack of information as for want of interpretation of that information, simply cannot function in this society. If Swanson and his followers are correct, that's life and the losers can't be helped. It is equally correct that losers tend to destroy what the winners hold dearest—and that's everything from a corner grocery store, to a neighborhood, to a government. But from a daily, “where do we get the money for the library” point of view, consider why libraries are having so much trouble with budgets:

In an ongoing New England study, it has been found that 73 percent of all citizen information needs are personal—solving day-to-day problems, coping with trauma or crisis, news about current events, interest in cultural heritage, religion and family life, and needs for recreation and leisure activities. Libraries are listed ninth in their information seeking patterns, with only a small percentage actually using the library, a clear indication that few actually cast the librarian as a diagnostician of information needs. Libraries in such an environ-

ment are vulnerable to reduced support and, even more seriously, are in danger of being cast in the role of keepers of the book, superseded by other forms of information services in the community. In the past, users have not held librarians responsible for anything more than what has been normally provided because they have not seen themselves in that client relationship.<sup>28</sup>

The need for librarians to reach out and help those other than the information literates is determined by another startling estimate. A Ford Foundation study found that possibly some 50 percent of adult Americans border on being illiterate, that is have considerable difficulty in reading at a high school level.<sup>29</sup> How is this possible when, according to the Labor Department, some 40 percent of the labor force aged 25 to 64 has completed a year or more of college, and by 1981, 22.1 percent of all workers in this age category have an academic degree?<sup>30</sup> Statistically, the 50 percent illiterate *v.* the 40 percent with one year or more of college still adds up, but it is just possible even academic training does not make the user comfortable with reading, or with information.

In what Jacques Barzum terms "the wasteland of American education," it is quite possible to tramp from one end to the other of a college program and remain pretty much unable to read, or its natural companion, to reason. One may, of course, from all of these data, construct a tight argument for serving only those eager and intelligent enough to appreciate education, but this type of catering to the minority may prove extremely dangerous. From the firm position of self-interest and even political safety, it is wise to have a reasonably educated population about to keep democracy in place. Without easy access to information, we will see: "all around us the menace of the untaught—the menace to themselves and to us, which amounts to saying that they are unself-governed and therefore ungovernable....There is no help for it—we must teach and we must learn....That is the condition of living and surviving at least tolerably well."<sup>31</sup>

A much more formidable threat to democracy is not the elusive intellectual in the library, but the loathsome notion that the tremendous technology available for locating information should be limited to the few who pay. God may have led Americans through fire and water to come out anti-intellectuals, but let's hope they are not trapped by their own calcined profit motive. If only the strolling comrades with money for the computer terminal or for copyrighted interlibrary loan materials are to be served, all others will have to move aside and eventually be forced out the front door. Meanwhile, those who have the cash may have to trade it for more than information. The very ability to find and strike bits of data within a blink of an eye also allows the computer to play, if

## Uncertain Realities

only potentially, a role in Orwell's 1984. The potential loss of privacy may presage a problem even for the information rich. Beyond that, of course, is the final burnt night when the computer-served discover they can do their own work without the librarian. The completely mangled service will collapse, or at best take another form.

It all comes down to the intelligent purpose of libraries, that is, to provide the best information service possible for all of the people who need that information. Perhaps this is another cliché, yet it remains a marvelous truth. There are a multitude of distant and totally unexpected events and ideas which everyone should be free to help decide. It does not seem an unrealistic possibility that the reference librarian may be a primary aid in that decision-making process....not for a few, but for everyone.

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BILL KATZ

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