Current Trends in Reference Service in Public Libraries

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PUBLIC LIBRARY REFERENCE services are in the midst of the most revolutionary change in their history. The new technologies have arrived. Even as recently as five years ago, the only "machines" reference librarians commonly housed in their reference departments and used on a day-to-day basis were 35mm microfilm readers for back files of newspapers and magazines. Today terminals and fiche readers, printers and CRTs, COM catalogs and database searching, on-line catalogs and on-line access to bibliographic utilities are seen in most of the public library reference departments in the country. Integration and use of the equipment and the vast resources it makes available have significant implications for staffing, training, budgets, public relations, indeed for all aspects of public library reference service.[1]

Other current trends in public library reference service of importance are budget constraints in the public sector; adapting to a greater percentage of growth than circulation services are experiencing; use, training, and supervision of paraprofessionals; centralized v. dispersed organization of reference service, including adult and children's, subject specialties, physical locations, networks; participation in management of reference service (the "professional bureaucracy"); and more realistic attempts at measurement and evaluation of reference service.

Perhaps the most basic change has been in the "card catalog," the bibliographic record of the holdings of the library itself.[2] Printed book catalogs, computer-output-microform (COM) catalogs in roll film or

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fiche, and on-line catalogs are some of the format options currently seen in public libraries, in lieu of, or in addition to, card catalogs. Each form or combination of forms has its advantages and disadvantages which must be learned and adapted to, and, subsequently, explained to library users.

A second basic change in the library's catalog has resulted from access to on-line bibliographic utilities in cataloging departments. This has achieved a degree of standardization and sophistication in local catalog records which more than fifty years of Library of Congress printed cards were not able to produce. While LC subject headings in an off-line catalog may not be the easiest subject approach for the lay person, standardization of bibliographic entry makes any catalog far more rational and easy to use for the professional.

If we consider all forms of catalog produced from machine-readable databases as interim formats between the manually-produced card catalog and the on-line catalog, their shortcomings may be easier to cope with. But explaining to patrons—as you must with a book or COM catalog—that they must look in two or more places and may still not have an up-to-date list of the library's holdings is a difficult public relations job. It often requires a theoretical discussion of the necessity of a machine-readable file before an on-line catalog can be had, and the cost of maintaining a manually-produced card catalog v. other formats.

While on-line catalogs may be the most cost-effective form, currently available "user-cordial" systems are less efficient for sophisticated and frequent users (among whom we must count reference librarians). Being able to enter the system immediately at the specific point you want (always, of course, providing that the system provides the needed specificity for an individual search) is a time-saving feature of card catalogs which the on-line vendors would do well to incorporate in their touch-screen terminals. However, reference librarians in public libraries are in the forefront of encouraging the installation of on-line catalogs because of the advantages of Boolean searching, continuous or overnight updating, and potential links to other resources.

Database Searching

Next to the mechanization of the library's catalog, the mechanization of reference sources generally—e.g., on-line databases—is the most significant trend in public library reference work.[3] Many public libraries are just beginning database searching and still treat it as a "special service," often a fee-based service. Frequently only one or two librarians

on a large reference staff will actually do the searching and only "in-depth," or more extensive searches are done by this method. However, some public libraries have as their goal, fully-integrated database searching. In these libraries, all reference librarians are expected to be proficient searchers and to use the most cost-effective way to find information regardless of format. The decision to use an on-line search must be the reference librarian's, not the patron's; therefore, fees cannot be directly passed on to the user. Librarians do brief searches when appropriate as part of their regular reference duty "while the user waits." Longer or more specialized searches may be done as time permits or by reference librarians with greater knowledge and experience of particular databases.

A major impact on public library reference service is the retraining of the entire reference staff in the many new and complicated reference sources which integrated database searching requires. It is a staggering load on an ordinary reference training schedule. In addition, providing opportunities for continuous practice of the new skills to reinforce the learning and hone the skills requires a major marketing effort with the patrons. Potential future savings from discontinuing printed index subscriptions are not available to offset the training and marketing costs when the library begins offering machine-readable reference service. Furthermore, transition periods from no database searching to a commonly-used, fully-integrated service are often much longer than anticipated.

Budget Restraints, Increased Service, and Use of Nonprofessionals

This on-line revolution in public library reference service has, therefore, significant budget implications at a time when public library budgets have not kept pace with inflation. And, at the same time, public library reference service has continued to increase dramatically. While circulation statistics for public libraries across the country have stabilized, annual increases of 5, 10, or 15 percent in reference transactions have been reported by many public libraries. The results are heavier work loads with fewer human and materials resources. While public administrators talk about "increased productivity," public services professionals have workshops on "stress" and "burn-out."[4] Services which patrons and reference librarians took for granted may now be fee-based—such as charging for reserving books which are out, charges for interlibrary loan, loan of audio-visual materials, information searches—or may even no longer be available. Explaining all this to

patrons in a way which will make them library advocates rather than library dropouts isn't what many reference librarians had in mind when they chose their librarian specialty. Coping with reduced materials budgets means more reserves and interlibrary loans for document requests and more referrals to higher levels in systems and networks for subject or fact requests. All this makes for a heavier work load and less even-tempered reference librarians.

But because reference service is so labor intensive, the only way to make significant cost savings is through reduction of personnel costs. This had led to some very creative management of resources by careful analysis of the work of reference librarians and the attempt to use highly-paid, experienced professionals as judiciously as possible. Another trend in public library reference work is increased use of para-professionals in reference service.[5] What was an unconscionable lowering of standards to the majority of reference librarians ten years ago has become an economic necessity of today.

In some ways, training programs in public library reference departments today seem more like the kind of in-service training of librarians more common in the last years of the nineteenth century. A combination of some library school training, formal internships, much on-the-job training and coaching and in-house workshops are turning out beginning professionals or para-professionals much more capable on the job than the typical masters-degreed library school product with no practical experience. This trend also seems to fit in with the "life-long" learning concept of the adult educators. Librarians may be spreading their professional training and even their general education over many more years, interspersed with increasingly responsible job experiences. The practice of active participation in the education and training of their own reference librarians has made the jobs of senior public library reference librarians considerably different from a few years ago. Designing and presenting courses and workshops, formal training, one-to-one coaching, and supervision, as well as back-up, in-depth reference service, are the primary components of their jobs. Organization of the work of a reference department along vertical rather than horizontal (professional) lines creates career development opportunities not only for the increasingly educated para-professionals, but also for the professionals who are learning supervisory and management skills.

Organization of Reference Services

Another trend in public library reference service which may be receiving increased impetus from budget cuts is greater centralization of

reference services.[6] Libraries which can be kept open with one professional generalist who gives service to all ages in all subject areas have a very different minimum budget level than libraries which need four subject specialists and a children's specialist in residence before they can open the door.

Larger libraries may hire children's literature, business information, science, or othe subject specialists for their reference staffs, but those specialists may also be expected to be good all-around generalists, too. Public library architecture is a very critical factor in the decision to have centralized *v.* decentralized reference organization. Some new libraries built only a few years ago may demand a degree of decentralization; some built many years ago do not in any way lend themselves to a centralized reference service.

One of the most exciting developments is that libraries which may have discontinued a separate children's reference service for reasons of economy of staffing are finding that many reference librarians are becoming enthusiastic proponents of one reference service for people of all ages. These librarians state that separate reference service for children discriminates against them giving them inferior access to information.

The trend to greater centralization has its parallel outside the individual building or system in greater development of reference networks.[7] Economies in collection development as well as in staff resources put a greater burden on headquarters reference departments *v.* branch reference service. And they also mean greater reliance on state and regional reference back-up networks.

Another trend related to economic constraints is some evidence of new and extended cooperation with schools in library instruction programs.[8] Again, programs which may have gotten started because of economies are starting to be seen as valuable in their own right. Commencing library instruction for elementary school children at both the school and public library begins life-long learning and encourages use of multiple information agencies. Choices among library and information centers may be based on the nature of the questions asked and full resources library networks may be called into play.

Governance of Reference Service

The idea of the reference generalist is compatible with another trend in public library reference work: the dispersal of management functions throughout the professional staff.[9] Every reference librarian is not only a professional generalist but also a manager. For organization

of reference service, this appears to be the next step leading to participatory management. Once all librarians are equally involved in working out group decisions, they logically become equally involved in seeing that those decisions are carried out. In a tight job market, where librarians may stay in the same job for a longer time, this is a good staff development technique: learning organization, planning, and/or supervision by managing one aspect of reference service. Some discrete units of reference management which can be decentralized are coordination of reference materials selection; scheduling the public service desk; budgeting and training for database searching; serving as training coordinator; making liaisons with various departments and working on committees both within and outside the library system.

Measurement of Reference Service

A final significant trend in public library reference service is the increased standardization in the measurement and evaluation of reference service.[10] Agreement on definitions of measureable units through the work of the ANSI (American National Standards Institute) Z-39 committee and the Reference Statistics Committee of LAMA-ALA (Library Management Association of ALA) has been an important basic step for all reference librarians.[11] The Reference Services Guidelines developed by the Reference Standards Committee of RASD (Reference and Adult Services Division) are another important base for current work in measurement and evaluation of reference services.[12] Public library performance measures development has given a special impetus to measuring reference service in public libraries. Some promising new research has been reported in the last few years—particularly with nonverbal behavior and with queueing—which may lead to more sophisticated evaluation in the future. In the meantime public libraries can begin to compare some of their own reference measures to those of other public libraries.

A forerunner of current reference services measurement and part of the effort to develop standard definitions was the 1971 study of reference service in all types of libraries in Atlanta by Ruth White.[13] This study was undertaken at the behest of the Reference Standards Committee of RASD as background for the development of the reference service guidelines. The public library part of the research consisted of ninety-four interviews with public library users. The kind of information obtained from them concerned use and evaluation of reference service and demographic information. These users were 54 percent male, 46 percent female; 21 percent were under eighteen; 38 percent were eighteen to

twenty-five; and 41 percent over twenty-five. Twenty-eight percent were college graduates, another 27 percent had had some college or were current students; 9 percent were high school graduates and 20 percent had not graduated from high school (presumably approximately the same 21 percent under eighteen). Of those surveyed, nineteen people indicated needed improvements in reference service and fourteen of those singled out materials as the specific area needing improvement. Two-thirds of the respondents had used the reference department only in person and twenty-five had used telephone reference. Fifty-five of the sixty-six who had used the reference service indicated they got the information they wanted.

Another source of information about reference service in public libraries was the study done for the Public Library Association as a preliminary to the development of the public library performance measures.[14] This data was gathered in 1971 and published in 1973 from a nationwide sample of public libraries, collected by stratified sampling of small, medium and large libraries. (Category was determined by total annual budget.) A particularly interesting statistic gathered in this study was that 3.4 reference questions (as opposed to directional questions) were answered per hour per reference staff person for all three sizes of libraries combined. Other findings reveal that for small- and medium-sized public libraries, approximately 45 percent of the reference users were students and 52 percent nonstudents; for large libraries, 23 percent were students and 76 percent nonstudents. For small and medium libraries, approximately 80 percent of questioners were in the library building, and 17 to 18 percent were by telephone. For larger libraries, the percentages were 54 in person, 47 by telephone. In all cases, 98 to 100 percent of questions were classified as "answered."

The libraries tabulated reference activity by each hour of the day from 9 A.M. to 9 P.M. The busiest hour was from 4 to 5 P.M. for all sizes of libraries. Other busy times included 11 A.M. to 4 P.M. for the large libraries (business was fairly evenly distributed over the daytime hours); 2 to 4 P.M. and 7 to 9 P.M. for the medium-sized libraries; and noon to 2 P.M., 3 to 4 P.M., and 6 to 8 P. M. for the small libraries. Since many large libraries are downtown central libraries, many medium-sized libraries are suburban libraries, and many small libraries are small-town libraries, location may partially explain some of the differences in busiest times of the day.

Most "public service personnel," spend about half of their time at the reference desk and half of it in other duties. Scheduling by hour somewhat imperfectly mirrored peak business periods. Medium-sized

libraries in particular needed to shift some of their morning staff to evening hours.

A study of reference service in eighteen public libraries in Connecticut was conducted by the Southern Connecticut Library Council in 1972.[15] While some categories of data differed from the Public Library Association study, the results are comparable. For example, reference activity during the day was collected in larger units than one hour. However, the busiest time period for this study was from 2 to 5 P. M. This study also compared reference activity levels by days of the week and found that there was more reference business on Monday followed by the other days of the week in strict chronological order. In this study, 76 percent of the reference questions were asked in person and 23 percent by phone. History and biography were the most frequently asked subject areas and the library catalog and nonfiction circulating collection the most frequently used sources. Data on duration of reference questions was kept in this survey. More than two-thirds of the questions were completed in less than five minutes, with the biggest number in the three- to five-minute range (34.5 percent) followed by one to two minutes (29.1 percent).

As part of a cost-use study for sharing the costs of interlibrary use gathered in the metropolitan St. Paul-Minneapolis area, statistics were gathered on reference use in 1975.[16] In this study, 76 percent of the questions were asked in person, 24.5 percent by telephone. Questions were also categorized as author-title (document) or fact-subject with 28 percent in the author-title category and 72.5 percent in the fact-subject. In all categories average answering time fell between 1.25 and 2 minutes. The overall average cost of a reference question in this study was $1.28.

Harter and Fields used statistics from 1972, 1973, and 1974 to develop a formula for the ratio of reference questions to circulation in public libraries.[17] Their formula says that reference activity equals .22 times circulation minus 20,000. It would be interesting to see their study replicated today.

The Future

The future of public library reference service seems bright; current trends appear to be leading toward more professional service with higher standards of performance, more technological developments to back up better service, and an increasing public need for the service. Despite gloomy predictions by librarians in other types of libraries, public library reference librarians know there will always be a job for them: they deal with far too many people on a day-to-day basis who need

help in getting their own information and who lack the resources to pay for it directly.

Perhaps the area which needs greatest emphasis in the future is informing the nonuser of the potential of free public library information service. There still exists a majority of the population who do not use the services of their local reference librarian primarily because they don't see the relevance of that service to their everyday needs. It is our job as public librarians to ensure that the public has the information to make informed decisions—including the one about whether to use our service.

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