
Values for Human-to-Human Reference

MICHAEL GORMAN

ABSTRACT

DEFINES “VALUES” AND LISTS THE EIGHT VALUES derived by the author in an earlier work. Gives a brief history of the evolution of human-to-human reference service and discusses its future. Relates each of the author’s eight values to the practice of human-to-human reference. Concludes with some thoughts on library instruction.

In a hubristic act in my book *Our Enduring Values* (Gorman, 2000), I formulated eight fundamental values that I believe should inform librarianship. Those values, based on experience and reading in library literature and beyond, are:

- Stewardship
- Service
- Intellectual freedom
- Rationalism
- Literacy and learning
- Equity of access
- Privacy
- Democracy

WHAT ARE “VALUES”?

Before I seek to relate those values to work in public services—particularly human-to-human (i.e., face to face) reference work—I would like to define what I mean by the word “values.” This is important, because the word is used so loosely in modern discourse that it is in danger of being drained of meaning. For example, the phrase “family values” is nothing

more than a political shibboleth in which “values” means the social and religious ideas of the speaker and, by inference, is critical of anyone who disagrees with her or him. My study has led me to the following definition of value:

A belief that is of deep interest (even self-interest) to an individual or group, and that animates the individual or group’s conduct and states of existence.

A group of such beliefs is called a “value system.” We must recognize at the outset that values involve belief, though by no means either credulity or blind faith. To take an uncontroversial library value—service—we must believe in service, but that belief is informed by a rational assumption that a library motivated by the service ethic is a better thing—for individuals and society—than a library that is not. We should also recognize that values involve self-interest as well as altruism. Clearly, values that make libraries strong benefit librarians, since strong libraries provide employment and good working conditions. In that way, values enable the achievement of altruistic aims and of personal benefit. To take another instance, librarians are committed to intellectual freedom as a societal good in itself and as conducive to an environment in which they can lead happy, productive lives. In the world of values, the personal and the societal are two pages on the same leaf.

I derived my definition of value from reading in a variety of fields, including philosophy, ethics, and management. I derived the eight values listed above from reading the work of various library writers and thinkers, principally Pierce Butler, Jesse Shera, S.R. Ranganathan, Lee Finks, and Samuel Rothstein, mapped to my own experience in libraries of different kinds for more than forty years. These are, then, my own concept of basic library values and should be seen as such. They are not a substitute for the agreed values of the profession of the type that ALA gamely tried to establish with its first Task Force on Core Values, a spin-off of its Congress on Professional Education, though whether any such can be achieved remains to be seen. (It must be noted that ALA, exhibiting true grit, is trying again with a second, and differently constituted, task force.)

A FALSE DICHOTOMY?

The terms “public services” and “technical services” are engrained in our collective culture. I have never been a fan of either term or of the dichotomy they embody. That mild opposition has been rendered even milder by recent coinages such as “access services,” “information delivery services,” and (shudder) “interpretative services.” (The latter always summons a vision of white-faced mimes.) There has been a chasm between the two “services” for many years, and I believe that has been to the detriment of service to users and to the quality of worklife of librarians. “Public services” seems to imply groups of people who are uniquely suited to interaction with the users of the library; “technical services” denotes groups of secre-

tive, hidden librarians, devoted to the arcana of cataloging and the dark world of systems. These stereotypes have led to a lack of communication and interaction, even to the belief that the two groups have different psychological profiles—one introspective and incapable of dealing with people, the other extroverted and too large-minded to be bothered with the pettifoggery of cataloging. The truth is that each group has much to offer the other. True collaboration between them has great potential for the improvement of service to the “public”—a cause to which both should be dedicated.

THE END OF REAL REFERENCE?

With the currently fashionable talk of “disintermediation,” “live reference,” and “everything being available on the Internet,” it might seem that human-to-human reference service (the key element in public services as defined up to now) is on its way out, that it will go the way of the Library of Congress catalog card and readers’ advisory services. As with many other predictions concerning “virtual libraries” and the like, forecasting the “death of face-to-face reference” seems to ignore the manifest advantages and popularity of this service. It seems to me that one must have extremely strong arguments to facilitate or allow the demise of a service that is both expected and appreciated by a wide range of library users.

In November 1876, Samuel S. Green of the Worcester Free Public Library wrote an interesting article on what was not then called “reference work” in what was to become the *Library Journal*. In that simpler world he wrote of “Modest men in the humbler walks of life, and well-trained boys and girls” who needed “encouragement before they become ready to say freely what they want” (1876, p. 74). Green refers to “the reference department,” though there were no such things as reference librarians then. Still, he summed up the question in terms that, *mutatis mutandis*, have much resonance today: “A hearty reception by a sympathizing friend, and the recognition of someone at hand who will listen to inquiries, even although he may consider them unimportant, make it easy for such persons to ask questions, and put them at once on a home footing” (1876, p. 74). Green’s description delineates the ideal personal attributes of a reference librarian: friendliness, the ability to put an inquirer at ease, the realization that all questions are important to the questioner, and willingness to help. Combine these with a thorough knowledge of resources and you have the recipe for the “personal relations” of 125 years ago and the reference interview of today.

Green went on to give numerous instances of what we would now call reference encounters on a wide range of subjects and with all kinds and conditions of people. The common thread is the desire to help and the matching of question and source that most closely meets the expressed and unexpressed wishes of the library user. Green states, with justice, that good

things flow from this “personal intercourse” between librarian and user. To paraphrase, they are:

1. After gaining the respect and confidence of the library user, the librarian can direct her/him to the best sources of information and foster the love of learning.
2. The librarian acquires a fuller knowledge of the collection and can use experience in developing that collection.
3. Mingling with the library’s users and gaining their trust strengthens the view of the library as an indispensable institution.
4. The librarian can use the trust good reference work engenders to elevate taste and improve reading.

No doubt this is a touch too high-minded and Victorian for our low-minded and cynical age, but the desire to serve, to help all people, to elevate the public taste and level of learning, to consolidate the library as an essential part of the community, and, above all, to *help* can be dismissed only at our peril. What we dealt with then, and what we deal with now, is the interaction of librarian, users, and collections, defining “collections” expansively so as to include resources tangible and electronic, local and distant. There must be a sympathy between librarians and library patrons, a knowledge of the collections on the part of librarians, and the ability of collections to meet all the knowledge and information needs of the library’s users. Inadequacies in, or lack of, any of its components threaten this intricate mutual dependence. The most exalted reference skills cannot make up for seriously inadequate collections. Lack of sympathy toward the library user can make even the most knowledgeable reference librarian ineffective, even when the collections are adequate. Knowing the reference collections well is important to good reference work, but so is an intimate knowledge of wider collections. If we can use technology and electronic collections to enhance this complex structure, so much the better.

It borders on the fatuous to propose that technology can be employed to provide a satisfactory alternative to the nuances of the interaction between librarian and user, knowledge of the whole range of recorded knowledge and information, and the subtleties of information and knowledge seeking. This has not stopped some from trying (See Campbell, 1992; Coffman, 1999). Among the proposals aimed at replacing human-to-human reference are:

- expert systems
- e-mail reference
- triage service (the Brandeis model)
- reference service by appointment
- elimination of reference service

Each of these (other than the last) has some superficial attractions and some

inherent and fatal flaws. Dave Tyckoson has analyzed and dismissed each in a magisterial 1999 article, so I need only state that technology can enhance but will never supplant human-to-human reference service. Further, if the latter were to disappear, it would be a severe, and possibly fatal, blow to the whole concept of library service.

VALUES IN A TIME OF CHANGE

Change imposes stress, even evolutionary change of the kind that technology will bring to human-to-human reference. I believe that agreed values will help us to manage change and will provide us with a basis for assessing how well change has been assimilated into library service. Most librarians have unexpressed or even dimly formulated values that govern their working lives. This is certainly not a bad thing for those individuals in their daily existence. However, I believe that we need to express and formulate our values collectively if they are to become a useful evaluative tool and an explicit consideration in creating a new librarianship. Absent that agreement and public expression, libraries and librarianship can fall prey to the kind of technological neophilia described above. Moreover, making our case to those who fund libraries is vitally important. How can we make such a case if we have no intellectual structure and shared beliefs? How can we refute the ideas of the digitize-everything crowd without reference to a coherent, value-based concept of what libraries are, can be, and should be?

REFERENCE AND THE EIGHT VALUES

I now seek to relate each value listed at the beginning of this essay to human-to-human reference. I shall show how they can be used as the basis of a philosophy of reference, today and in the future.

Stewardship

In order to be good stewards, we must ensure that the human record survives and grows. We must also be stewards of our profession and its useful policies and practices. Both of these aspects of the value of stewardship are under threat from an uncritical and lopsided embrace of technology. Though reference librarians are not always directly involved in the preservation of the records of civilization, they are, and should be, vitally concerned about the totality of that record. In particular, much useful recorded knowledge and information is lost to most libraries when older reference resources are discarded in favor of newer, updated editions or other resources. It seems that some reference librarians are concerned only with the materials housed in the reference department itself. This runs smack into one of the great circular definitions of all time: *a reference book is a book housed in the reference department*. The truth is that the knowledge and information sought by library users may be found in any of the collections available to the modern reference librarian; and the tangible documents in the

reference department are merely the closest and most conveniently arranged. As far as electronic resources are concerned, the reference librarian has a duty to view them in light of all other resources, using them when they are the best source and eschewing them when they are not. The lazy resort to the Web first and last displays the worst sort of abdication of responsibility. Charles Ammi Cutter said that the convenience of the catalog user should always be preferred to the convenience of the cataloger. The same goes in spades for the reference librarian and the inquirer at the reference desk. Good reference librarians are aware of and value the whole world of recorded knowledge and information—from books, maps, videos, electronic resources, and everything in between. With a concern for all resources and their transmission to posterity, they cannot, therefore, be indifferent to that fact that the inchoate nature of electronic resources and their mutability poses an unprecedented preservation problem. There is a very real chance that much of what is now available electronically will be unavailable in a few years. By unavailable, I mean lost forever, not merely difficult to find. This is a sea change—or, rather, a reversion—in the history of communication.

In the mid-1500s, Bishop Diego de Landa ordered the Conquistadors to burn all the Mayan bark-cloth books they could find, because these [sic] “contained nothing but superstitions and falsehoods of the Devil.” The great collection of Mayan astronomical knowledge was thus destroyed. Descendants of the Mayans live today in the forests of Guatemala . . . but all the knowledge their ancestors accumulated over the centuries is lost. (Stockwell, 2000, p. 11)

It is not hard to see what Mayan bark-cloth books have in common with electronic resources: they were easily obliterated (from malice or inadvertence) and, once gone, were gone forever. The same could be said of all the manuscripts, papyrus rolls, etc., that predated the printed codex. If the latter is an aberration in human history, it behooves us to come to terms with that fact and ponder what we should do when only the records of the last handful of years are available as reference sources.

In an age when a student of librarianship is as likely to take a course on Javascript as a course on reference work, reference librarians should be alert to the peril that threatens their specialty. They should be even more alert when that peril is reinforced by those who believe that:

- untutored users can find everything they want and need by themselves on the Web (“disintermediation”)
- reference help should be available only by appointment
- we do not need human-to-human reference at all

Good stewards are custodians of cumulative professional skills and ensure that those skills are taught to their successors. This requires reference librarians to take an enlightened interest in library education and to lobby

for reference courses. It also requires that they take the products of library schools and, through example and instruction, train them to be good reference librarians with a comprehensive knowledge of sources, superior communication skills, and a commitment to reference service.

Service

Service, in the highest sense of the term, is central to all library work. We seek to serve the individual and, in doing so, to serve society and humanity as a whole. This is altruistic, of course. Reference librarians have to be animated by a desire to help—that desire being based on sympathy for the individual and for the library's users as a group. The former is sometimes less of a problem than the latter, as it is easier to stereotype groups than to reject an individual seeking help. Service is not the only motive in reference work—intellectual curiosity is also a strong element for many—but it is surely the indispensable motive.

In a way, one can see human-to-human reference as the capstone in the evolution of library service. In the beginning, there are collections, then collections have to be organized, and then they have to be interpreted.

The story is told that Aristophanes of Byzantium, who was Director [of the Library of Alexandria] from ca. 200 to 185 BC and who "working daily with the utmost drive and diligence systematically read all the books," when serving as a judge in a competition of poets held before the king, disqualified all but one on the grounds of plagiarism. Called upon by the king to prove his case, he rushed to the library and "relying just on memory," from certain bookcases produced an armful of rolls.

This bravura feat may have been possible for Aristophanes of Byzantium, but after the collection had reached a certain size, ordinary readers needed the sort of help locating works that they enjoy today. (Casson, 2001, p. 38)

That help came, of course, from the first great cataloger—Callimachus of Cyrene—but it must also have come from the omni-lector Aristophanes of Byzantium and his successors in the form of what we now call reference service. Viewed in this sense, and perceiving the continuity between libraries over more than two millennia, we can see that bibliographic control and reference work are mutually dependent and complementary. A collection, once beyond a certain size, must be organized for retrieval—a task for latter day Callimachuses. But that organization can work only up to a point. That point is the one at which a skilled human being (a reference librarian) is needed to give guidance and assistance in using the bibliographic architecture of organization and acting as a guide, philosopher, and friend to all users of library materials.

A true service ethic treats a child's enquiry as being as important as a Nobel Prize winner's, a relevant book as being more important than a marginally relevant electronic source (and vice versa); and makes no value judgments when it comes to questions or answers.

Intellectual Freedom

Libraries are devoted to free enquiry and the freedom of each mind to consider any aspect of the human record. Banned books and filtered databases place restrictions on those freedoms, surrendering to the forces of fear. The question of intellectual freedom is essentially a clash of cultures—one inward-looking, timorous, and closed; the other outward looking, adventurous and open. Let this question not be muddled by reference to the question of “protecting children” (an opportunistic cry of the congenitally censorious. That is a separate discussion. Let us consider adults and their natural and, in the United States, constitutional, right to read and view whatever they wish. Instead of being afraid of what is unfamiliar, distasteful, or not congruent with our beliefs, we should remember the wise words of S. R. Ranganathan: *Bad thought laid bare to the world is rendered sterile*. We must let time and the tides of thought take care of that which we do not care for and, in doing so, liberate ourselves from being arbiters of taste or propriety.

Surely the right to intellectual freedom is nowhere more established than in reference service. My understanding of intellectual freedom and reference is that people have the right to ask any question that does not infringe on the rights of the person being asked, and that the reference librarian must be able to draw on the whole human record in order to answer that question. If that is so, human-to-human reference calls for qualities of tact and understanding that may be difficult for many, but that are essential if free enquiry is to flourish. Areas of thought that are “sensitive” arouse, inevitably, strong emotions in both reference librarians and seekers of knowledge and information. How many feel completely at ease in asking for information on abortion, religion, racism, safe sex, or any other topics that are the stuff of argument, dissent, and the formulation of public policy? All the more reason, then, for the reference librarian to be as neutral as humanly possible in attempting to provide factual, unbiased information and referring questioners to the best recorded knowledge. This problem has been magnified by the advent of the Internet and the Web. It cannot be denied that there was much of merit in the way publishing in the Age of Print, particularly scholarly publishing, provided stability and authenticity to the recorded knowledge and information that was the stuff of reference work. Did any reference librarian ever question the value and authenticity of the knowledge and information contained in, say, an Oxford University Press reference book? In fact, it could be argued that we were, if anything, too unquestioning. No human endeavor is infallible and the very solidity of print made us accept without question almost everything presented in blue cloth covers with gilt trim. Be that as it may, few reference librarians went far wrong in relying on the work done by the publishers, editors, and writers of the OUP, Britannica, Merriam-Webster, and thousands of others. Their one flaw lay in currency. The practicalities of the print publishing industry made the information contained in many reference books and other print sources out

of date (even if only slightly) on the day they were published. There is a great deal of enduring value in the majority of reference books, but in some cases the question of currency looms large.

To get a true flavor of the jam we are in now, compare respectable medical resources such as *Mosby's Medical, Nursing, & Allied Health Dictionary* or *The American Medical Association Encyclopedia of Medicine* with the innumerable sources of medical information and misinformation found on the Internet. The former have every virtue except currency; the latter may have no virtues at all. Reference librarians are rightly wary of being accused of practicing medicine without a license. When it comes to printed sources of high repute, all they have to do is to indicate the sources and mention the date of publication as a possible warning. When it comes to Internet resources, when does encouraging critical thinking tip over into warning people away from sites that are worthless or not what they purport to be? We are dedicated to intellectual freedom and free enquiry, but that dedication may be sorely tested in the inchoate world of the Internet.

Rationalism

Reason lies at the heart of all library practice and philosophy. It can be said that idealism tempered by pragmatism is the mental hallmark of a true librarian. We yearn to do the right thing, but we also yearn to deliver the best service of which we are capable. Librarians do not espouse ideas built on faith but seek that which can be proved and demonstrated to reasonable people. Reason affects how we assign priorities and carry out our programs and services. It is also the intellectual bedrock of all our specialties, from collection development to cataloging to reference services.

Although human-to-human reference service is based on the exercise of human capabilities and their attendant subjectivities, it too must be governed by reason as far as possible. This has several ramifications. Although the reference interview is a matter of human communication, it can be systematized as far as the librarian is concerned. The reference librarian should always follow certain rational ideas well entrenched in librarianship (such as proceeding from the general to the special, from the class of question to the question itself). In that way it is possible to ensure that what seems to the library user to be merely a helpful conversation is, in reality, a rational path to an answer. Another aspect of reference service that is subject to rational analysis involves the sources used to provide answers. We have already looked at print (with its attributes of fixity and authenticity) compared with electronic resources (with currency as their strong point). The rational approach is to use each in areas in which they are strong and to understand and explain the advantages and drawbacks of each. Moreover, an important aspect of modern reference work lies in steering library users (particularly young people) toward appropriate printed resources and to teach them to look upon electronic resources with a critical eye.

One enduring question of reference work involves the classification of types of reference enquiry. There are commonly accepted categories: locational, library policy, data seeking, term paper advising, consultation, etc. The level of expertise required and the time to be taken obviously vary greatly depending on the type of enquiry. The rational approach is to try to ensure that each type of question is answered efficiently, with the minimum expenditure of human resources and time. The simplest situation is that of the small library in which one person answers all questions, reference or otherwise. Larger libraries have the possibility of deploying different kinds of staff to deal with different kinds of reference enquiry and with the general enquiries that are made in all libraries. Few would question the fact that, if possible, purely directional ("Where is the Music Library") and library policy ("How many books can I check out?") enquiries are best dealt with by support staff or even by student assistants. Few would dispute that in-depth reference consultations require librarians trained in reference work. The dispute lies in the middle ground. In a hypothetical world, one could classify and filter incoming enquiries and deflect them to finely defined classes of answerers. This may be intellectually appealing, but it is unrealistic. If possible, it makes sense to siphon off the non-reference questions, but even those are sometimes possible lead-ins to true reference enquiries. "Where are the public terminals?" might lead to "I'm looking for good Web resources on Africa." The sad truth is that such veiled enquiries often come from the people most in need of reference service. Their initial questions may be vague and general because they feel awkward about asking any question at all. Ideally, all enquiries would be addressed to a human being who is sensitive to such issues and willing to seek the questions behind the question and to answer, or refer the user to someone who can.

Another aspect of the rational approach to reference service is assessment. Though there have been many studies of reference service, they tend to concentrate on factual questions and the accuracy of responses to them. This is a narrow, though important, slice of reference service and really goes only to the question of the "information center" role of a library. Certainly, the accuracy of such responses should be assessed, and other common tallies (e.g., the number of questions in pre-set categories) should be collected systematically. There are more difficult areas to assess and they are among the most professional and valuable aspects of reference service. Naturally, they require sophisticated and time-consuming methods that are seen by many as being antithetical to the practical delivery of reference service. In addition, the more complex human interactions they seek to assess have inherent subjective elements that are not readily amenable to assessment. The many difficulties should not deter us from taking the rational approach that demands assessment of all our services in order to justify the funds we spend on them.

Literacy and Learning

Though librarianship is no longer inherently bound up with the love of books (something seen as central to our profession as recently as a generation ago), we are and should be concerned with the ability of people to interact with complex texts. This is not a matter of preferring print to electronic resources (or vice versa), but a recognition of the fact that human knowledge and information is recorded in words, images, and symbols. Although the latter two are of great importance to a minority of scholars (art historians, mathematicians, musicians, etc.), honesty compels us to recognize that learning in most disciplines is inextricably linked with the ability to decipher, understand, and learn from complex texts. The medium in which those texts are found and preserved is a question of practical, not philosophical, importance.

Though a distressingly large number of American adults cannot read and write, illiteracy is not the chief enemy of learning in modern society. The enemies are the low level of functional literacy and the rise of aliteracy, particularly among the young. People who can read but choose not to are as shrouded in the darkness of ignorance as the truly illiterate.

All librarians have an interest in encouraging literacy. Reference librarians can empower individuals by steering them to classes of material beyond the exigencies of the question in hand. In other words, adding value to a reference answer can increase the impulse toward more and more reading. A good reference librarian will not only answer a question accurately but will also suggest other readings in that area or related areas. When it comes to literacy and learning, a reference query can be seen either as a closed loop (a question asked, a question answered, and no more) or as a knock on a door. Opening the door may lead to a lifetime of learning.

Equity of Access

The pervasive cliché, "the digital divide," grants that some classes of people have greater access to some services than do others. If it were not so sad, it would be almost comic to see the gravity with which our lords and masters tackle a fact apparently previously unknown to them. Although this divide is seen as unique to digital information, those not blinded by the white light of technology recognize that the disabled, the poor, the rural, the aged, the young, members of minorities, and other disadvantaged persons have long had fewer privileges than those who do not belong to any such category. This sad state of affairs is true of health, educational, and public services of all kinds. It is scarcely an exaggeration to say that the bulk of domestic public policy arguments are about the best way to reduce these many societal gaps. Let us be charitable and assume that agitation about "the digital divide" is not motivated by the kind of technophilia that says putting computers into under-funded inner city schools is a panacea. Let us also assume, for the sake of argument, that the digital divide is an issue

to be solved, rather than a symptom of far wider social problems. Given those premises, there is no doubt, that libraries can be front-line agencies in closing the divide, and that reference librarians can assist and train those on the wrong side of the divide.

If you believe, as I do, that the digital divide is simply one manifestation of societal inequities of all kinds and that the goal is equity of access to the whole range of library services, then it is clear that reference service has a vital role to play. To take but one example, is the quality and level of reference service the same in major research libraries and in junior college libraries? Given the inequity of funding between these institutions, the answer is probably no. Do the students in junior colleges need more assistance and training than students in major research institutions? The answer is probably yes. Here is the essential paradox: the service is funded adequately for people who need it the least and funded inadequately for those who need it the most. Middle- to upper-class suburbs have well-stocked, well-staffed libraries; the inner city has only the library service that can be obtained by dedication and battling against all the economic and societal odds. Good reference service should not be a matter of socioeconomic class. That is why it is vitally important that reference service be provided to all, and that reference librarians seek to provide that service as equitably as possible.

Innumerable issues come to mind in this context. Is the furniture of, and the equipment in, the reference area conducive to its use by the disabled? Do students receive the same level of reference service as faculty? Do the physical arrangements of the reference area induce shy, comparatively uneducated people to ask questions without fear of embarrassment? Such questions must be asked often (and from the user's point of view) if the goal is equitable reference service.

It is here that the underlying altruism of most librarians comes into play and that one of the benign effects of technology is felt. That effect is the leveling of access to electronic resources. The users of Yale University Library have access to print and other tangible collections of untold richness. The users of a junior college in a small town in central California are lucky if they have access to one-hundredth of those resources. The difference between the number and range of electronic resources (and assistance in their use) available to these two groups is probably still great, though orders of magnitude less than with "traditional" resources.

Another way in which technology can be used to lessen the inequities in provision of reference services is in such programs as e-mail reference, "live" (i.e., remote electronic synchronous) reference, and other ways of reaching remote users. (It should be noted that the best of these is the use of the telephone—the most advanced and the most widely available network in human history.) As observed previously, none of these methods is as effective as human-to-human reference, but they are far better than no

reference service for the rural, the home bound, or other such seekers of knowledge and information.

Privacy

Few fundamental rights are more under siege than privacy. Global networks and the increasing involvement of technology in all aspects of life have led us to a situation in which only our unexpressed thoughts are truly private. All expressions, all actions can be made public without our consent. There is no guarantee of privacy in e-mail (the most widely used application of electronic technology), but many believe that sending an e-mail is the equivalent of mailing a letter. Telephone calls are monitored and tapped. Video cameras record all actions in public places in the name of security. The U. S. Supreme Court has even approved the use of infrared and heat photography to spy on people in their own homes. Inquisitor Kenneth Starr was allowed to poke into the book-purchasing habits of one of his victims, and only a few brave booksellers and civil libertarians spoke against this egregious invasion of privacy. In such a climate, the insistence by librarians on privacy might seem positively old-fashioned, but it still matters, in principle and in practice. We believe that people are entitled to read and view what they wish without others knowing what they have read or viewed. For that reason we ensure that circulation records are not revealed to others, and that libraries are furnished with places in which people can read, view videos, and listen to sound recordings in privacy. (The aberration is the way we make computer screens visible to the casual passerby—partly for aesthetic reasons, and partly because we do not trust people's use of such a "hot" medium. Small hand-held computers linked to wireless networks may well be the instrument that restores privacy in the electronic arena.)

Users of reference services are entitled to privacy. This presents a practical problem. Most libraries seek to make reference areas open and welcoming, but those virtues are inimical to privacy. This can be a real problem in dealing with "sensitive" subjects or with shy, easily intimidated library users. The latter might well ask a question if assured that only the reference librarian would hear the question and answer. Because there is no formula for dealing with this issue, we must rely on experience and tact on the part of skilled reference librarians. Tactics include a low voice, appropriate body language, walking away from the desk with the library user, positioning screens so that only that user can see the result of a search, writing (rather than saying) the name of a source, and many other methods that fit the individual situation. This all centers on respect for the user's right to privacy, and it requires the kind of tact and understanding that can be developed but never taught. The ideal of the librarian as sympathetic friend, first advanced by Samuel Green 125 years ago, is still relevant in an age in which we are told, "There is no privacy. Get over it."

Democracy

Libraries are supremely democratic institutions. They stand for freedom, equality, and the rights of humankind. The idea that democracy depends on a well-informed electorate may be a truism, but it is true for all that. Libraries are in the vanguard of institutions that support democracy by providing the recorded knowledge and information upon which democracy depends. In a wider sense, democracy depends on education, and libraries are integral to education. We should always remember the words of that tough-minded thinker H. G. Wells: "Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe." When Wells wrote those words, more than half a century ago, the catastrophe he foresaw was physical—the destruction of civilization through wars (especially nuclear wars) created by ignorance. Though much of the world is still threatened physically—by war, famine, flood, drought, AIDS, and overpopulation—the catastrophe we should seek to avert in the developed world is cultural and societal. We are far less threatened by the thermonuclear technology of death, and far more threatened by the sedative technology of infotainment and the consequent flight from learning. Another of Wells's visions tells us of a world in the far distant future in which society is divided into the mass of degraded ignorant toilers called Morlocks and their decadent rulers, the Eloi. The time machine obviously projects his take on the state of late 19th century capitalist society, but it is not too hard to extrapolate present trends into a society of ignorant Morlocks, subservient to vulgar diversion and materialism, ruled by educated Eloi.

Reference service is key to the library's struggle to improve democracy and to bring knowledge and information (free of specific charge and free of value judgments) to all who ask. If, in this representative democracy, the people (*demos*) are to show good judgment in electing their representatives, they must be educated and have access to recorded knowledge and information. They are unlikely to have the latter without the sympathetic guidance that reference librarians supply and the critical thinking that is fostered by the higher levels of library instruction. Can anyone imagine a better illustration of democracy in action than this: a student from a disadvantaged background—the child of migrant farm workers who never graduated from high school—goes into a state-supported library, confident that someone with an advanced degree will assist her in her life-changing pursuit of education, without charge, without prejudice, and without constraint.

A FEW THOUGHTS ON LIBRARY INSTRUCTION

Time was when what we called "bibliographic instruction" was largely an exercise in damage control. The creaking bibliographic architecture of the period—typified by the huge card catalogs of research libraries—made it impossible for even the most informed student to find her way around the library. Library instruction changed for the better as card catalogs were

replaced by OPACs, cataloging rules were rationalized, MARC was introduced, computers became commonplace, and electronic resources became ever more numerous. Instruction was still concerned with understanding the bibliographic architecture of the library, but in a more user-friendly environment. It also became concerned with elementary computer instruction and with critical thinking. (Contrary to popular myth, the young are not all “computer literate”—whatever that means—and today’s students are not all young.) This trinity of 1) elementary computer and library bibliographic instruction, 2) information competence (for both “traditional” and electronic resources), and 3) critical thinking make today’s library instruction an essential part of the general-education curriculum. If students have the benefit of such a program in their first year of higher education, they will have a solid platform for the rest of their studies. They will possess the ability to profit from continuing human-to-human reference services, and the lifelong power to control their lives through knowledge and information.

IN CONCLUSION

We must examine and affirm the core values of our profession if we are to flourish in a time of change and maintain the ethic of service to individuals and society. In particular, we must maintain the vital human-to-human component that typifies reference service across our history. This is an age in which human values are under strain; human contact and sympathy become more prized as they become rarer. Let us always have an open door and give to all the fruits of our skills, our experience, and our willing hearts.

REFERENCES

- Baker, S. L., and Lancaster, F.W. (1991). *The measurement and evaluation of library services*. 2nd ed. Arlington: Information Resources Press.
- Butler, P. (1963). *An introduction to library science*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Campbell, J. (1992). Shaking the conceptual foundations of reference. *Reference Services Review*, 20 (4), 29–36.
- Casson, L. (2001). *Libraries in the ancient world*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Coffman, S. (1999). Reference as others do it. *American Libraries*, 30 (5), 54–56.
- Cutter, C. A. (1904). *Rules for a printed dictionary catalog*. 4th ed. Washington DC: GPO.
- Finks, L. W. (1989). Values without shame. *American Libraries* (April 1989), 352–356.
- Gorman, M. (2000). *Our enduring values*. Chicago: ALA, pp. 10–12.
- Green, S. (1876). Personal relations between librarians and readers. *American Library Journal*, 1 (2–3), 74–81.
- Ranganathan, S. R. (1963). *The five laws of library science*. 2nd ed. New York: Asia Publishing House.
- Rothstein, Samuel. (1968). In search of ourselves. *Library Journal* (January 15), 156–157.
- Shera, J. H. (1970). *Sociological foundations of librarianship*. Bombay: Asia Publishing House.
- Stockwell, F. (2000) *A history of information storage and retrieval*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, p. 11.
- Tyckoson, D. A. (1999). What’s right with reference. *American Libraries*, 30(5), 57–63.
- Wells, H. G. (1951). *The outline of history: Being a plain history of life and mankind*. Revised ed. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Wells, H. G. (1895). *The time machine*. New York: H. Holt.