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## Introduction

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THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF REFERENCE WORK in libraries has changed dramatically in the past two decades—some would argue more than ever before in its history of 126 years (Green 1876). Forces bringing about such change have included political, economic, cultural, and technological developments that have affected libraries and information centers in a number of ways. Yet the *raison d'être* for reference practice—and indeed for library work in general—has remained the same: to bring together library users and the knowledge they seek. In other words, the user and his needs remain at the heart of the information profession.

Computer-based reference has significantly improved library service to contemporary users—from the introduction of online and cataloging databases to local and wide-area networks to electronic reference sources. The appearance of the Internet in the 1990s heralded a new era for libraries in terms of networking opportunities. More specifically, “virtual reference” (or Web-based reference) has had a major impact on the referral function. This issue examines the extent to which (and how) technological advances have changed basic reference practice.

A paradigm is a universally recognized scientific achievement that for a time models problems and solutions to a community of practitioners (Kuhn, 1961). It is a conceptual understanding, an agreed-upon construct for conducting the business of a profession. The structure takes some time to formulate and shifts only when the professional community agrees that significant changes in the knowledge base beg to be acknowledged and incorporated into new practical forms.

Reference work in today's libraries has been influenced by a host of

related social and economic factors, chief among them being the increasing use of technology. This issue has three specific objectives: to examine the reference tradition within the context of recent technological advances, to determine the extent to which the paradigm is shifting, and to explore the implications for library practice.

Gorman's paper on "human-to-human reference" sets the tone for the entire discussion. Librarianship, he argues, is based on a core set of highly regarded principles that must not be forgotten in the present milieu. His recent book, *Our Enduring Values* (2000), is an important reminder of the service ethic to which librarians subscribe.

Tyckoson continues the discourse by reviewing the history of reference and the various models of reference service delivery (e.g., traditional, tiered, teaching, virtual). Each model, he maintains, has its distinct advantages and disadvantages; however, the "best" template for any given library can only be measured against its community of users.

Westbrook's user-needs analysis of a selected patron group pulls together elements of the information-seeking process that determine user satisfaction with library search results. Conceptual questions she raised in her study include: To what extent does the user's definition of relevance mesh with the librarian's definition? What implications do these differences have for library practice? Her "internal" definition of relevance expands the classic interpretation of pertinence (Lancaster and Warner, 1993).

Whitlatch contributes an assessment of strategies for the evaluation of electronic reference. Useful measures, she maintains, can only be reached after study goals and objectives have been determined; those could fall into several categories: economics, the reference process, resources, products/outcomes (user satisfaction with results). She further identifies various research methods (surveys, interviews, case studies and focus groups), noting that shifting patterns in user demands provide libraries with opportunities to emphasize different strategies for bringing together users and needed resources.

Dilevko's paper serves as a wake-up call for reference workers in the virtual environment whose jobs have been, and are being, phased out. His chief concern is that "call centers" are "de-skilling" the library profession. Reference librarians, he cautions, should consider how best to develop a unique knowledge niche that would allow them to differentiate themselves from potential library users, thus positioning themselves as market leaders instead of followers.

Chandler outlines the library and information science curriculum needed to prepare information professionals for the twenty-first century. She argues that, contrary to a widely held view, the library profession is not on the decline; the next few years will find librarians in high demand. Graduates with technological library expertise and interpersonal communication skills will have the strengths needed to understand the diverse user popu-

lation of the new millennium. The case study she includes is her own curriculum at the University of North Texas School of Library and Information Sciences, where the reference course is one of several offered in the distance education (online) format.

Katz paints a picture of the old reference standard versus the new technologies. Providing access to the right information, he contends, is a goal in danger of tripping over the new technology. He also touches on the growing digital divide between the haves and have nots.

Fritch and Mandernack round out the issue with a two-part presentation. The first part reviews the history of reference; the second is a template for the “paradigm shift.” The social context for reference work, they hold, is still very important. The “shift” requires an amalgamation of the traditional philosophies of reference—a more deliberate blending of the conservative and liberal views.

Does the “new face” of reference constitute a paradigm shift? According to the authors in this issue, yes and no. Yes, in the sense that reference librarians have new responsibilities in the digital era (e.g., how to achieve high tech, high touch). No, in the sense that new delivery mechanisms have not changed the basic tenets of the profession. In fact, the technological options have strengthened the base.

The working title for this issue was “The Emerging Reference Paradigm.” However, after reading the authors’ contributions and reflecting on them, one might safely conclude that reference practice has an already established paradigm (though time is only one criterion in paradigm formulation). Reference librarianship is not in a “pre-paradigmatic state,” in classic Kuhnian terms. Rather, the model appears to be shifting as knowledge evolves. The traditional values of librarianship are as true as they ever were—only more so. Libraries are still sanctuaries (not repositories) for the masses, not boutiques for a privileged few. Emerging technologies offer more alternatives to the contemporary library user, and these alternatives are opportunities in disguise. Elizabeth Cady Stanton once observed: “Nothing strengthens the judgment and quickens the conscience like individual responsibility.” Therein lies the challenge for the profession. Librarians and information professionals are up to that challenge.

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