

Shining a light on the reference librarian role as reference services adapt to users' needs

BY MAGNUS OSAHON IGBINOVIA AND ESTHER OLUWAYINKA SOLANKE | JUNE 8, 2015

In this information age, the exponential growth of information and the attendant influx of technology have implications for the role of reference librarian. The question of whether or not a reference librarian is still relevant is tantamount to asking whether or not man needs illumination in dark places. We believe that reference librarians are more relevant than ever in this information age.

Information overload

"The greatest problem of today is how to teach people to ignore the irrelevant, how to refuse to know things, before they are suffocated. For too many facts are as bad as none at all."

— W.H. Auden

With information explosion comes information overload. The role of the library and librarians then is not only to ensure that individuals who need information can obtain it with an appropriate outlay of resources (in terms of time and money), but also to ensure they are not overwhelmed by large amounts of irrelevant matter.

Library users are challenged to process and analyze information for possible economic value and social gains. Reference services provided in a systematic manner can assist with retrieving, processing and analyzing information. The reference librarian also guards against the spread of misinformation by those mired in ignorance and prejudice.



Reference desk at Redeemer's University library in Nigeria

The reference librarian

Most seekers of information and ideas, at some time or other, confront barriers to finding what they need. These barriers are due to time limitations, lack of knowledge of what sources exist or how to find and use them, and the sheer size and complexity of the world's information. Thus, the reference librarian's primary task is to help such individuals overcome these barriers and to accomplish their goals using relevant information and ideas.

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As gateways to knowledge via their information retrieval skills and knowledge of reference sources, reference librarians can provide:

- Personal assistance — Entering into a dialogue to determine users' needs and ensure those needs are met. This could include term paper advising with a student or research consultation assistance with a faculty member
- Teaching — Helping users develop strategies for finding, evaluating, and using print and electronic resources, within the library and beyond, to achieve their goals
- Awareness — Disseminating curated information as a current awareness service to information seekers
- Directories and signs — Ensuring library users are able to locate the information and information services they require
- Verification — Determining whether a user's information about a document (e.g., bibliographic citation) is correct and complete. This has become even more necessary as the quantity of papers expands and the risk of fraud rises

The virtual reference librarian

Those who argue that technology is making the reference librarian obsolete fail to realize that libraries are taking advantage of that same technology to provide and enhance services, develop new community relationships, reach new library users, and enhance the role of the library as an information resource center. A reference librarian in the digital environment provides digital reference services through email, web forms, ask services, chat reference,

video-conferencing or web-camera services, digital reference robots, and collaborative digital reference services, among others.

Outlook

It is difficult to predict the future, but looking at the trends and changes taking place, it is quite possible that the next few years will see:

- A more prominent role for reference services, where the services provided are attractive, efficient, evaluated, marketed, integrated, professional, institutionalized, value-based and appropriate (Janes, 2003)
- A tiered reference service, where libraries are linked through collaborative arrangements to share reference responsibilities. Questions will be attempted at the local level, and if unanswered, may be routed to a system, consortial, national or even international level (Singh, 2004)
- Reference services offered from multiple, perhaps differentiated service points with a mix of media and technologies and use of networking and collaboration across administrative and professional lines (Bopp & Smith, 2001)

Conclusion

The characteristics and needs of library users are constantly changing in response to societal changes. The task of reference librarian in the present and future is to help users meet their needs by consistently improving and finding better ways to provide customized information, guidance and instruction to the users they serve. **LC**

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