

Repositioning Reference Services in the Digital Age

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ABSTRACT

This work examines the concept of traditional reference service and the changing roles of reference librarians in digital age/obligation. The platforms for delivery of the reference service and the role of the reference librarian have transformed from that of reactive approach to a more dynamic and proactive approach to enquiry's heading. It also provides enquiry forms of references, and a real time reference service. The study finally concludes that reference service in the digital age has greatly changed and as such reference librarians must rise up to the challenges in order to remain relevant, while upholding the traditional ethics of their profession.

Keywords: *Digital, references, reference services, digital age*

INTRODUCTION

The information industry has developed as society has begun to value information more highly. This industry encompasses publishers, software developers, on-line service providers, and other businesses that package and sell information products for profit. It provides both opportunities and challenges to librarians. On one hand, as more information becomes available in electronic form libraries no longer have to own an article or certain pieces of statistics information for example, to obtain it quickly for a user. On the other hand, members of the information industry are offering alternatives to libraries. A student with her personal computer can now go directly online to locate, order or to receive a copy of an article without leaving her home. Although, the development of digital libraries mean that people do not have to go to a building for designated as library for hard copy of information, yet, users still need help to locate the information they want.

Hence, the role of reference librarians in this age must be improved upon to meet up with these challenges, and be relevant in the global information race. Singh (2004) argues that digital age allows information to be stored in several forms like; text, audio, video and so on. These can easily be created, organized accessed and transmitted. Library therefore needs to accommodate these changes of technology but considering the core values of the library. Janes (2003) points out that reference in the digital age some fundamental basics are constant in nature. In addition, in an electronic environment, the associations and interactions between the library staff (librarians) and the users is no longer face to face and in the electronic but remote environment accessibility is used as the prime indicator for users evaluations (Whitlatch, 2001). Chunli and Jinmin (1998) comment that conclusion can be effectively drawn that clients or the users wants/needs and aspirations

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in this digital age is not only to access or process information but to actualize into products. Zickur Rainei and Purcell (2013) in their research found out that in the recent twelve calendar, 53% of Americans within the age bracket of 16 years and older visited a library with book mobile, 25% visited library Website and 13% use handled device like smart phones or tablet computer to access library websites. References services is the fundamental element in the library, this is because it gives proper knowledge and guidance to the user in relation to the desired needs and aspirations (Singh, 2004). Reference services took in focal starting point in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as a result of several forces like the dramatic increase in the complex variety of library resources within and outside it and the heterogeneous nature of those materials (Singh, 2004).

Digital Reference Library Service

The terms digital library and virtual library are used to refer to the vast collections of information to which people gain access to cover the internet, cable television, or some other type of remote electronic connection (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2009). Digital reference service is the type by which a library service conducted on-line, and then reference transaction is a computer-mediated communication (Amen, 2008). As libraries have moved to this digital age, so too have reference librarians. The roles of reference librarians have assumed the role of educator to teach how to find information both in the library and over electronic networks. Public reference librarians have also expanded their roles by providing local community information through publicly accessible computer systems. The work of reference librarians moved outside the library walls. Reference librarians have limited avenues to market themselves and their products in this age.

Reference librarians no longer sit in the library waiting for patrons to come ask questions and they in turn answer. A lot of changes have taken place in this digital age, but most of these changes are less felt in the developing countries. It is very important that the reference librarians in this age and this part of the global brace up to the challenging role that the digital age has brought about. According to Amen (2008), digital reference service falls in two main categories, e-mail reference and the real time reference. The distinction between the two is in the immediacy, which real time offers. Digital reference has origins in the reference which allows librarians to answer questions in a delayed fashion, the main advantage of e-mail reference service is that of convenience, accuracy of questions they ask and quality of responses provided, while the main drawback is the lack of face-to-face interaction with the end-user. Real time reference on the other hand, offers live interaction between the librarians and the user through the use of chat technologies and video conferencing which helps to eliminate the problem of misunderstanding, enhancing better communication. An added advantage of real time reference service is the possibility of producing transcripts at the end of the chat sessions. However, the amount of information sent back and forth is limited. Reference services in libraries are most often described as direct, personal assistance to readers, seeking information. Okpara (2006) describes reference services as the act of bringing into contact the right reader and the right information sources at the right time and in the right personal way.

The traditional duties of reference librarians are basically the following:

- Listen to the patron
- Find out and translate his/her information needs and provide the correct sources to satisfy those information needs (Oyedum, 2005).

This is the traditional role of reference librarian, but in digital age/electronic library services delivery, the reference librarian is not moving away from his traditional function as stated above but improving on it to catch up and be in consonance with the digital age information service delivery. Amen (2008) in quoting Segun (2008) states that the fundamental principles that guide reference work are still relevant in the digital age even though the mode of apparition has evolved significantly. The platform for the delivery of the reference service and the role of the librarian have transformed from that of reactive approach to a more dynamic and proactive approach to enquiry headline, for instance, the reference librarian goes beyond instructing or guiding clientele to resources to anticipating need and information needs and building data bases of frequently asked questions (FAQs).

Selective dissemination of information (SDI) in which librarians choose information that may be of interest to their users and forward it to them before users request it (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2009). For the reference librarians to do this, he must be computer literate, being computer literate might just be an understatement, the reference librarians must have knowledge of the internet to be able to deliver information services, he/she must be conversant with the use of e-mail, sometimes the reference librarian might have to use internet social networks such as facebook, tweeter, blogging and so on. to package information and make them attractive to his users or information seekers. But before this can be done effectively, it is important that the reference librarian should have a sound understanding and familiarity with his/her patrons.

First of all, such questions are: who are my users? What are their information needs? What method of information package can be used that will be attractive to them, bearing in mind the type of library, it is saving. This is important because the character and/or services differ remarkably among both individuals and in terms of type and size. The sizes and characteristics of the potential user groups vary greatly (Oyedum, 2005). The population of reference librarian and a special librarian differs greatly and prone a reference library in a school library at the same times. It equally varies from that reference librarian. Thus, the reference librarian's sound and understanding of the above is fundamental to better information service packaging and delivery. Amen (2008) writing further provided synonyms to digital reference library services. These are terms that are or interchangeably used in digital reference library service. They include:

- i Digital reference
- ii Online reference
- iii Electronic reference
- iv Real time reference
- v E-reference
- vi Live reference
- vii Asynchronous and reference

ix	Web conference/reference
x	Chat reference
xi	Online international service
xii	Instant message reference
xiii	Virtual reference.

Chat Reference Service

Chat technology enable users to communicate on the internet with others in real time. Live reference and real time are those terms used interchangeably, libraries are using this service, and it has been observed that the live chat has preference over e-mail reference because it involves a two-way conversation in real time. Just like the in-person reference service, it offers the user the opportunity immediate feedback. In typical chat reference service, a link is provided on the library's home page, the patron authenticates his relationship with organization by logging in with password, and some libraries only serve patrons from their institutions, while others are accessible to all patron. Once the question is sent by the patron, all libraries only are notified and an answer is forwarded by the first free libraries at that moment. Some of the applications for this service include the following virtual reference toolkit (<http://www.tutor.com/products/vrt.aspx>), 24/7 reference (<http://www.247ref.org>), Question point (<http://questionpoint.org/>) and Live helper (<http://www.livehelper.com/>). This application possesses functionality such as instant messaging, co-browsing, webpage and document-pushing, customization of prescript messages, storage of chat transcriptions and statistical reporting.

CONCLUSION

There is no gainsaying that reference service in the digital age has greatly changed. Reference librarians must, as a matter of necessity, brace up to attendant changing roles with it, while upholding the traditional ethics. There is room for a lot of improvement in technological know-how. In the words of the foundation that enables society to reach new heights. The reference librarian is expected to be competent with regards to using electronic resources in order to be relevant in the global information technology race.

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