

After the Desk: Reference Service in a Changing Information Landscape

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Abstract:

We as librarians seem to know (and fear) that the Reference Desk is in decline, but as a profession, we are less certain or united about what should replace it. This paper proposes that the librarians themselves must be promoted as the primary access point for Information Services. Though line-ups at The Desk are ever-shortening, the less-cited statistic is that individual consultation and group instruction requests are increasing. Information literacy plays a key role in the new model of reference, but in a librarian-centric model, any public service plays a role in reference and research. Outreach, flexibility, and connectivity are key components of the new model.

Keywords: reference, information literacy

Introduction

It is a long-known, oft-lamented fact that our standard Reference transactions are steadily in decline (CARL-ARBC, 2014). The Reference Desk—that once stalwart symbol of Information Services—is fast diminishing in power and relevance, and the response from libraries has been...varied to say the least. While Christy R. Stevens (2013) aptly summarizes various calls to end the reference desk since 1986, some librarians believe the decline of the desk is synonymous with the fall of Reference Services as a whole. Of these, some cling to it as an institution (Fitzpatrick, Moore, & Lang, 2008), while others have steered into the skid and abolished both their desk and their Reference Department. Most reactions have been more nuanced—combining desks with circulation or IT services to create the single service desk (Samson and Oelz, 2005), staffing with paraprofessionals rather than librarians (Stevens, 2013; Sonntag and Palsson, 2007), or simply cutting back on desk hours. Ewing and Hauptman's (cited in Stevens, 2013) observation that the majority of reference interactions are "directional or simplistic in nature" (204), implies that a librarian's time may be better served elsewhere. Susan M. Ryan's (2008) study of almost 7000 reference transactions similarly concluded that 89% could be answered by non-librarians.

If the reference desk has truly become irrelevant, what happens to the reference librarians? Fear that the fate of our profession is tied to the desk seems to linger, even among those more inclined to view the reference desk as a location or conduit for Reference Service, rather than its avatar (Watstein and Bell, 2008). This paper will discuss circumstances surrounding the desk's decline, alternative and emerging conduits for reference, and current Best Practices in refocusing Library and Information Services. Ultimately, I argue that in order to weather the storm of declining reference requests, the librarians themselves must be promoted as the primary access point for Information Services. Resources, systems, trends and services are rapidly evolving and show no signs of slowing down; only the librarian remains as a provider, an interpreter, and a guide to these services. With deference to those declaring that Information Literacy is the new Reference (Stevens, 2013; Sonntag and Palsson, 2007), it is possible to build that concept even further. As the Public Services Librarian's (as many of us former Reference Librarians are now called) time is freed to focus on more necessary and/or complex tasks, any interactions with clients—be they research consultations, orientations classes, or development of new services—become the new form that Reference Service has taken.

As an additional note on scope, I must mention that while parts of this paper may be relevant to all types of libraries, my principal experience has been with academic libraries, and there lies the primary concern of this paper. As for my resources, they are heavily drawn from Canadian, and American sources, such as the Canadian Association of Research Libraries (CARL) and the American Library Association (ALA), so this paper will also reflect a North American experience and accompanying bias.

Deaths Greatly Exaggerated

Before we talk about the desk, it's important to address that OTHER supposed symbol of the library in decline. I'm speaking, of course, about the Book. As early as 2012, Amazon declared that Kindle ebook sales were now outpacing its print books (Malik, 2012). The book's impending doom has had far-reaching ramifications well outside the library world (R.I.P. bookstores?) but is also the centerpiece of many a blog post proclaiming the end of libraries (see Siegler, M. G., 2013). While many protest that reports of the Book's death have been greatly exaggerated (Zickuhr, 2013), there remain the multiple damages of looking at libraries through a book-centered lens. While those proclaiming that the death of the book is the end for libraries might be easily refuted through statistics on public library usage, patron opinions, or links between library existence and literacy (see ALA, 2014; Berg, 2013) more subtle harm comes from a camp of would-be library defenders. Rebecca Schumann (2014) proclaims herself a book fetishist and declares that without books the "*whatever*-brary will become just another Jamba Juice." No Reference or Information Services of any kind are taken into consideration in her thoroughly misguided lament. Though one thinks printed books are dying while the other self-admittedly fetishizes them, what Siegler and Schumann have in common (besides being non-librarians of course), is that both reduce library services, of any kind, to our association with this single feature.

On that note, I return to my central topic, because what is the Reference Desk if not a single feature of an infinitely faceted library? For as much ado as the Book's decline has made in popular news, rarely, if ever, have I heard a librarian express concern for the profession on these grounds. We don't fear the decline of the Book, partially out of skepticism that it exists, but mostly because we know that books, contrary to public opinion, are not our stock in trade (Berg, 2013). We do, however, fear the decline of the desk. If patrons are largely choosing to

Google their way through the information landscape, rather than consult our carefully-chosen library resources, then this represents a genuine threat. However, just as a decline in print readership does not necessarily foreshadow an illiterate society, the fall of the Desk need not herald the end of Reference Service. It *is* notable if the general public and library commentators are more inclined to associate books with the library than Information Services (Forrest, 2011). Librarians need to find a way to break—or even just expand—this omnipresent association.

Adjusting to Electronic Resources

What the Desk and the Book have in common (aside from both being in decline, of course) is that they are both traditional standards displaced by the growing proliferation of electronic resources. While early adopters of technology have long been seen to be at war with print apologists (Schumann, 2014), I believe that a peaceful coexistence is possible; there will always be a place for books in the digital library of the future, though I don't necessarily believe that it will be a central place. The same can be said for the desk (Carlson, 2007). Fitzpatrick, Moore, and Lang (2008) found that even within a modern Learning Commons, their students favoured the traditional reference desk model, with 95% of students claiming that their preferred method of accessing a librarian would be to approach the desk. While it is important to maintain a centrally-located access point to librarian assistance, the reference desk is rooted in print traditions and print services (Stevens, 2013). Electronic resources allow patrons to access the library from anywhere at any time, and so reference services must also be on-call to meet this demand.

If students and other users no longer need to visit the library to access resources, then our response must be (and for the most part, has been) twofold. On the one hand, we do want to keep our physical space a necessary and vital one (Bennett, 2008), but on the other hand, we have been given opportunities to expand services outside the physical building.

Firstly, there exists that eternal question of space: is it more important for books, or for study? Scott Bennett (2008) maintains that some form of information commons is essential to anyone building an academic library, but does this replace or complement the current reference rooms? Though some fear that technology-focused Learning Commons may wholly supplant Library Services, this fear may be unwarranted based on some student reactions. Karen Keiller (2014) reported extremely unsatisfied LibQual results from University of New Brunswick St. John after the move to a new learning commons. While design problems may have fueled the UNBSJ concerns about quiet study space, the central tension—to bring students into the building, or attempt to follow them elsewhere—remains.

New Reference access points, both physical and virtual, are becoming increasingly more common: In Canada, Chat Reference is the new normal in both public and academic libraries (CARL, 2013). Virtual Reference has the dual advantage of providing a lifeline for those who wish to access the library from a distance while also appealing to the ever-growing factions that prefer to converse virtually than face-to-face. During the same session, it is possible and even likely to take questions from a patron in the library requesting that you “shush” the table next door, and a patron in another city, province, or country wondering how to renew books online. The oft-cited disadvantage of Chat Service, is of course, that it is faceless and impersonal, but it presents many opportunities to encourage students to talk to their librarians and give them the required contact information for future use. Additionally, the relative anonymity of the medium may avoid potential patron biases that might affect librarian

approachability (Bonnet and McAlexander, 2013). If patrons are discouraged from talking to librarians based on any kind of superficial factors, such as age, gender, race, or dress, then the Internet, as usual, can level the playing field.

It is worth noting that even when accounting for virtual questions, reference volumes are still in decline, but an established chat service goes a long way towards promoting library services beyond the limits of the physical building (Stevens, 2013). If students can't or won't visit the library, then we can leave them online reference breadcrumbs, so that they might hopefully find their way back to us. Libraries take questions by email, Twitter, and text message; research and citation guides are created, and even a library YouTube channel would not be out of the ordinary. Some libraries are experimenting with embedded librarianship or the retail-inspired roving reference. Scott Carlson (2008) notes that the notion of "going to where students are" is usually applied virtually, but also works in the physical realm, citing the University of Michigan's Librarian with a Latte program, where librarians invite students for open reference consultations at a popular on-campus coffee shop. Certainly, without the reference desk, there is no central access point for reference service, but is there an heir apparent, and do we need one?

New Growth in Information Literacy

Though line-ups at the desk are ever-shortening, the less-cited statistic is that individual consultation and group instruction requests are increasing (Stevens, 2013). While most, if not all of us, are familiar with giving both reference consultations and library orientation sessions, some academic libraries, such as Bishop's University and Mount Saint Vincent University in Canada, are beginning to offer credit courses in Information Literacy, taught by reference librarians. For-credit Information Literacy classes are far from the norm, but they represent an exciting direction for academic information services.

In my experience teaching Information Literacy at Bishop's, the greatest advantage of the full course, as opposed to the one-time orientation session, is the relationship-building with students. In the model used at Bishop's, Information Literacy and Critical Thinking (ILT) is a Lab course that comprises the first 6 or 7 weeks of the semester, and it is seen as a companion to students' regular courses. Currently, the Information Literacy course is required in the fields of Business, Education, Sociology, Economics, and Modern Languages, but additional electives are offered for any of the Humanities and the Social Sciences. While ideally 6 classes would be able to impart many valuable research and evaluation principles to the students, it moreover establishes the librarian as an active presence in the institution. Students who have taken the ILT course will consult their librarian for research and citation advice the same way they might consult a professor.

Good Practices: Some Key Concepts

While it is difficult, and quite likely presumptuous, to prescribe best practices for the post-Desk reference world, I'd like to pare my suggestions down to a few key concepts that are lacking—or perhaps, emerging—in Reference Service as a whole. The goal of these concepts should be to help continually adjust to a changing information climate and position your librarians as primary information resources in the minds of users. The first is outreach. It is no great secret that librarianship as a profession is more attractive to introverted types (Scherdin, 2002), but as we've already discovered, if students no longer need to come to the desk for service, then it is up to the librarian to meet them where they are. Lisa Forrest (2011)

positions outreach as an integral factor in directing students' attention towards more library resources than the obvious books.

Outreach can include small gestures like putting your picture on a Subject Guide to allow students to put a face to your name, or it can mean becoming more involved with the faculty in your departments. Christy R. Stevens (2007) suggests that faculty-librarian collaboration is necessary to sustain effective Information Literacy initiatives, but persistence may be necessary as faculty have historically shown reluctance to engage with librarians. Stevens (2007) additionally suggests that there is an information literacy component to "meeting users where they are" and that librarians need to stop assuming that faculty and students can intuit basic library vocabulary and information literacy components (Julien and Given, cited in Stevens, 2007). Bringing the library to the students means replacing library jargon (databases, catalog) with language that students already understand (Polger, 2011).

There are many opportunities for outreach not yet mentioned, which brings me to my second key concept: flexibility. Every organization has a different size and different culture, and what works for one library may not work for another. For example, larger organizations may find enough of a client base to support multiple social media platforms: Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Flickr, etc. Smaller organizations may want to consolidate their fan base on a single platform. If you're a small university where students are comfortable asking reference questions on Twitter or by text (Carlson, 2007), you may not need a distinct chat platform. Depending on institutional culture, students may embrace the LibAnswers system in lieu of a reference desk (Stevens, 2013), or as in the Fitzpatrick, Moore, and Lang (2008) study, they may still prefer a more traditional model. Use your accepted culture as a base to go forward and create new opportunities, but the basic tenet of flexibility is to not refuse unorthodox methods.

The third concept I'd like to talk about, connectivity, is in some ways a hybrid of the first two. Decentralizing, or perhaps *re*-centralizing, reference service requires extending a network into many other areas of your organization. Often, moving into a learning commons or combining desks means a closer collaboration with Information Technology (Samson and Oelz, 2005), and new librarians are expected to possess the technological savvy to lead or collaborate on digital or web-driven services (CARL, 2010).

Opportunities to collaborate with faculty, students, and the community are endless—from providing study space and overseeing Learning Commons to hosting Open Access Journals and Institutional Repositories. Partnerships with other organizations, such as Research Offices, Student Services, Copyright Offices, and IT departments both help create connections as well as provide a wealth of new subjects about which to provide Reference. As Stevens (2013) notes, there are many emerging areas in Information Services and a lot of work to be done, but "the ability to get buy-in from and to collaborate with stakeholders across the library and the campus" (208) is essential. Initiative will flounder with no buy-in, and the time has passed from when librarians are allowed to be their own worst advocates.

What these three concepts—outreach, flexibility, and connectivity—create is an organic, moving, human reference department. By following the patrons in any-all of their new directions, the librarian makes a greater impact and is more likely to be noted and pursued as an information resource in her or his own right. Clients will always have questions; the conversation needs to change from *where* they are asking to *who*. If we as librarians reach out

and show ourselves to be reliable guides through the information storm, Reference Service will continue to be relevant and thriving long after the fall of The Desk.

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