Reference is Dead, Long Live Reference: Electronic Collections in the Digital Age

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ABSTRACT

In a literature survey on how reference collections have changed to accommodate patrons' web-based information-seeking behaviors, one notes a marked "us vs. them" mentality—a fear that the Internet might render reference irrelevant. These anxieties are oft-noted in articles urging libraries to embrace digital and online reference sources. Why all the ambivalence? Citing existing research and literature, this essay explores myths about the supposed superiority of physical reference collections and how patrons actually use them, potential challenges associated with electronic reference collections, and how providing vital e-reference collections benefits the library as well as its patrons.

INTRODUCTION

Reference collections are intended to meet the immediate information needs of users. Reference librarians develop these collections with the intention of using them to answer in-depth questions and to conduct ready-reference searches on a patron's behalf. Library users depend on reference collections to include easily navigable finding tools that assist them in locating sources that contain reliable information in a useful, accessible format and can be accessed when the information is needed. The expectation for print reference collections is that they are comprised of high-use materials—the very reason for their designation as noncirculating items is ostensibly so that materials are available for on-demand access by both patrons and staff, who use them frequently.

However, librarians and patrons alike have acquired what Margaret Landesman calls "online habits," to wit, the most-utilized access point to information is often the 24/7 web.[1] In a wired world, where the information universe of the Internet is not only on our desktops, but also in our pockets and on our fashion accessories, the role of the print reference collection is less relevant in supporting information and research aims. In no other realm have the common practices of both users and librarians changed more than in how we seek information. Nevertheless, a technology-related panic seems to be at the boil, with article titles like "Are Reference Books Becoming an Endangered Species?"[2] and "Off the Shelf: Is Print Reference Dead?"[3] Words like "invasion" are used to describe the influx of electronic reference sources. We read about the

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"unsustainable luxury" of housing hundreds—sometimes thousands—of unused books on the open shelves.

All this handwringing leads us to wonder why librarians in the field need this much coaxing to be cajoled into weeding their print reference collections in favor of electronic reference resources. Does this format transition really constitute such a dire situation? What if the decline of print reference usage isn't a problem? And what's so luxurious about dusty, overcrowded shelves full of books no one cares to use?

In "The Myth of Browsing," Barclay concludes that "the continued over-my-dead-body insistence that no books be removed [from libraries] is an unsustainable position."[4] A survey of the relevant literature reveals that staff resistant to the transition from print to electronic reference collections often share three core presumptions about reference:

- Users prefer using print sources, and the importance of patrons' ability to browse the physical collection is paramount.
- The reliability of web-based reference sources may be questionable, especially when compared with the authority of print reference materials.
- Access to print materials is the only option that certain users (namely, those without library cards) have for being connected to information.

There also seems to be a more subtle assumption at play in the print vs. electronic reference debate—that print books are more "dignified," cultivating a scholarly atmosphere in the library. Certain objections to removing print reference collections to closed stacks and using the newly freed public space to build a cooperative learning commons, for instance, tend to devolve into hysterics about the potentiality of libraries becoming "no better than a Starbucks."

The "no better" variable in this equation is a cosmetic one—librarians aren't worrying about libraries serving up a flavored "information latte" for vast profit margins—they are worrying that libraries will be perceived as a place to loiter, use the Internet, and "hang out," rather than a place for serious study. One thing for librarians who worry about this potential outcome to consider is that loyal coffee shop denizens would be up in arms to learn that their favorite shop was being closed or its services being reduced or eliminated. The implications are clear. Perhaps libraries should consider the café model: a collaborative "no-shushing" zone—the difference between a library and a coffee house being that at a library, people are able to explore, learn, and be entertained using the resources provided by the institution.

At Homer Babbidge Library at the University of Connecticut, staff considered it important to "maintain a vestige of the reference collection, so that students were reminded they had entered a special place where scholarship was tangible."[5] However, users considered the underutilized stacks of books a waste of space that could be better used for cooperative work areas or

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computer access stations. The students' needs and interests were heeded, and Homer Babbidge Library's Learning Commons has been a successful endeavour.

Reference Collections: History and Purpose

Brief points about the history of reference services lend context to the arguments presented in favor of building electronic reference collections. Grimmelman points out that "it's almost a cliché to assert that the Internet is like a vast library, that it causes problems of information overload, or that it contains both treasures and junk in vast quantities."[6] From the earliest dedicated reference departments to the 24/7 reference model developed in response to progressing technology, Tyckoson affirms that "one thing remains constant—users still need help. The question . . . is how to provide the library's users with the best help."[7]

Browsing collections in libraries are newer than one might assume. Prior to World War II, academic library faculty could browse to find reference materials that met the information needs of students, but undergrads weren't even allowed in the stacks.[8] In public libraries, reference collections were open to users, but reference rooms were considered to be, first and foremost, the domain and workplace of the reference.[9] This raises the question, what is the domain and workplace of the contemporary reference librarian? Arguably, the answer to this query is wherever the information is, for example, online.

Ready reference collections arose from the need to make the most commonly used resources in the library convenient and readily available for patron use.[10] The most commonly used resources in contemporary libraries are those found online—again, where the information is. Both users and librarians now turn to the web as the first resort for answering quick reference queries, and they turn to online databases and journals for exploring complex research questions. Meanwhile print works that were once used daily sit moldering, gathering dust on the shelves either because they are outdated or because no one thinks to find them when the answer is available at the swipe of a finger or the click of a mouse from where they sit, whether that's in the library or in, *ahem*, a coffee shop. "The convenience, speed, and ubiquity of the Internet is making most print reference sources irrelevant," Tyckoson says.[11]

Print Preference, Browsing Collections

Library use is increasing—but, as Landesman and others point out, it is increasing because users want access to computers, instruction in technology, study spaces, or just a place to be that's not home, not school, and not work. Users do not come to the library for reference sources—researchers and scholars prefer to access full-text works via their computing devices.[12] The argument that users prefer print sources is antiquated, and the emphasis on building browsing collections of physical reference materials reflects a misguided notion that users crave tactile information. Landesman is blunt: "When it is a core title, users want it online."[13]

Statistics bear her assertions out. Studies show that usage of print reference collections is minimal and that users strongly prefer online access to reference materials.

- At Stetson University, usage statistics gathered during the 2003–4 academic year showed that only 8.5 percent of the library's 25,626 reference volumes were used during that period.[14]
- A year-long study by *Public Libraries* revealed that only 13 percent of Winter Park (FL) Public Library's collection of 8,211 reference items was used.[15]
- When Texas A&M University converted its reference collection's primary format from print to e-books, a dramatic increase of the e-versions of reference titles was recorded.[16]
- In a survey of William & Mary Law Library users, a majority of respondents indicated that they consciously select online reference sources over print, citing convenience and currency as top reasons for doing so.[17]

Scanning the shelves may seem to some to be the most intuitive way to search for information, but in actual practice, browsing is ineffective—books at eye level are used more often, patrons are limited to sources not being used by another patron at any given moment, and overcrowding of the shelves results in patrons overlooking useful materials.[18] Browsing is the least effective way for patrons to "shop" a collection.

Searching by electronic means overcomes the obstacles inherent in browsing the physical shelves when using well-designed search algorithms that employ keywords on the basis of accurate metadata. Landesman indicates that if librarians commit to educating patrons on the use of the reference databases, ebooks, and websites they offer, online reference will be "a huge win for users."[19]

It should be noted: no one suggests that print reference should be eliminated entirely, at least not yet. Smaller print reference collections result in better-utilized spaces; they ensure that remaining resources in the physical collections are used more effectively—only the items that are actually high-use are included, which makes these sources easier to locate; books formerly classified as reference materials are able to circulate to those interested in their specialized content. Smaller print reference collections serve patrons in myriad ways, including freeing up funds that can be used to enhance electronic reference collections.

Digital reference services are just another way of organizing information—there is no revolution here, unless it is in providing information with more efficiency—with breadth, depth, and access that surpasses what is possible via a print-only reference collection. The inevitable digital shift is a very natural evolution of patron-driven library services rather than cause for consternation on the part of library service providers.

Web Reliability: Google and Wikipedia

Those who argue that the reliability of online sources is questionable are typically referring to Google results and Wikipedia entries, which have little bearing on a library's electronic collections

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of databases and e-books, but has plenty to do with a library's reference services: these two sources are very often used in lieu of printed fact-finding sources such as atlases, subject or biographical dictionaries, and specialized sources like Bartlett's Familiar Quotations—which was last printed in 2012 and has recently gone digital.

For questions of fact, Google is often a convenient and "reliable enough" source for most queries; authority of the results yielded by a Google search is not always detectable, and is sometimes intentionally obscured, so the librarian must vet results carefully and select the most reliable sources when providing ready reference to patrons. However, Google is far more than just its main search page. For instance, Google Scholar allows searchers to locate full-text articles as well as citations for scholarly papers and peer-reviewed journal articles. In general, there are many tools on the web, and librarians must expend effort determining how to make the best use of each. In particular, Google is better suited to some information tasks than others—it's up to the librarian to know when to use this tool and when to eschew it.

Wikipedia has been the subject of much heated debate since its inception in 2001, but in a study conducted by *Nature* magazine, the encyclopedias Britannica and Wikipedia were evaluated on the basis of a review of fifty pairs of articles by subject experts and found to be comparable in terms of the number of content errors—2.9 and 3.9, respectively.[20] Deliberate misstatements of fact, usually in biographical entries, are cited as evidence that Wikipedia is utterly unreliable as a reference source. In fact, print sources have been plagued with the same issues. For many years, the *Dictionary of American Biography* contained an entry based on a hoax claiming a (nonexistent) diary of Horatio Alger—and while the entry was removed in later editions, the article was still referred to in the index for several years after its removal.[21] If anything, it seems that format might provide a false sense of assurance that a source's authority is infallible.

All reference sources include bias, and all will include faulty information. The major difference between print and electronic sources is that in the digital era, using the tools of technology, these errors can be corrected quickly. What some see as declining quality of a source based on its format is simply a longstanding feature of human-produced reference works, dissociated from any print vs. web debate.

Access: Collection vs. Policy

Some academic and public libraries intend to decrease or discontinue purchasing print-based reference sources so funds can be diverted to build electronic reference collections; they weed print reference to make room for information commons containing technology used for accessing these electronic collections. The basic assumption in the objection to this practice is that the traditional model of in-person reference is integral to a functioning reference collection, that access to information depends on that information being printed on a physical page.

Reference services are provided virtually via chat, IM, and email. Reference services are provided via the library's website. Reference services are provided by roving librarians,

librarians engaging in one-on-one literacy sessions, and in large-group training sessions. Long gone are the days of the reference librarian who waits patiently at her station for a patron to approach with a question. Since the reference services model no longer mandatorily includes a stationary point on the library map, nor does providing quality reference depend solely on the depth and breadth of the print reference collection, how are print reference collections used?

As indicated previously, about 10 percent of print reference collections are used by patrons on a regular basis. Concern for the information needs of library users who do not have library cards is well-intentioned, but the question remains: if 90 percent of a collection goes unused, even when those users without library cards have access to these materials, is the collection useful?

As Stewart Bodner of NYPL says, "It is a disservice to refer a user to a difficult print resource when its electronic counterpart is a far superior product."[22] How users want to receive their information matters—access should not depend on whether a user can obtain a library card.

For those libraries with high concentrations of patrons who do not qualify for library cards (e.g., individuals who do not have a fixed home address, or who cannot obtain a state-issued ID card), libraries might reconsider their policies rather than their collections. Computer-only access cards can be provided on a temporary basis for visitors and others who are unable to obtain permanent cards. San Francisco Public Library recently instituted a Welcome Card for those members of the community who cannot meet identification requirements for full library privileges. The Welcome Card allows the user full access to computers and online resources and permits the patron to check out one physical item at a time.[23] When compared with purchasing, housing, and maintaining vast print reference collections, this is a significantly less costly and far more patron-centered solution to the problem of access to electronic information sources—librarians should be advocates for users, with the goal being access to knowledge, no matter its format.

Conclusion: Building Better Hybrid Collections

Most library professionals agree that libraries should collect both print and electronic sources for their reference collections, but the ratio of print to digital is up for debate. As more formats with improved capabilities appear, researchers find that patrons prefer those sources that provide them with the best functionality. It is essential to look to the principles on which reference services are founded. One of those principles is to build collections on the basis of user preferences. Librarians must consider what the reference collection is for and whether assumptions about patron preferences are backed by evidence. In essence, considering what "reference" means to users rather than defaulting to the status quo.

A reference collection development policy must be based on what is actually used often, not on what has the potential to maybe be used sometime in the future. The library is not an archive, preserving great tomes for posterity—the collections in a library are for use. With less emphasis on print materials, librarians might focus on the wealth of sources available electronically via

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databases and ebooks, as well as open-source, free online resources. Librarians must cultivate an understanding of the resources patrons use and the formats in which they prefer to access information. As Heintzelman and coauthors state, "A reference collection should evolve into a smaller and more efficient tool that continually adapts to the new era, merging into a symbiotic relationship with electronic resources."[24]

Rules of reference that were devised when print works were the premier sources of reference information no longer apply. Reference librarians must lead the way in responding to the digital shift—creating electronic collections centered on web-based recommendations, licensed databases of journals, and ebooks—with a focus on rich, interactive, and unbiased content. Weeding reference collections of outdated and unused tomes, moving some materials to the closed stacks while allowing others to circulate, and building e-book reference collections allows libraries to provide effective reference services by cultivating collections that patrons want to use.

Much of the transition from print to electronic reference collections can be accomplished by ensuring that resources are promoted to patrons and staff, that training in using these tools is provided to patrons and staff, that librarians become involved in the selection of digital collections, and that the spaces where print collections were formerly housed are used in ways the community finds valuable.

One need not worry about the "invasion" of e-reference or the "death" of print reference. The two can coexist peacefully and vitally, as long as librarians maintain focus on selecting the best material for their reference collections, no matter its format.

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