

The relevance of reference Librarian in the 21st century: a critical look

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Abstract

This paper examines the relevance of the reference librarian in the face of ubiquitous IT tools which could be used to access information resources from a remote place without necessarily coming physically to the library. The users seem to under-estimate the impact of the library and librarians in their quest for information, since there is the Internet, search engines, databases and myriads of other online journals, institutional repositories, self-archives, academic blogs from which information could be crawled within seconds. This phenomenon has brought about a gross reduction in the use of library resources by patrons, and reference librarians seem to be redundant in their duty posts. It was revealed in this study that reference librarians are now faced with new roles, and dynamic methods of service delivery. New roles of the reference librarian in the 21st century includes providing access to information, acting as information advocates, advising role, information organisation and retrieval, knowledge and digital management, and information mining, digital referencing among others. The study concluded that the reference librarian ('Hybrid Librarian') must adapt to the growing trends of Information and Communication Technology, using internet resources, new social media, semantic web, cloud computing, mobile technology (Library 2.0/3.0) and other relevant tools in carrying out reference services.

Key words: Reference Librarian, Hybrid Librarian, Online referencing, Information and Communication Technology (ICT), Library 3.0 and Apo mediation

1. Introduction

The influx of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has affected the way information services are provided to users of the library. It has caused a change in user behaviour towards seeking information in the library through the reference librarian. Internet, search engine, open educational resources, Institutional repositories have all contributed to this phenomenon. Users tend to over-emphasize the need to consult the reference librarian for whatever reason again. The question now is 'what is the relevance of reference librarian in this 21st century'. To answer this question, we need to look critically and closely at the changing roles and activities of the reference librarian in this information age. ICT has not relegated reference librarians to the background, but has only changed their roles, activities, and their nomenclature and made their jobs more effective, user friendly and yet challenging.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Traditionally, reference work depends on patrons approaching librarians. Students, faculty, and other users must actively seek reference help. It is much more common now, however, for patrons to seek answers from the Internet, rather than approaching a reference librarian. The web is many things a good library ought to be: confidential, non-judgmental, providing easy access to a wealth of uncensored information, and offering a creative and inspirational space. In the age of the web, reference librarians are less frequently approached with simple reference queries because Google or Wikipedia can often answer such questions not only quickly and effectively, but also comfortably (Martin, 2009).

Martin (2009) opined that librarians need to avoid the harsh assumption that lazy patrons are simply fleeing the reference desk for easy answers on the Net. If we examine this behavior in context of the information society, the abandonment of the reference desk becomes more than laziness. As one of the transforming technologies of the information society, the Internet has changed the flow of information, and this has undoubtedly affected the information seeking behavior of our patrons. The ubiquity of the Internet has affected not only how our patrons use (or do not use) the library, but also how they conceive of the library and information, and perhaps more importantly, how they conceive of themselves. The library is no longer viewed as the sole keeper of all information. Rather than requesting library assistance or even seeking out library resources, college students typically begin their information searches using a search engine (De Rosa and Cantrell, 2005)

Allen (2005) posits that due to library patrons' ever-changing information needs and the widespread adoption of information technology in higher education, academic libraries need to evolve by employing "hybrid librarians" on teams that provide instructional and information services in the departments they serve, while staffing and maintaining the physical library space as it also evolves. The library is now seen as Hybrid library and the reference librarian now tagged "Hybrid Librarian". Starr (2004) opined that one definition of the hybrid library is: "an environment with physical and virtual services supporting professional activities of the users at their workplace from the discovery of information to the manipulation and analysis of the delivered resources" From this definition, one can see that helping users to find information is only one part of the comprehensive library services that 21st-century librarians need to offer.

ICT is busy transforming the nature of academic libraries. A variety of terms such as hybrid, digital and virtual library are used to refer to the academic library. A digital library can be defined as "a managed collection of information, with associated services, where the information is stored in digital formats and accessible over a network". The virtual library has been defined as "remote access to the contents and services of libraries and other information resources, combining an on-site collection of current and heavily used materials in both print and electronic form, with an electronic network which provides access to, and delivery from, external worldwide library and commercial information and knowledge sources". Hybrid libraries are libraries that provide access to both electronic resources and paper-based resources (Ferran, Mor & Minguillon, 2005).

Every sphere of the academic library is being affected by ICT quite radically. No longer is the library the untouchable custodian of information. It is being shaken to its very foundation, in fact its existence is being threatened. The academic libraries' traditional role of information custodian had been reduced to that of being one of many information providers (Cheng, 2001). Of all the information and communication technologies the Internet and particularly the World Wide Web with its graphical user interface, has had the greatest impact on the information revolution (Duff, 2003). According to Farrow (1997) cited in Smith (2005), wide spread publicity has led to assumptions that the Internet will meet all user information needs and that there will be no need for professional librarian intervention in future between user and information resources. Moyo (2002) states that student expectations that all their research needs will be met online are on the increase. Not only do students expect to find the information they need online, they also expect it to be available in full text. Tam & Robertson (2002) averred that these assumptions have led to a reluctance to use the physical library materials and to a decrease of visits to the library.

Allen (2005) citing Garrod (1999) also talks about the need for a balance between the old and the new, print and electronic, traditional and innovative. One of these strategies was to redesign library positions. For example, a reference librarian position at Earlham College morphed into an "information technology/reference instructional librarian" responsible for web pages and software support.

NEW ROLES OF THE REFERENCE LIBRARIAN IN THE 21ST CENTURY

New roles of the reference librarian in the 21st century includes cultural role, teaching role, providing access to information, space provision, act as information advocates, advising role, information organisation and retrieval, knowledge and digital management, and information mining. For the reference librarian to carry out these new and challenging roles, they will stay in advance of need, believe in themselves and what they can offer, not take their existence for granted, develop themselves, learn from each other, seize the opportunities, lift up their heads, get out more and engage, be confident and claim the future (Wastawy, 2007). The reference librarian are faced with the daunting task of performing electronic reference services, digital reference services and using 'Second life' as an aid to perform reference services.

Electronic Reference Services (ERS)

According to Moyo (2002) cited in Smith (2005), reference statistics in academic libraries are plunging. At the same time electronic access of these resources are increasing. This tendency can be ascribed to the fact that users can access these resources remotely via the Internet. Internet connectivity and e-resources had become absolutely essential for the new reference service paradigm. One of the key elements of e-reference service success is that the service is available at the point of need (Moyo, 2004)

The tremendous growth in the use of online reference works has created a need within the academic library to develop services to support this type of service. Academic libraries are turning to on-line real time reference tools also referred to as ORR to support students remotely. The Pen State University library has more than 300 databases that students may access. On-line real time reference support is used to assist students at the point of need (Moyo, 2002 cited in Smith, 2005). Sowards (2003) opined that e-reference works share all the benefits of e-resources e.g. 24/7 remote accessibility, concurrent access for multiple users and the potential for online

updating to keep content up to date. Electronic communication had become the primary mode of communication in e-reference services. Online chat had become the method of choice. Some e-reference application providers have added Voice over IP (VOIP) to their products which enable voice dialogue with the library user.

According to Sowards, e-reference services have many advantages, which includes:

- ✓ Availability via the Internet.
- ✓ Service at the point of need.
- ✓ Easy for people who are unable to come to the academic library e.g. the physically disabled.
- ✓ 24/7 availability.
- ✓ Access to multiple information resources

Digital References services (DRS)

The terms digital reference services, web-based reference services and electronic reference services are used interchangeably by Su (2002) as terms with similar meaning. There are various definitions of digital reference services. Lankes (1998) defines digital reference as Internet-based question and answer services that connect users with individuals who possess specialized subject or skill expertise. Digital reference services refer to a network of expertise, intermediation and resources put at the disposal of a user seeking answers in an online/networked environment. A digital reference occurs when a question is received electronically and responded to electronically (Bertot, McClure and Ryan, 2000).

Janes, Carter and Memmott (1999) developed their own definition of digital reference as a mechanism by which people can submit their questions and have them answered by a library staff member through some electronic means (e-mail, chat, Web forms, etc.) not in person or over the phone. A digital reference service generally comprises the following elements:

- a. the user of the service,
- b. the interface (e-mail, web form, chat, videoconference, etc.),
- c. the information professional, and
- d. electronic resources (including electronic or CD-based resources, web resources, local digitized material etc.), as well as print resources (Berube, 2003)

The concept of Second life as an aid to reference service

Developed in 2003 by Linden Labs, Second Life is a multi-user virtual environment in which users can build their own characters, create their own worlds, communicate with other virtual users, and explore worlds created by others. To the 21st century reference librarian, Second Life is found to be a valuable tool for training and development through developing models. Reference librarians collaborating throughout the physical world are able to provide 24/7 reference service using SL. SL librarians can hand electronic note cards to virtual students as a way of pointing users toward various web resources (Bhattacharyya, 2010).

The reference librarian as an ‘Apomediary’

The recent development in library and information services tagged Library 3.0 has made the reference librarian to be called an ‘apomediary’. Eysenbach (2008) submitted that apomediation is a new scholarly socio-technological term that characterizes the process of disintermediation (intermediaries are middlemen or gatekeepers, whereby the former intermediaries are functionally replaced by **apomediaries**, i.e network, group/collaborative filtering processes e.g health information professionals giving relevant information to a patient, and disintermediation means to bypass). Library 3.0 has caused a shift in the conventional duties of reference librarians, standing in-between users and information resources. The librarian no longer stand as an intermediary, but as an apomediary who stands by or aside, as users could access information directly without necessarily going through the reference librarian. The reference librarian could only stand as a guide to high quality information services/experiences without being a prerequisite to obtain that information or service in the first place (Eysenbach, 2008). Examples of library 3.0 tools include social networking sites, social bookmarking, blogs, wikis, communication tools, folksonomies, semantic web, cloud computing, mobile technology among others. The reference librarian is now faced with the daunting task of adapting to the use library 3.0 by developing their ICT skills, social network use skills and other adaptive skills that will make her/him to be relevant in information services provision.

However, for reference librarians to remain relevant in this information age, they should:

- Build digital library functionality-preserve and archive digital content as a matter of course.
- Enhance the users' experience with new technologies
- Offer researchers publishing capabilities, repositories for their work, and self sufficiency.
- Support the needs of big science (massive data, unstructured data, extraction, visualization and simulation).
- Establish Library 2.0 (Blogs, wikis, Twitter etc) which implies a paradigm where libraries are more supportive of change and users are giving opportunities to be part of the library's activities and planning.
- Adapt and maximally utilize web 3.0 technologies in delivering information services.

Conclusion

The study revealed that the reference librarians are relevant in this 21st century as they help to meet the needs of the virtual users, creating a platform for knowledge access through online databases and institutional repositories. The reference librarian is now seen as hybrid librarian, helping those who would come physically to the library to consult reference books, as well as providing E-reference service, digital reference service, and using Second Life to meet the divergent needs of virtual and remote users. Hence, it was established that the reference librarian must adapt to the growing trends of Information and Communication Technology, using internet resources; social media (Library 2.0) for referencing, as well as using electronic mail for document delivery and current awareness services. Librarians must know how to use Library 3.0-deal with mobile technology, social media, dynamic web, widgets and filtering. Undoubtedly, the reference Librarian is relevant in the face of growing technology and remote access to information resources on the internet.

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