VIRTUAL REFERENCE SERVICES: IMPLEMENTATION OF PROFESSIONAL AND ETHICAL STANDARDS

Virtual reference, which allows users to connect easily with librarians online, is becoming popular. Librarians answer thousands of questions every day over the Internet. As the service matures, professional associations publish standards that provide professional guidelines to improve the quality of the services. This article focuses attention on the quality of these e-services in light of professional and ethical standards in the field. It examines the extent to which librarians adhere to professional and ethical guidelines and the role that virtual reference plays in providing services to diverse user groups. First, it discusses adherence to the professional standards and shows that the professional behaviors of librarians vary depending on user, institution, and request types. Then, it discusses the extent to which librarians provide equitable online reference services to diverse users groups and the inconsistent findings from empirical research.

Adherence to Professional Standards

Evaluation of virtual reference services has been the focus of recent studies; however, many of these evaluations have been anecdotal in nature, and more studies that are empirical need to be conducted. Although some researchers argue that new methods and measures of evaluation are needed, some methods from traditional (in person) reference evaluation are useful for evaluating virtual reference. A major concern in the evaluation of reference services evolves around the variables that should be measured. Evaluations of traditional reference services have investigated the types of questions asked, the accuracy, completeness, and usefulness of the information provided by a reference librarian, assessed user satisfaction, and examined the behavior of librarians. Evaluations of virtual reference services utilize similar measures and have examined, for example, the type of questions, accuracy, completeness, usefulness of the service, and user satisfaction.

In an effort to help librarians improve user-librarian interaction, both the American Library Association's Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) (2004) and the International Federation of Library Associations' (IFLA) Reference and Information Services Section (2007) have established professional guidelines as standards to assure service quality. RUSA originally published the *Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers* for traditional reference services, and later modified it to include instructions for both in person and remote reference services. These guidelines focus on five areas: approachability, interest, listening/ inquiring, searching, and follow up. Similarly, the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) (2007) has recently published a set of guidelines that relies partially on RUSA's (2004) guidelines but focuses solely on digital reference. These guidelines address the needs of library administrators as well as practicing librarians and include two sections. The first focuses on the administration of digital reference services and was written with the responsibilities of program administrators in mind; the second, focuses on the practice of digital reference and provides guidance for the practitioner of digital reference. The standards for practitioners focus on four areas. The first, general guidelines advise

librarians, for example, to provide prompt reply to all requests in addition to the five areas from RUSA guidelines. The second, content guidelines, advise librarians, for example, to respond in an informative and objective way, to compose a well-structured message with heading, body, and signature and to offer accurate responses. The third, chat guidelines, advise librarians, for example, to identify themselves and use spelling, grammar and capitalization appropriately. And the fourth, guidelines for chat sessions, for example, advise librarians to explain their search process, use complete citations, use the client's name, clarify confusing terminology, and avoid excessive jargon. It is unclear, however, whether librarians who provide virtual reference services are aware of these guidelines and to what extent they make an effort to implement them in practice. Moreover, studies of virtual reference effectiveness rarely utilize these standards to evaluate service quality. Those studies that do report low levels of adherence to the guidelines.

In one of the instances that the standards were used as a benchmark for evaluating virtual reference services, 324 transactions from 54 academic libraries were analyzed to determine the extent of librarians' adherence to the professional guidelines (IFLA and RUSA) and compared the level of adherence to the two sets of guidelines (Shachaf & Horowitz, 2007). The study found low levels of adherence to both sets of guidelines; varied levels of adherence based on request types and user names; and variation in institutional rank when the two sets of guidelines were utilized.

The highest levels of adherence to IFLA guidelines were observed for behaviors such as (from the most to the least frequent, as long as the behavior was observed in at least half of the transactions): objective behavior, clarity of response, answer accuracy, response completeness, answer was sent within stated time policy, and greetings and closure in the transaction. Adhering to RUSA guidelines involves a high frequency of greetings and closure, answer's accuracy, using appropriate written language, providing an objective response, the availability of policies on the library website, easy access to the service, and the use of web forms. The lowest levels of adherence to IFLA guidelines were observed for behaviors such as (from the least to most frequent, as long as the behavior was observed in no more than half of the transactions): explaining the search strategies, including evaluative remarks, making concluding remarks, and thanking the user for using the service. In addition, automatic responses were sent only by approximately one fourth of the institutions. The lowest levels of adherence to RUSA guidelines were observed in addressing users by their first name, thanking them for using the service, including concluding remarks, and making follow up remarks. Other less frequent behaviors involved providing detailed information on the resources, rephrasing the question, explaining search strategies, asking for additional information, and asking what the user already tried to do.

Differences in the level of observed behaviors were evident for various requests types and user names. In other words, not only did different types of requests result in different levels of adherence to the standards, but different users also received different levels of service (on the same requests). The difference in the frequency of behaviors by request type or by user name was apparent when using either set of guidelines for evaluation. The pattern of differences among the users did not differ between the two sets of guidelines (i.e., the same users received better or worse service when either set of standards was utilized) and the differences between users were only intensified when IFLA guidelines were utilized (compared to the RUSA guidelines). Unlike the variations among users, which maintained a similar pattern of adherence to the two sets of guidelines, institution ranking varied based on the set of guidelines that was utilized in the evaluation. These variations call for further investigations into how and why the behavior of librarians varies when addressing different questions and different users.

Furthermore, these results raise a similar question about the extent to which librarians (and those that provide virtual reference services in particular) adhere to other, more general professional guidelines such as their code of ethics.

Adherence to Ethical Standards: Service Equality

The American Library Association's (1995) code of ethics guides (reference) librarians to provide unbiased responses to all requests and users, specifying: "We provide the highest level of service to all library users through appropriate and usefully organized resources; equitable service policies; equitable access; and accurate, unbiased, and courteous responses to all requests." Additionally, section 201(a) of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (42 USC § 2000a(a) (1964)) specifies that "all persons shall be entitled to the full and equal enjoyment of the goods, services, facilities, privileges, advantages, and accommodations … without discrimination or segregation on the ground of race, color, religion, or national origin." Therefore, the importance of equitable service in virtual reference service is clear. It is in particular important because today a growing number of minorities and international students attend higher education institutions in North America and make increasing use of library and reference services (Curry & Copeman, 2005; Whitmire, 1999, 2003). They use the academic library heavily (African American use the library more than White students) and request more assistance in searching databases (non-native English speakers compared with native English speakers) (Whitmire, 1999; 2003; Zoe & DiMartino, 2000). Providing reference services to diverse user groups is a challenging task, which involves overcoming many barriers.

It is unclear to what extent librarians adhere to the code of ethics and if they provide equitable service to their users. It may be that reference librarians already provide unbiased reference services and that providing services to diverse user groups over the internet may increase or decrease such bias. Reference services may be more equitably provided in the virtual environment because social presence is reduced, and interactions are more impersonal and task-oriented because social cues, context, and non-verbal behavior are missing (Sproull & Keisler, 1986). The lack of social cues in e-mail mediated communication and virtual reference services can facilitate the provision of unbiased service to diverse user groups. However, e-mail creates many challenges for librarians who provide reference services, primarily because the lack of non-verbal cues during the reference interview results in misunderstandings. Moreover, discrimination may be more likely to be expressed overtly due to the anonymous, spontaneous, impersonal, and uninhibited nature of computer-mediated communication (Glaser & Kahn, 2005); librarians may express themselves in less self-conscious and socially desirable ways. Although it is unlikely that librarians will deny resources or services on the basis of group membership, they may, nonetheless, find excuses to discriminate; subjective bias may increase, and greater inequality may result in the virtual environment. When virtual reference services are provided, librarians may become less self-aware and less likely to monitor their behavior and therefore more likely to react on impulses that would normally be inhibited. While it is possible that inequality in reference services will increase in the virtual environment due to the deregulating effect it has on behavior, it is also possible that librarians will provide unbiased service online. Are virtual reference services color and gender blind?

A series of studies that addressed this question report mixed findings (Shachaf & Horowitz, 2006; Shachaf, Oltmann, & Horowitz, in press). A pilot study was conducted to examine the quality of virtual reference services in 23 libraries of the Association of Research Libraries. A variety of quality indicators were examined in light of the RUSA (2004) and IFLA

(2007) guidelines. Using an experimental design, requests were sent to various libraries that were signed using different user names, each representing a different ethnic group (for example, Ahmed Ibrahim, Arab; Latoya Johnson, African-American; and Rosa Manuz, Hispanic). We found that, for the majority of indicators of service quality, whites (Christian and Jewish users) received the best service, African-American and Arabs the worst service, and Asians and Hispanics fell somewhere in between.

For example, one of the indicators of service quality is the amount of time it takes the librarians to respond to a user request (International Federation of Library Association, 2007; Reference and User Services Association, 2004). Receiving a reply in the shortest period of time indicates a better level of service than a longer response time. If users quickly receive a response to their queries, they will be more satisfied with the service than if the librarian takes a long time to respond. An equal level of service to all user groups will be shown by an equal amount of time between the user request and the librarian response. There should be no difference in the average response time across all user groups.

Although most of the policies of the libraries that participated in the pilot study stated that the expected response time was two days, the findings show that the average response time to Caucasians was shorter compared with the average response time to Arabs and African-Americans. It is likely that a user who receives a reply a month after asking for information will not be satisfied with the service (several responses were sent 3-5 weeks after the original request to the Arab and the African-American users). The variations in response time indicate discriminatory behavior towards these user groups.

Service discrimination against Arabs and African-American by reference librarians should not be the norm. The discriminatory behavior of virtual reference services could be explained by the flaws of the virtual environment, where it is easier to behave in less socially accepted ways. It may as well be explained by other factors, such as the relative homogeneous nature of librarianship. The library profession is overwhelmingly white; this composition provides an ideal atmosphere for stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination to flourish. Although the findings show that librarians provide different levels of service to different users on all the aspects that have been examined, the sample size in the pilot study was not large enough for generalization. Thus, two follow-up studies have been conducted, generating a much larger sample of libraries and transactions to conduct statistical analysis to examine the significance of the differences.

The two experimental studies examined whether online discrimination exists in services that are provided by virtual reference librarians to the general public. Both follow-up studies apply a similar research design and methodology but differ in the type of library examined. One experiment focused on academic librarians and the other on public librarians. The analysis of the level of service received by males and females and by ethnic groups was based on answers to 676 online reference queries: 324 transactions from 54 academic libraries and 352 transactions from 88 public libraries. The quality of the virtual reference services was evaluated along three dimensions:

1. Timely response: acknowledging user email questions in a timely manner, providing patrons with responses as quickly as possible, and adhering to stated turnaround policy (International Federation of Library Association, 2007; Reference and User Services Association, 2004).

2. Reliability: answering the query efficiently and correctly and providing a signature that contains the librarian's name or initials, title, and institution (International Federation of Library Association, 2007).
3. Courtesy: approachability, friendliness, politeness, and professional courtesy (International Federation of Library Association, 2007; Reference and User Services Association, 2004).

The results from both studies indicate that although differences in the quality of virtual reference services among user groups, user names, sex, and ethnicity exist, these differences are not statistically significant. There are three possible explanations for these results: that they reflect the ethical behaviors of librarians, that they reflect the potential of the virtual environment to lessen subjective bias, and that these results are due to the limitations of the two follow-up studies. Any one of the three explanations requires future research to provide additional support.

Do virtual reference librarians provide equal quality of service to diverse user groups? Based on the findings of the two follow-up studies, the tentative answer is "yes," since no significant differences were found in the quality of e-services that libraries provide to the public. The quality of service to all user groups was equal in terms of courtesy, reliability, and timely response. It is possible to conclude that the virtual environment has the potential to enable unbiased services to all users. However, the findings from both the pilot study and the two follow-up studies open the door for future research. It is possible that the findings of the pilot study as well as the two follow-up studies result from the limitations of the methodology. Future research is needed to support or contradict the results from either the pilot study or the follow-up studies.

In sum, this article discussed virtual service quality in light of professional standards and ethical guidelines. Professional and ethical guidelines are established to improve professional behavior and should not be perceived simply as declarative documents. Librarians need to be aware of the RUSA and IFLA guidelines, as well as their code of ethics; efforts must be made to implement them. Training and research awareness will lead to improved professional behaviors.

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