

## **New Trends of Library Reference Services**

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### **Abstract**

Reference service is considered as the heart of the library services. It is a service, facilitated by a reference librarian, which meets the information needs of users with desired information. Like many other library services, library reference service also has changed with the impact of emerging technologies and in par with changing social needs. The aim of this paper is to discuss some of these new trends of library reference services. These new trends are divided into four main areas named as: new trends of reference sources, new trends of reference interview, collaborative efforts on reference services, and non-library based information services.

**Keywords:** Reference Service; Reference Sources; Collaborative Digital Reference Services (CDRS); Reference Interview; Reference Librarian

### **1. Introduction**

The motto of present day library service is based on Dr. S.R. Ranganathan's philosophy on providing 'right book to right user at the right time in the right (personal) way'. In order to realize this philosophy, reference service plays a vital role. Therefore, reference service is even considered as the Heart of the library service.

According to the ALA Glossary of Library and Information Science:

‘Reference Service is that phase of library work which is directly concerned with assistance to readers in securing information and in using resources of the library in study and research’ (ALA Glossary of Library and Information Science, 1983).

Ranganathan defines Reference Service as:

‘Personal Service to each reader in helping him to find the documents answering his interest at the moment pinpointedly, exhaustively and expeditiously’ (Ranganathan, 1961).

The Online Dictionary for Library and Information Science (ODLIS) provides an updated and comprehensive definition for ‘reference service’ as follows:

“All the functions performed by a trained librarian employed in the reference section of a library to meet the information needs of patrons (in person, by telephone, or electronically), including but not limited to answering substantive questions, instructing users in the selection and use of appropriate tools and techniques for finding information, conducting searches on behalf of the patron, directing users to the location of library resources, assisting in the evaluation of information, referring patrons to resources outside the library when appropriate, keeping reference statistics, and participating in the development of the reference collection...” (Reitz, 2006).

Although assisting users to find their information runs as far back as the evolution of libraries, the idea of modern 'library reference service' was introduced by Samuel Swett Green in 1876. In his article titled 'Personal relations between librarians and readers' appeared in the 'Library Journal', Green emphasized the importance of actively assisting users to find their desired information. Green in his seminal article introduced four (04) prime functions of the Reference Librarian.

- (i) Instructing patrons how to use the library
- (ii) Answering patrons' queries
- (iii) Aiding the patron in selecting resources, and
- (iv) Promoting the library within the community (Green, 1876)

Green's ideas were presented at a time when librarians were more concentrated on acquiring materials and organizing them in library collections. Even today these four functions remain the core of library reference services. Later, Dr. S.R. Ranganathan expanded Green's ideas by introducing five laws of library science.

### **1.1 Components and Functions of Reference Service**

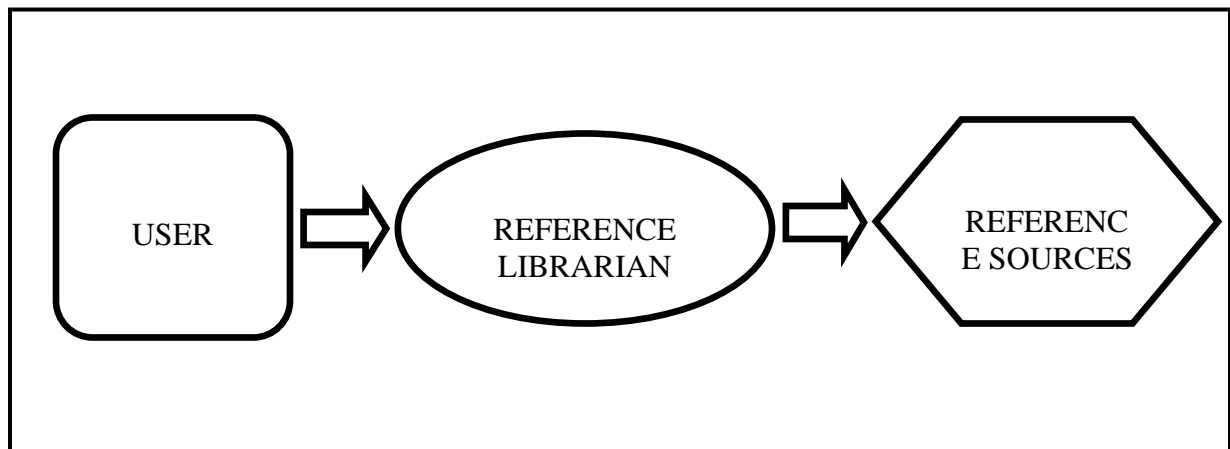
Essentially the reference service incorporates the following three basic elements:

- (i) Information or knowledge base (also known as reference sources)
- (ii) User or client
- (iii) Information professional or librarian (also known as reference librarian)

Information or knowledge base is one of the basic elements of the reference services. These are the sources in which information and knowledge sought by users are contained. They are ranging from traditional reference sources to online resources and not only restricted to documentary sources, but also include various organizations and subject experts as well.

User or client is the focal point of the library reference service. Users have different information needs. They pose their information needs in the form of reference questions to the reference desks. Katz (2002) identifies four types of reference questions as: directional type, ready-reference type, specific search type and research type questions.

Information professional or librarian (also known as reference librarian) serves as the intermediary between users and reference sources (*Figure 1*) by assisting and advising users in their information seeking.



***Figure 1: The Reference Process***

## **2. New trends of Reference Services**

By today, library services have dramatically changed in response to the changing needs of the society. Also, the Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have made a great impact on that. Certainly, these technologies have revolutionized access to information in libraries of all kinds and sizes (Bopp and Smith, 2001). Library reference services also have undergone significant changes as a result of the new trends & developments in ICTs. In this paper, these changes (discussed hereafter as new trends) are discussed under following four (04) broad themes:

- (i) New trends of reference sources
- (ii) New trends of reference interview
- (iii) Collaborative Digital Reference Services (CDRS); and
- (iv) Non-library based information services

### **2.1 New trends of Reference Sources**

As discussed under section 1.1, reference librarians must be able to respond to a variety of questions ranging from ready-reference to research type, depending on the needs expressed by library users. Information resources most frequently used by reference librarians, in answering for these reference questions, are called “reference sources”. Dictionaries, directories, encyclopedias, handbooks, manuals, yearbooks are few to name as examples for reference sources. Thus reference sources are key players of library reference services.

ODLIS defines a reference source as:

“Any publication from which authoritative information can be obtained, including but not limited to reference books, catalog records, printed indexes and abstracting services, and bibliographic databases” (Reitz, 2006).

Katz (2002), in his authoritative book titled ‘Introduction to Reference Work’ divides reference sources into two (02) broad categories as:

- (i) Control-Access-Directional Type; and
- (ii) Source Type (Katz, 2002)

Traditionally, printed reference sources such as encyclopedias, dictionaries, yearbooks had a prominent place in library reference collections, and were heavily used in the reference process. With the impact of electronic publishing, traditional printed reference materials have found a new life on disk, on screen and online. As a result, two types of reference sources can be identified by today:

- (i) Print & Electronic Sources
- (ii) Electronic Only Sources

Some authoritative reference sources are published in both printed and electronic means. The electronic counterparts include both online and off-line versions. For an example, the ‘Oxford English Dictionary (OED)’ is published in all printed, CD-ROM, and Online modes. The renowned ‘Europa World Yearbook’ provides access to its online version

named 'Europa World Plus'. Some of the printed reference sources have found a new life on Online and have abandoned publishing their print versions. For example, the centuries old authoritative 'Encyclopaedia Britannica' decided solely to restrict its future for the electronic version from 2012 onwards (Cauz, 2012). Some reference sources have emerged only as electronic sources. For instance, the Microsoft Encarta is a digital multimedia encyclopedia published by the Microsoft Corporation in Online, DVD/ CD-ROM formats. Wikipedia is another popular source, which follows the open editing model, is considered as the largest online reference source. These electronic reference sources offer various features which cannot be found in printed materials. They contain multimedia information (audio, video, etc.); provide sophisticated search facilities, provide regularly up-to-date information, and as such have become more user-friendly than traditional printed reference sources. Most of these authoritative sources are subscription based and some of them are freely accessible.

Some libraries even maintain virtual reference shelves as per these electronic reference sources (*Figure 2*). They have organized selected online references sources (either subscribed or freely available) and provide access to them via the Library Website.

Following are some examples for virtual reference shelves:

- Library of Congress Virtual Reference Shelf  
(<http://www.loc.gov/rr/askalib/virtualref.html>)
- University of Tennessee Libraries Reference Shelf  
(<http://www.lib.utk.edu/refs/refshelf.html>)



*Figure 2: Virtual Reference Shelf, Library of Congress*

## 2.2 New trends of Reference Interview

The interaction between the user and the reference librarian taken place at the Reference Desk is known as the ‘Reference interview’. ODLIS defines the Reference interview as:

“The interpersonal communication that occurs between a reference librarian and a library user to determine the person's specific information need(s) ... A reference interview may occur in person, by telephone, or electronically (usually via e-mail) at the request of the user, but a well-trained reference librarian will sometimes initiate communication if a hesitant user appears to need assistance” (Reitz, 2006).



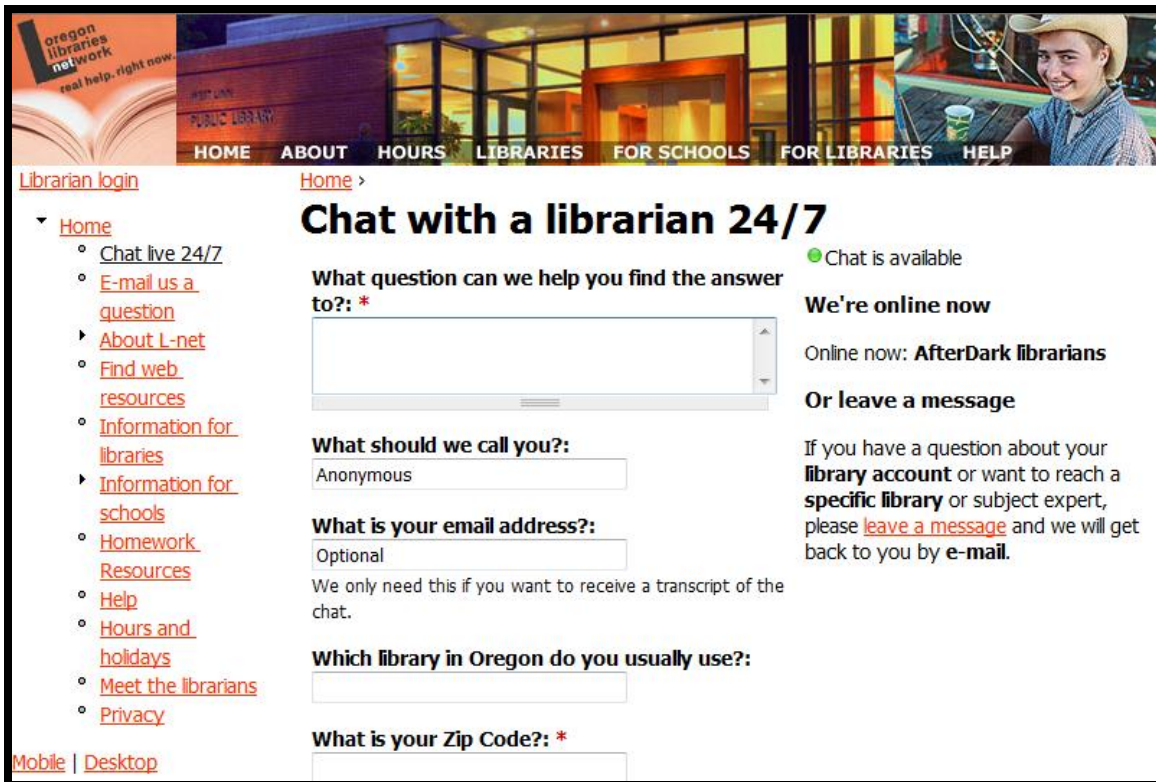
The Reference interview is considered very important in the reference process since it enables the librarian to understand the exact information need of his clientele. Traditionally reference interview was a face-to-face interaction between the librarian and the user. Later, the telephone based reference interviews also became popular.

This face-to-face reference transaction has been changed into an online transaction as a result of ICTs. Reference interaction in the Online environment is called as Digital Reference Services (also known as Virtual/ Online Reference Services). They use different technologies such as e-mail, Web forms, Chat, Video conferencing, Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP). These services are popularly known as ‘Ask A’ services. Example: Ask a Librarian Service of Library of Congress

**2.2.1 E-mail based reference interaction:** This type of reference service assigns a designated e-mail address and publicize it among users (via library website, etc.). When users want to submit a question, they simply send an e-mail to the reference librarian. The dedicated librarian or a team of librarians monitor the Inbox of the e-mail account regularly. When the librarian finds the answer, they send an e-mail back to the patron. There are several benefits of e-mail based reference interaction. In e-mail based reference, patron does not have to visit the library to ask the queries. Librarian can take more time to answer a question since the user is not “on hold” and can provide a comprehensive answer which may not be possible at a busy reference desk. On the other hand, e-mail is an easy way to communicate when compared to other technologies.

**2.2.2 Web Form based reference interaction:** This is a service usually introduced through the Library Website. User has to fill out an online inquiry form on the library website including his/her question and click the submit button. The message is sent to the librarians' mail account. User has to provide his/her e-mail address along with the question to enable the Reference Librarian to reply. This kind of service simplifies the user's task since filling a Web-based form is easier than sending an e-mail. Example: Ask A Librarian Question Form, Barry Public Library

**2.2.3 Chat-based reference interaction:** E-mail and web-based reference services are often criticized because of the absence of two important aspects of traditional face-to-face reference interview. In both services, patrons often do not receive the same immediate response. Also, librarians cannot as easily conduct the reference interview which is necessary to determine the exact need of the user. According to Bopp and Smith (2001), the major drawback of accepting reference queries by e-mail or Web page is the asynchronous nature of the interaction. Chat-based reference interview can be named as an effort to bring the face-to-face reference interaction in a digital environment through the use of synchronous, real time technologies. Instant messaging is also used as another form of chat-based reference interaction.



*Figure 3: 'Chat with a Librarian' service of Oregon Libraries Network*

**2.2.4 Videoconferencing based reference interaction:** This form of digital reference includes the visual element, which is absent in above mentioned text-based services. In this method, instead of a window for the textual exchange, there is a window through which librarians and users can see each other while conducting a face-to-face interview. Videoconferencing offers the advantage of real-time discussion between the user and the librarian (Bopp & Smith, 2001). Libraries use especially designed software programs for these services. For an example, University of Michigan's Interactive Reference Assistance (IRA) service uses the 'CUSeeMe' communications software for this purpose.

**2.2.5 VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) based reference interaction:** IP telephony is another popular communication technology which uses the Internet in much the same way the regular telephone uses the phone line. An availability of a computer with the Internet connectivity and special software enables a patron to use this service. This would be much cheaper than traditional phone services and also effective than text messaging. For an example, the ‘Skype a Librarian’ service of Ohio University Libraries accepts questions via Skype (free internet calling service).

### **2.3 Collaborative Digital Reference Services (CDRS)**

It is inevitable that no library can meet all the needs of its users. This is common to the Library reference services as well. A library cannot individually answer all the questions asked at the reference desk due to the non-availability of relevant reference sources, time constraints, lack of expertise, etc. On the other hand, a library cannot simply turn down a users’ query based on above reasons. Therefore, collaboration is needed among libraries especially with regard to answering the reference questions. The ICTs have been able to create a platform suitable for such collaboration and CDRS have emerged in library settings as a result of such efforts. Existing library consortia have added digital reference services into their shared activities, and libraries in different locations have introduced collaborative ‘Ask A’ services by sharing question loads and expertise. Thus, the Internet and other related technologies have enabled a collaborative 24x7 live reference service. Following are some examples for CDRS:

- **24x7 Reference Project:** The Metropolitan Cooperative Library System, based in the Los Angeles area, has established a real-time service for its public and academic libraries using Web contact center software which can be customized for each individual library
- **QuestionPoint:** is a collaborative reference service the Library of Congress and OCLC worked together to develop, with input from participating members of the Global Reference Network

CDRS provide benefits for libraries such as allowing individual libraries to share expertise and resources; expanding service hours; providing access to a larger collection of knowledge resulting from digital reference service (e.g., question-answer archives). However, CDRS would also present challenges including: quality and consistency of responses, best technology accessible by each stakeholder, policies and procedures of institutions, etc.

## **2.4 Non-library based information services**

Today we are living in an information society. Demand for information and knowledge has been rapidly increased and people and organizations are eager for information to fulfill their information needs. However, libraries themselves have been unable to meet all the information needs of the Information Society due to various reasons. On the other hand, users do not solely depend on libraries for information seeking. Alternative information services have been emerged in light of this situation and sometimes even

have challenged the Library-based reference services. They can be broadly named as non-library based information services and can be divided into few categories as follows:

- (i) Online Expert Services
- (ii) News Groups/ Discussion Lists

**Online Expert Services:** These services are either free or fee-based. They answer users' questions and provide research guidance. Some of them are computer-generated expert services (example: AskJeeves) and the other are human-mediated (example: Google Answers, AllExperts).

These non-library based services are usually staffed by volunteer subject experts. A question posted will be answered by one or more experts. Some of the services even maintain an archive of frequently asked or recently answered questions along with their answers (example: AllExperts, Google Answers). Following are some disadvantages of online expert services in comparison to library reference services. Everyone who posts a question may not get an answer through an online expert service. The authority of the answer may be questionable. The possibility for a reference interview is less than library reference services.

**News Groups/ Discussion Lists:** News groups are Internet message boards, usually devoted to a specific topic. Members of the group are those who are involved in a particular subject field and they share a common subject interest. They use the Newsgroup/ Discussion list to share the information and knowledge, to be up-to-date on new trends of the field, to clarify queries, etc. Members of the group may post any

questions and then the others respond to the question, and sometimes respond to the responses as well. Then it becomes a continuous public discussion about a particular topic. Popular Internet services such as Yahoo (Yahoo! Groups) and Google (Google Groups) provides facilities to maintain number of newsgroups free of charge and they are ranging from business and entertainment to science and technology topics. In addition to above, Weblogs or blogs are also widely used as effective modes of communication among people who share a common interest.

### **3. Conclusion**

The objective of this paper was to discuss some changes and trends in library reference services. As per the discussion, it is clear that library reference services have dramatically changed and new trends have emerged along with changing social needs. Reference services have become one of the key areas in libraries where modern ICTs are fully utilized. However, none of these changes or trends have been able to challenge the basis of library reference services. Even in an online environment, four functions coined by Green in 1876 remains core of library reference services. Still the philosophy introduced by Dr. Ranganathan for reference service is valued in modern environment. All the technologies used today are merely facilitating the achievement of these four functions and philosophy of library reference service.

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