

Mission and operation of the Reference Service of the American University Library

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Abstract:

Therefore, the existence and operation of a university library in the contemporary era cannot be conceived outside of the computerization and digitization process, and a collection that does not include documents on this innovative type of support is a nonsense. That is why the permanent training of librarians in the area of information and documentation technologies, communication and information in real time, accurately, are determining elements in the contemporary process of modernization and continuous evolution of libraries in general and university and specialized libraries in particular. If the reference librarian doesn't fulfill his duty, the library fails in its mission. The reference librarian is the key to the success of the services rendered by the library. The library services must revolve around information users. Since the university and academic libraries provide the informational support to a homogeneous, well-defined public, the introduction of new information technologies in libraries led to the need to diversify the range of services provided, beyond traditional library services and products. Reference librarians have practically become IT specialists rather than book handlers or "collection keepers", good connoisseurs of one or more languages of international circulation. The future of university libraries, given that they are no longer the only information managers, depends on how they will manage to adapt their services and collections to user requirements. To this end, I have briefly addressed in this paper-work, the way reference services are organized and function within university library systems from USA.

Keywords: *reference service, academic libraries*

Introduction

Today, information is the driving force that ensures the dynamics of change as bases of ultra-fast progress. Digitization technology has changed the traditional relationship between user and the document, a situation similar to the transition from the manuscript to the printed book in the second half of the 15th century. Running a university library cannot be conceived outside computerization and digitization process, and a collection that does not include new media documents is hard to conceive. That is why the permanent training of librarians in the area of information and documentation technologies, communication and information in real time, accurately, are determining factors in the contemporary process of modernization and continuous evolution of libraries in general, and university and specialized libraries in particular.

A library can have the most modern and fitted location, it can have the most comprehensive collection of documents, the best-made catalogue, but if the reference librarian, that information worker who comes into contact with the user, does not do his duty, neither the library fulfils its mission, regardless of its profile. The reference librarian is the key to the success of the services rendered by the academic library to the information users. The introduction of new information technologies led to diversifying of the range of services provided, beyond traditional library services and products. Reference librarians have practically become IT specialists rather than book handlers or "collection keepers", and good connoisseurs of one or more languages of international circulation. This paper-work addresses the way reference services are organized and function within university US library systems, a country with a long tradition in information dissemination practices from the library to the user, identifying possible solutions to increase efficiency.

1. A brief history of Reference Services in American University Libraries

Reference Services were introduced in the USA around 1876, at the time when it became generally accepted that both public education and library services should be accessible free of charge. As in the case of any new trend, efforts to obtain a free reference system for the general public had a conceptual basis that started from the idea that the only way to accelerate the performant society's modernization process is to create possibilities for unfettered dissemination of information to all social and educational compartments.

For the first time, the idea of intensifying reference practice for readers was launched at the Conference of Librarians in Philadelphia on October 5, 1878, where Samuëll Sweet Green explained the need for a program of assistance vis-à-vis readers. His ideas were published in the article "Personal Relations Between Librarians and Readers" published in the *American Library Journal* (1878), (which is issued today under the name of the *American Journal* (Green 1877, pp. 74-81)). He draws the librarians' attention to the fact that many users, especially professionally active people, do not have time to search for information, so all the more the librarians have obligation to research and provide users with the necessary documentation. When students and researchers came to the library, S. Green recommended the use of encyclopedias and book indexes. Simultaneously with these tools, he also recommends requesting the help of librarians, if the information sought was not found. He also emphasized that very often librarians are asked to help select materials for reading or for carrying out certain researches, being actively involved in collection development policies. Then, gradually, the reference system began to develop the research technique, the process of making connections to find information and the cataloguing of information sources. Green also presented his vision regarding the reference services, simultaneously with the editing of *Dewey's Decimal Classification Tables*, a fact that significantly facilitated finding information in the library more easily. Although some librarians and researchers considered these tables to be sufficient, during the 1880s-1890s the need for additional trained personnel, with solid knowledge in various fields of knowledge and advanced information retrieval techniques, increased considerably. This new activity, originally called "readers' assistance" by 1890 was already known as "reference work".

In 1883, in several libraries in several large cities in the USA, classes were opened for the training of reference librarians (reference assistants). In 1887, in the organizational framework of the *College of Colombia*, the first School of Librarianship was opened, the training plan of librarians being focused on user assistance. By 1900, several university libraries were structured in

such a way as to have reference rooms, where the collections were organized in a free access regime, and the reference librarians were ready at any time to provide support to their use.

In the first half of the 20th century, the concepts and methods of reference activity were expanded, specialized services were introduced, such as, for example, the consulting service. At the beginning of the century, the reference services provided by librarians also included offering answers via phone to information requests. In 1900, the *Legislative Reference Service* was organized in the American state of Wisconsin. Following this example, specialized libraries were reorganized into scientific research centres, business centres, health protection institutions, etc. Starting with the year 1913, specialized collections began to be organized in libraries for areas such as: business, science, music, art, etc.

To conclude, Green outlined four basic functions of the reference system, these being:
training the library staff to provide the best answers to users and to help them solve some of the problems encountered;
satisfying information needs: presenting new purchases, cataloguing volumes according to certain criteria, facilitating access to information sources;
developing the collections by studying the market and accessing funds;
the relationship with the public and the promotion of the library; creating cultural events, inviting cultural personalities and inviting the public to various workshops.

Starting with 1876, libraries began to adapt to the functions of the new reference system, modernizing themselves to reach the stage we know today. Richard E. Bopp wrote that "until 1876, librarians were responsible for developing collections and arranging volumes on shelves, and users searched for them independently"(Bopp and Smith 2011, pp. 4). Gradually, the reference system began to develop the research technique, the process of making connections to find information and the cataloguing of information sources. France Bouthillier estimated in the work "La concurrence dans les metiers de la documentation" that: "in the information environment there are three large groups of interacting actors: those who use information, those who create it and those who mediate access to it" (Bouthillier 2002, pp.39).

At the same time, the increase in the number of specialized libraries had a particularly important influence on the conception and methods of carrying out the activity of reference services. At the same time, another author Rich Soo Young draws attention to the reference system in the article "Changing reference service environment: a review of perspective from managers, librarians, and users" on the existence of two concepts:
"the variety of activities associated with personalized assistance provided to library users, including selection, bibliographic instruction and implementation of electronic products";
direct librarian-user interaction, which takes place at certain service points, usually at the reference desk."(Young 1999, pp.179-186) The two views have undergone changes over time and with the help of technology have transformed the role of libraries and librarians.

The reference service underwent radical changes during the 20th century. As part of its evolution, the reference service became more and more efficient and, in certain circumstances, began to offer assistance to users by other means than direct interaction at the desk or at the reference desk. Gradually, reference services appeared and were used via the telephone, as well as

through the postal services. This fact led to the loss of direct contact between the librarian and the user.

In the specialized academic libraries, the reference services were transferred from the reference desks to the library offices, the reason being the significant increase in the number of information services in certain fields. Currently, there is a strong process of expanding the reference services through some modern means of work: accessing scientific databases, online library catalogues, electronic mail, etc. In many US libraries, reference desks have been replaced by alternative models, such as the triage system or service, which consists in prompt reference services rendered by professionals at the reference desk, with in-depth research following to be carried out by reference librarians. Professor Ionel Enache wrote in his paper work *Planning and organization of library services* that: "Processing includes all the material and intellectual operations, which are carried out from the moment the document enters the library, until it is made available to the reader"(Enache 2004, pp.96).

Another way to modernize the reference service is to establish several levels of staff. Administrative staff or students can answer more simple requests so that reference librarians can focus on more specific issues. If the staff at the information office cannot provide an adequate answer, they redirect the user to the librarian located, as a rule, in another office of the relevant institution. This method became known as the "Brandeis" reference service model after Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts adopted it in 1990. However, in the vast majority of public or academic libraries, the "face to face" method is still predominant for providing reference services, according to D. Tyckoson in the work *The advantages of the reference service* (Tyckoson 1999, pp. 40).

2. The role of the librarian and the modern library vis-à-vis real and virtual users

The movement to support reference service reform began with the article "Reference Service Failures: Coping with Success and Failure of the Reference Service" by Bill Miller and published in the *American Libraries* journal (Miller 1984, pp. 303-306, 321-322). It was a moment that led to a radical change in the debates about the reference service.

Since 1984, new challenges began to appear for reference librarians: the need to be experienced teachers, to be able to write and read in as many foreign languages as possible, to have online search skills, to be skilled computer users. And, all this, complementary to their traditional duties. Miller advocated the idea that libraries must have adequate resources for each service they provide to the user. The activity of information services consists both in a simple search for a simple address or a telephone number, as well as in finding bibliographic references and disseminating documents on a specific topic. Although the number of answers offered with the help of electronic resources increases, the efficiency of information services in the vast majority of cases depends on printed resources. The reference service will continue to transform with the development of resources and technologies, but the assistance given to each individual user will remain basic, because the organization of information, the various and multiple reference books and the process of finding information in a cultural universe that is so diversified are operations far too complex to be entrusted to people who visit the library occasionally. The so-called "direct access" inhibits the transfer of information, instead of accelerating it. For the public, learning and relearning how information is organized in libraries is too much of a time investment with often limited benefits or success.

In the American outlook, the responsibility of a library must be extended beyond the collection and organization of information and library materials, to an active, personalized role in the dissemination of information. Librarians must act as mediators, catalysts between library resources and the public. This dynamic role was crystallized in the reference service.

In the 20th century, the theoretical basis of library science has a solid foundation in the works of the great Indian mathematician, philosopher and librarian Ranganathan.

Among other fundamental contributions to information science, Ranganathan enunciated in 1931 the five fundamental laws of librarianship. These five laws expressed simply, reflect Ranganathan's deep spiritual and practical thinking, being unanimously recognized as standard principles of the discipline, namely:

- *books exist to be used;*
- *to each reader-his book;*
- *each book-with its reader;*
- *save the reader's time;*
- *the library is a developing organism.*

Walt Crawford and Michael Gorman adapt these laws and thus present them in the book "Future Libraries: dreams, madness & reality" (Crawford and Gorman 1995):

- *Information exist to be used;*
- *To each consumer - the necessary information;*
- *Each information-with its consumer;*
- *Saves the information consumer's time;*
- *The universe of information is constantly developing.*

The implications arising from these laws had particularly profound consequences in library science thinking and in the way of organizing work in United States libraries. The proliferation of computers at home, databases that offer complete texts and various information, accessible from the desk, fax transmission, reference services by phone, the Internet, tend to reduce the need to visit libraries today.

If the future would decide the disappearance of libraries as they are known today, with shelves and files, this does not mean that the organization of information and the librarian will evaporate along with them. On the contrary, if the universe of information is constantly changing, the mentality, the way to create, organize and offer reference services must also keep up. In Bill Katz's view, presented in the work "Introduction to reference work (Katz 1981, pp. 20), it is necessary for the reference librarian to develop certain behavioural characteristics, among which we select a few that seem essential to us:

- solicitude, benevolent attitude, receptivity;
- the permanent desire to detect the real need for knowledge;
- cultivating the ability and tactfully approaching relationships with difficult people;
- responsiveness to users in difficulty;
- knowledge of all library collections, alternative resources and appropriate connections ;
- knowledge of university problems and relations with other libraries;
- knowledge of the specialized area and the use of reference materials;
- inclination towards thoroughness;

- clarity of thinking;
- memorizing details;
- the ability to quickly obtain the necessary information, imagination and intuition of related areas.

Kathleen Kern showed in the paper *Communication, patron satisfaction, and the reference interview. Reference & User Services Quarterly* the fact that, "the way in which the interaction occurs between the user and the librarian (online or face to face) is of secondary importance, what matters first is an equation which takes into account the library and the communication with users with their expectations " (Kern 2003, pp. 47).

If in the past, info-documentary structures focused their attention on books, document collections, all activities (purchase, processing, preservation), with the main goal of preserving the knowledge heritage of humanity, today, users must be at the centre of the concerns of all information structures. Guinchat and Menou show in the work *Introduction generale aux sciences et techniques de l'information et la documentation* that: " the user can participate in most of the operations carried out within the documentary chain: signalling and evaluating information sources, selecting purchases, facilitating access to non-conventional literature , the creation of work tools, the use of products and services, the production of information and documents, the circulation of information" (Guinchat *et al.* 1990, pp. 486).

Today, the reference librarian within these culturally complex bodies must contribute substantially to the development of the library's collections, both digitally and on paper. It is also imperative that the reference librarian understands the users' requirements , both in terms of the quality of the types of materials, as well as their volume. Specialist librarians must serve as instructors to teach readers how to use the various types of equipment. Fortunately, users belong to multiple categories: young or old, students or scientists, interested in what they do or willing to move on to another more interesting work. Many do not know how to word the need for information and either ask very general questions or they do not know how to precisely formulate the topic they are looking for, digressing. The staff must be expert in directing the discussions to obtain references, so that the user receives what is needed. It should not be forgotten that a satisfied user can be the source of great professional satisfaction for the librarian in question.

Eric Sutter demonstrates in the work *Services d'information et qualite: comment satisfie les utilisateurs* (Sutter 1992, pp. 11) that at the level of an info-documentary structure, design of products and control procedures, the quality of the service that accompanies the product, the quality of relations with users, the effectiveness of an information service, depends a lot the quality of the dialogue between users and specialists in the field of information, the skills of the latter and the attitudes shown by both sides. The library knew how to make itself indispensable to the public, both through its educational and cultural function, and as an inexhaustible source of useful information. In turn, the public loved the library and proved its attachment by using the library's services to the full and voting year after year in favour of library fees. Access to current, accurate and complete information, offered equally, regardless of social class, age, gender, religion or ethnicity, is the basis of a democratic society and is part of the human rights.

In the American librarianship system, any university or academic library offers information and reference services. On average, an academic library offers 77 reference hours per week, operating about 80% of the number of hours the entire library is open to the public. At the

University of California, Davis (<https://www.ucdavis.edu/>), reference services are open from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. every day and from 7 p.m. to 10 p.m. Monday through Thursday. On Saturdays and Sundays the reference office operates between 10-12 and after a lunch break between 13-17. On average, out of a 40-hours of work per week, an American librarian works at the reference desk for a third of the time, namely, about 13 hours. At the University of California (<https://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/>), each librarian works with the public two hours daily and in addition, four hours every two weeks during the weekend. In the other two-thirds of the time, the librarian has various responsibilities that may include: computer searching, bibliographic instruction, selection of books and magazines, administrative work, documentation and scientific research. Of all the library sectors, reference services frequently have the largest number of staff. This service employs an average of eight professional librarians. The budget of these collections also varies. On average, these libraries have an annual purchase budget for reference monographs that exceeds 20,000 dollars per year, and if the budget for reference periodicals (yearbooks, indexes, statistical compendiums) is added, the average amount rises to above 60,000 dollars annual.

To designate users of information systems, specialists in the field use the following notions: beneficiaries, readers, consumers of information. Rodica Mandea showed in the paper work Finding specialized information. Concepts and practices the fact that: "the term most often used is that of information consumer, while user denotes the consumer of modern services and supports, and the reader - the consumer of traditional services and supports" (Mandea 2004, pp. 71).

Conclusions

The reference service underwent radical changes during the 20th century. Currently, there is a strong process of expanding the reference services through some modern means of work: accessing scientific databases, online library catalogues, electronic mail, etc. In many US libraries, reference desks have been replaced by alternative models, such as the triage system or service, which consists in prompt reference services rendered by professionals at the reference desk, with in-depth research following to be carried out by reference librarians.

Another way to modernize the reference service is to establish several levels of staff. Administrative staff or students can answer more simple requests so that reference librarians can focus on more specific issues. If the staff at the information office cannot provide an adequate answer, they redirect the user to the librarian located, as a rule, in another office of the relevant institution. This method became known as the "Brandeis" reference service model after Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts adopted it in 1990. However, in the vast majority of public or academic libraries, the "face to face" method is still predominant for providing reference services.

Technical developments in recent years have changed not only the volume of information, but also the procedures for its dissemination and acquisition. Consequently, the Internet has fundamentally transformed scientific communication, posing a particular challenge to libraries. It should also be noted that a rapid increase in the volume of information that is available online, as well as, with it, volume of necessary technical services did not manage to lead, as desired, to a simplification in their access. It is, therefore, necessary to continuously improve and train both librarians and researchers, dedicated users in order to search for the information they deem necessary.

The procurement, provision of access and presentation in electronic format of modern library services must be, at least, equal to all the traditional offers of university libraries. The continuous increase in the offer of products in electronic format in the coming years will have

significant consequences on the relationship between the library and users. At the same time, regarding reference collections or a library in general, we can say that no library can hold the entire recorded knowledge of a society. Space is limited, as is the staff. The only way libraries can respond to users' information requests to a greater extent is to pool their resources. This possibility would limit the duplication of collections and the unnecessary use of space.

Internet resources are present at some point, then they disappear. But, libraries have the responsibility of preserving information over time. The Internet has become a recurring theme, present in the media, with repercussions on libraries as well. They will have to define their position in relation to the network and the documents circulating on it, because these institutions have an important role in the capitalization of Internet resources. The long-term projects of libraries should take into account, in addition to the need for joint development with the Internet, and the clear evolution towards digital documentation. Digital documents represent the new documentary supports that libraries, through reference services, must process and make available to the user. The periodic evaluation of the reference service is extremely important, this evaluation being carried out by means of questionnaires that must be filled-in within a given time or through hidden questionnaires, to which the subject answers without knowing that he is being questioned. The evaluation can also be done by directly observing the activity from the reference desk, through statistics that represent a unitary assessment criterion.

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