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Being Organic Gives Reference Librarians the Edge over Computers

By Terence K. Huwe

A few years ago, the San Francisco Bay Region Chapter of the Special Libraries Association hosted a special dinner meeting, which featured a screening of the classic movie *Desk Set*. For those who haven't seen it, the plot (in brief) involves a showdown between corporate librarians and the new computer that is planned to replace them. To make a long story short, the machine malfunctions, the librarians win, and Spencer Tracy wins Katherine Hepburn's heart—entertainment on several levels. Yet in thinking about what libraries continue to do better than electronic systems, I can't help feeling that the more things change, the more they stay the same. The difference is that the knowledge work corporate librarians performed in the mid-Twentieth century involved fewer media types than today. And nowadays, more people, with varied titles, are doing that work in many niches throughout organizations.

The "showdown" between humans and computers is a frequent theme in movies and literature, and it's intriguing how frequently librarians appear in space-age science fiction and fantasy, often with extra powers and political clout. Everyone loves a good story, especially when it turns conventional thinking on its head to make a point. Interesting, isn't it, that reference providers must perform that very thought process—turning a question on its head to deconstruct its meaning—everyday. I've provided reference service for seventeen years, and I remain convinced that the information profession's critical edge has everything to do with reference counsel. Moreover, I think it's possible to argue this point very assertively without falling into the Luddite trap of being anti-technology. Alice Youmans, one of my colleagues at Berkeley's Law Library, once said, "*...in my experience, the media we use to help people find the answers they need are constantly changing, but the actual work of reference stays the same.*" What has changed is that we now must constantly engage in strategic marketing of services, and make a commitment to tailor all library services to focus on users.

Relationships: A Killer App

I know what you're thinking: another opinion piece on reference, blah, blah, blah. But think about why the library profession appeals to so many people,

particularly as a second career. I see two main draws that bring people to library school. The first is the unmistakable fact that in a digital era, we're all using electronic media, there are many ways to accomplish similar tasks, and a lot of people are aware they could be doing a better job, whether just for fun or for work. Second, I strongly believe that ours is a "helping profession", much in the same way that psychotherapists, nurse practitioners, and other health care or legal professionals help their clients. That's a privileged relationship, and it carries a duty of care. Katherine Hepburn's character in *Desk Set* was very aware of this, as well as the value point that her knowledge work offered the firm. She personifies a dedicated and imaginative professional who understands one of the most important "memes" of the information age: relationships determine success, and knowledge work is all about relationships.

When I speak of reference, I am speaking broadly. Every contact with the public that we experience in our physical spaces counts, no matter how simple. For example, at one library I worked at, the circulation staff were allowed only one answer to any question beyond charging out books: "Go to the information desk." This told the patron she had only just begun to learn what about was available, and she could talk to people who could help more. Nowadays, reference often happens online, referrals come from Web sites, and services like Google Answers purportedly perform reference like the pros. Indeed, the recent duel between Google Answers and Cornell University Library staff seems a lot like an updated *Desk Set*, albeit in a much more scientifically measured fashion (see <http://www.dlib.org/dlib/june03/kenney/06kenney.html>).

"A Matter of Parsing Text"

As a profession, we've always held varied viewpoints on the proper role of reference and its value points. Indeed, attempts to define reference often inspire more debate than consensus. But regardless of what type of strategy we may employ, I believe that reference is at the top of the value chain in our professional practice.

Not everyone agrees with me, though. One of the University Librarians I've worked with once said, "Public service is an unfunded mandate." Which is to say, *we can't afford it*. In a private conversation, he casually alluded to reference as a simple matter of "just parsing text" — which is say, *we can automate it*. Both these remarks define the urge to use technological solutions to replace human processes—without fully examining what might be lost. This Dean-level

administrator had a staff of over 100 librarians who regularly performed reference, and they were constantly advocating for reference service. They used (and continue to use) reference to open doors to the faculty, to open minds, and to keep patrons coming back.

Clearly, the person-machine productivity “smackdown” has taken new twists since the 1940s. The Pew Internet and American Life Project reported that over 73 percent of college students use the Internet more than the library, while only nine percent started at the library (see <http://pewinternet.org/reports/toc.asp?Report=71>). I wonder what Katherine Hepburn’s *Desk Set* information professional would make of the the Google generation, and the newest verb in the English language, “Googling.” Probably she would point out that students are using resources all over the place, and information professionals may be managing a high percentage of the best sites.

Parsing the Information Ecology

With the open web and our digital libraries as key tools, I think we hold an edge in working with the Google generation: the reference interview. I regard the reference interview as the ultimate digital killer application. Moreover, everything important about this complex dialogue can be tailored to a digital library environment. The strategies are legion: 24/7 reference call centers, virtual reference, email-based reference, and so on. At the core of the interchange lies a simple, but powerful moment in the interview. Usually it involves the reference provider saying, in a casual sort of way, “What were you really hoping to find?” At this point, the hunt is on, the abstract becomes concrete, and the service provider has an opportunity to demonstrate library skill, which depends upon a comprehensive, thoughtful approach to using all media, both new and historical, and both digital and print.

This is not a matter of parsing text. It is a matter of *parsing everything*—the entire information ecology of the modern organization. One of my favorite examples involves a doctoral student who was one of my key customers here at the Institute of Industrial Relations. Her doctorate involved an analysis of how petroleum producers promulgated employee safety standards over time. In order to prove her hypotheses, she needed to see company files on the subject, which were not in libraries and not online. Using SLA contacts, I was able to arrange for her to visit a high security production plant, where she was escorted by armed guards to the records center and could read through regulations. She

also got entrée to a very elite think tank, in order to read through supporting documents for their consulting reports. This reference work happened during the Web era. It made all the difference for the student, who's now a tenured professor in at the University of Massachusetts.

More recently, a sociology student who was very well versed in how to use the University of California's extensive digital resources, commented that he could never have finished his doctorate *if he had not had the help of our library staff*. He's now on the faculty at the University of Michigan. My point here is not that libraries are "better" than computers; instead, my point is that librarians use all resources, including interpersonal relationships to maximum advantage. We're not addicted to one media type over any another. And sometimes, things just boil down to people connecting.

New Names and New Arenas For Reference

Getting back to that Pew study, I find considerable room for excitement and optimism, beyond the confines of the library I work in. Most library associations have begun to collection "E-Metrics", i.e., how to measure all of the uses of the library, not just circulation and collection size. This makes explicit just how much bibliographic instruction is going on. Interestingly, University of California librarians seem to be reaching more people, but in different forums. System-wide, UC Libraries engaged over 106,375 participants in about 7,782 instruction sessions during 2002-2003. Online training classes, roving reference and online contacts combine to make a powerful case for the vibrancy of information counsel. Just as important, group training is more than "reference;" it's a social interaction wrapped around the search process, which makes the library a more inviting place.

Group training classes and bibliographic instruction are just the tip of the iceberg of strategy, too. We've seen a lot of buzzwords come and go, but at least locally, information literacy has really struck a nerve. At the University of California librarians are actively seeking to partner with others who have a stake in teaching, and that includes not only the faculty, but computer trainers. Two major Faculty Senate committees endorsed a resolution that was drafted and advanced by librarians to explore how to integrate information literacy training into the curriculum, giving new life to the effort. Internecine competition comes with the territory, but right now, I see substantial opportunities for instructional librarians to move library culture far beyond the library itself. The new forums

include the classroom (as instructors or as guest lecturers), as well as the computer lab. Nothing is stopping us from asserting our vision for offering service in unorthodox places other than a lack of will. Proactive outreach of this nature is vigorously endorsed by the Special Libraries Association's *Competencies for Special Librarians of the 21st Century* (<http://www.sla.org/content/SLA/professional/meaning/comp.cfm>).

"Making the Case"

Okay, so there are a lot of good things in the pipeline, there are some indicators that support our bias for user-focused service, and we know what we're doing. There's one more task that we really have to do, or it's all a waste of time. We need to make the case for our service to decision makers. This has been consistently true throughout the history of our profession, but the stakes are higher because we have a lot of digital competition. We need to be able to look beyond today's setback, with today's vice presidents or Deans, and plan to win hearts and minds over the long term. We also need to be ready to handle the next boss we will be training. In law firms, government, companies, and higher education, it's the same story. Yet here's another organic edge for reference providers: we can go get in people's faces, and they can't press "Control-Alt-Delete" to reboot us. Just as Katherine Hepburn made the case and got her man—by any means necessary—today's digital librarians need to step out the box to ensure that reference service remains at the heart of the digital library.