

What is Reference Good For? SCRLC

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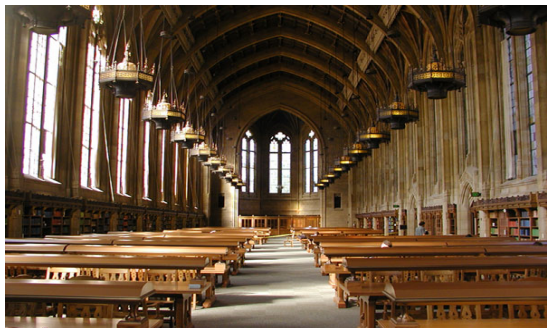
Seattle



my libraries



my libraries



reference

“[Reference] has become an indispensable public service because it saves the money of the individual...and by furnishing skilled bibliographical aid in the use of reference materials it saves the time of busy people and ensures possession of facts which by themselves they could not obtain.”

reference

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Margaret Hutchins *Introduction to Reference Work* (1944)

why is mediation necessary?

lots of stuff

hard to find (choose, understand, use, evaluate,...)

how are these changing?

more stuff, more kinds of stuff

easier to find...and harder

nothing new on either count

what we do

examine the information needs of our communities and individuals

survey and understand the **information environment**

devise, evaluate, plan, manage and refine the most efficient and effective ways of meeting those needs

or else

what is “reference”?

“...readers in popular libraries need a great deal of assistance...this is particularly needed by persons unused to handling books or conducting investigations.”

Samuel Green *Library Journal* 1 (1876)

what is “reference”?

“Reference work includes the direct, personal aid within a library to persons in search of information for whatever purpose, and also various library activities especially aimed at making information as easily available as possible.”

Margaret Hutchins *Introduction to Reference Work* (1944)

what is reference for?

a better question

the circumstances which gave rise to it

increased number, variety of information resources

increase in complexity of those resources

hence, increased difficulty in finding resources, information within

increase in number & diversity of people using libraries; wider

range of needs, enquiries, sophistication in searching

all things we could say about today

reference is in transition

as the information environment changes

- § continually evolving technologies, allowing/fostering increased self-investigation, sharing, interaction
- § mobile/cloud/social nexus
- § constrained \$, competitive and volatile information marketplace (publisher and consumer)
- § perceptions of libraries and librarians, increasing marginalization
- § changes in society

what is reference for? (ca1950)

a new technology that widens access to the library

telephone

- important v. less important questions, people
- centralized or dispersed?
- different staffing models?
- dedicated information resources?
- policies?
- different levels of service?
- service reflects contexts (tech, social, econ, professional)

what we are best at

our traditional strengths

- service orientation
- determining needs & understanding context
- multiple modes of searching
- evaluation of resources
- when to stop
- education about the process
- tool-making

what we are best at

our traditional strengths *in a modern context*

- service orientation *where, when*
- determining needs & understanding context *distributed*
- multiple modes of searching *beyond Google & Wikipedia, sophistication*
- evaluation of resources *tweets*
- when to stop *even more critical*
- education about the process *they have to know what we do*
- tool-making *apps, videos, widgets, LibGuides*

secret weapons

- interview (esp in tech mediated domains), embed/liason print, in the short/medium run?
- knowledge of stuff, sources (finding, evaluation)
 - memory and imagination (& wisdom)
- areas where we can shine (readers adv/guidance, research support, depth & quality)
- search, how to make a system sit up and beg us
- stuff comes and goes; method over material

changes

- searching changes (but many things persist)
- services change (tho basics with great slowness)
- stuff changes (more, more kinds, genres rarely evaporate cf morph, but individual sources & items sometimes do)
- memory and imagination*
- content over containers*
- method over materials*

components of professional work

knowing what you're looking for, and what to look for

knowing **stuff**—**where to look**

knowing how to **search** stuff, and **for** stuff, and when you've found it, or aren't going to

service basics (understanding needs, evaluation, technology, ethics & guidelines, etc)

plus advice, evaluation, guidance, instruction, personalization (within community)

in the contemporary context . . . whither the **middleman**?

thriving middlemen

which ones are thriving, and why?

providing additional, high-level, personal service

good value

niche, unique

community building

taste-making

reference

“[Reference] has become an indispensable public service because it saves the money of the individual . . . and by furnishing skilled bibliographical aid in the use of reference materials it saves the time of busy people and ensures possession of *facts which by themselves they could not obtain.*”