The Internet Myth - Emerging Trends in Reference Enquiries

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Abstract

This paper examines the impact of greater access to electronic information, both free and fee-based, on reference enquiries. The research methodology included an extensive literature review and interviews with reference services librarians in both Australia and overseas. The assumption that greater Internet access and use equals a decline in public and state library reference enquiries is not proven. The paper concludes with a summary of trends, predictions and scenarios of usage of state and public library reference services in an increasingly electronic age, paying special attention and emphasis to the Australian environment.

Introduction

Between November 2002 and February 2003 the authors were commissioned by the State Library (SLV) of Victoria to review the VISioN reference service provided by the SLV to Victorian public libraries. VISioN (Victorian Information Services Network) was established in March 1994 to provide an extended reference service for Victorian public libraries, utilising the resources of the SLV. Public libraries refer enquiries from their users to VISioN for more information and research. These enquiries are those that public libraries cannot easily answer, either due to lack of reference resources or due to lack of personnel to carry out the reference enquiry. At the time of the review, the VISioN service was administered by a specialised team within the Information Services Division of the SLV.

Use of the VISioN service had been steadily decreasing. It was assumed that increased availability of the Internet in public libraries and increased use of the Internet by the general public whether in libraries, at home, or at work had caused a decrease in reference enquiries in public libraries. The definition of a reference enquiry used in the context of this review was that of the Victorian Reference Librarians' Cooperative (a subgroup of VicLink). An enquiry is "A transaction where a staff member undertakes to:

- Find, or recommend relevant resources within the library or online
- And/or assist in the use of these resources
- And/or answer the question either through the use of library tools or by references to other sources of information such as databases or web sites."

Some of the research carried out as part of this review, relating to the changing nature of reference enquiries received by public and state libraries was considered to be of general interest to the information community, and, with the permission of the SLV, forms the basis of this paper.

Background

Public and state library reference services are affected by many different factors. These include:

- The number and type of reference enquiries being received by public libraries;
- The use of electronic resources directly by library users without a librarian's interface;
- Internet access in fifty percent of Australian homes;
- The perception that everything can be found on the Web.

These issues led the authors to consider some key questions:

Has the nature of reference enquiries in public libraries changed over the last five years?

Has the nature of reference enquiries received by state libraries changed over the last five years?

What are the trends in reference services in Australia and globally, i.e. is there increasing use of electronic information in delivering reference enquiries? What effect does this have on the delivery of a service?

Will the government's push to provide all people with access to the Internet affect the use of traditional Reference Services?

Methodology

The methodology for this research included an extensive literature review, interviews with reference services librarians in both Australia and overseas, and a survey of both public library service managers and reference librarians in public libraries in Victoria.

Literature Review

Relevant literature published in the last five years was identified. This included journal articles, conference papers and newspaper articles. Many sources emphasised the use of electronic resources alongside more traditional formats as normal practice in providing reference services in public libraries. This is illustrated by a comment made four years ago is still relevant today:

> Far from becoming musty museums for those quaint things known as books, the role of the library as society's repository of knowledge is taking a quantum leap: Nearly three-fourths have plugged into the Information Age, providing public access to the Internet and the chance to explore myriad databanks and archives (McLellan 1998, p.1).

Electronic reference services are a rapidly growing extension of the traditional face to face or telephone reference service offered by virtually all libraries (Arnoldy 2002, Jordan 2002, Hane 2002). Increased access to these services is increasingly being blamed for the decline in the use of face-to-face reference services but this has not been substantiated. The Internet and/or online databases will not replace books or traditional information, but will be used in conjunction with more traditional sources. John Dolan, Acting Director of Birmingham Libraries, says:

> What's exciting about information technology is that it won't displace books, it will simply provide more and more ways of getting to ideas. Libraries are about providing people with a supportive environment. There are a billion websites out there, so where do you start if you're searching for information? (quoted in Dodd 2001, p.11)

Pantry & Griffiths (2002) make the point that the availability of electronic information potentially opens up the services of a particular library to a worldwide audience. Having reviewed research on the use of electronic information services, they reach the conclusion that these services are offered on the basis of librarians' subjective perceptions of who the users are, rather than on research-based evidence. Of the user surveys that have been carried out and reported in the literature, Pantry & Griffiths observe, "…many continue to use other sources and …persist in the belief that the Internet contains the whole of human knowledge in a convenient box" (p.40). They conclude that very little is known by the library profession about the actual users of electronic information services.

Some sources indicate that reference librarians themselves are still hesitant about using Internet resources. Hopkins & Sapiie (1999) describe a survey of librarians conducted by the Queens Borough Public Library USA to determine their confidence levels in using electronic resources to answer reference questions. Results demonstrated high confidence levels in using the library's online catalogue but lower confidence in using the Internet. Later studies indicate that this is changing. Janes (2002) reports the results of a survey of reference

librarians in public and academic libraries in the USA, which investigated experiences with, and attitudes towards, the use of digital and networked technologies and resources in reference work. Most respondents were positive and optimistic in their outlook but it was clear that those who used Internet resources regularly had more confidence in their abilities to find valid information.

Some private enterprises are now offering services that compete with the electronic information services offered by libraries. Most of these enterprises offer services to libraries, but they have a service for individual users also. One such is ebrary (www.ebrary.com), which maintains a range of information resources in electronic format, which can be accessed for a fee. Helfer (2001) discusses the decline in reference statistics in academic libraries and considers the role of access to information via the Internet. She relates this to user expectations and demands; the use of commercial Web reference services; and virtual reference desk software enabling academic and public libraries to offer round the clock service. There is a growing trend for public and private libraries to form global consortia to utilise expertise around the world on a 24/7 basis (Jacso 2002, Dumas 1998, Maxwell 2001). One example of this is *QuestionPoint*. This service aims to provide a professional reference service anywhere, anytime, through a collaborative web based network of libraries, led by the Library of Congress. It uses flexible software developed by the Library of Congress and OCLC and has member libraries from almost all library sectors. Questions received via an online enquiry form are routed around the world according to "best-fit" matching based on subject, geographical area, educational level of material required, availability of library service at the time of day, format expertise and also according to a balanced loading system to distribute enquiries across participating libraries. Diane Kresh, Director of Public Service Collections at the Library of Congress, has commented:

> QuestionPoint is about redefining the role of the library and the librarian in the digital age. The technology enhances the services we are able to provide to our traditional users. It will also enable librarians throughout the world to collaborate with their colleagues and work with new audiences in creative and exciting ways. (Quint 2002, p.50)

In Victoria, a collection of databases including full text journals, books, newspapers and pictures, are provided to public libraries on subscription through the Gulliver consortium and BRUCE. This collection is available at almost every Victorian public library and in Tauranga District Libraries in New Zealand. Public library members can also remotely access the databases via the Internet. BRUCE stands for Bibliographic Resources Under a Consortial Environment. Whereas the Gulliver Consortium provides a core group of databases for all its members, BRUCE allows any number of libraries to join forces and access a range of other databases in addition to the Gulliver ones. Williamson, K. et al. (2001) looked closely at the way the Gulliver databases were used in four public library services in Victoria during 2000. The databases were trialled with individual users, and focus groups with staff explored their views of the databases. Librarians felt that the availability of full text was a great advantage of these databases, but doubted that many library users, whose first reason for using a library computer was for Internet access, simply saw the Gulliver icon as something that was in their way when they were navigating to a familiar website. The study found very little incidence of library users accessing the Gulliver databases and librarians commented that most users wanted the searching of that type of information-resource to be done for them – in other words, by a librarian. It was considered that some users were hesitant to experiment with using the databases, and when

they did, library staff often provided support. The study found that many library staff were not fully aware of what the Gulliver databases contained and needed more training in their use.

Another Victorian study (Armstrong 2002) also examines the emerging issues for reference librarians given the increasing range of resources, especially electronic, now available. Armstrong observed that

> Reference services in public libraries – all libraries – have had to respond quickly as the multi-lane information freeway has expanded, together with the enthusiasm and expectations of users. The traditional pathways to finding answers to questions have altered course, to the point where the information flow is so vast that the first job of reference librarians is to select, untangle and draw out relevant information into an understandable format (Armstrong 2002, p.104).

Armstrong interviewed an unspecified number of reference librarians in Victorian public libraries, whom she perceived to be "…working at the forefront of these changes". One issue she identified was that libraries had difficulty in effectively measuring the number of reference enquiries that library users attempted to answer for themselves by means of the electronic resources available in the library. As these enquiries are not counted, the statistics are lacking that might show that the provision of electronic resources means in fact that libraries are being using to answer an increasing number of enquiries, rather than a decreasing number, even though some of these enquiries might not, initially, be handled directly by a librarian. Many of the librarians interviewed by Armstrong also commented that the nature of the reference interview had changed: many library users have already searched the Internet for an answer and the librarian needs to check the search strategy they used; there is not the same volume of referral to other types of libraries because public libraries have better access to a range of electronic resources. In consequence, librarians need to learn new skills and be ready to accept the changes that the electronic environment has brought to reference services.

A similar conclusion was reached by Ross & Nilsen (2000) after examining accounts by users of their experiences in asking reference questions in Canadian public and academic libraries. It was found that the availability of electronic resources, including the Internet, had changed users' experiences of reference services and provided more options for finding the answers to their enquiries. However, there were long-standing problems in reference services that still contributed to a library user not finding for themselves, or being given by a librarian, a satisfactory answer to their reference enquiry. These included the failure to conduct a reference interview, unmonitored referral to other sources or libraries, and failure to ask follow-up questions.

Survey

In the administration of the VISioN review survey, two separate self-administered questionnaires were designed, one for Library Service Managers and one for Reference/Information Service Librarians. One objective of the survey, relevant to the context of this paper, was to help identify and verify trends about the use of the Internet and other online services such as Gulliver and Bruce in answering reference enquiries, and patterns of deferred reference enquiries. Questions were asked about decline or increase in

reference enquiries, the reasons; the type of enquiries received (i.e. Business, technical, genealogy, educational) and the percentage of questions that could be answered from the library's own resources. The questionnaire was not intended to disclose statistically rigorous data and subjective (i.e. anecdotal) responses were encouraged.

The questionnaires were piloted with several reference/information service librarians in Victoria and one library manager. The pilot revealed some ambiguities in the questionnaire, which were rectified and the questionnaire was then distributed electronically to all Victorian public library services. Telephone calls were made to non-respondents in an effort to achieve a high response rate.

Thirty-four Library Managers responded to the questionnaire. As the response from Hume-Moonee Valley Regional Library Corporation also represented the Melton Library Service, this represented a 79% response rate. Twenty-two (65%) of respondents were from metropolitan library services, and 12 (35%) from country library services.

Thirty-one Reference/Information Services responded to the questionnaire. There were multiple responses from some library services, so that in total 27 (62%) of library services responded. Twenty (65%) of respondents were from metropolitan library services, and eleven (35%) from country library services.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted by both telephone and email with a range of library managers and reference librarians, both in Australia and overseas. Some interviews were also conducted with reference/information service librarians in Victoria to collect data to complement the survey data. These interviews focussed on the use of the Gulliver and Bruce databases now available in most Victorian public libraries, in order to ascertain whether these additional reference resources had enabled more reference enquiries to be answered in house rather than being referred on elsewhere.

Findings

The literature review revealed that there are global trends emerging in reference services in public libraries. There is a general decline in the number of traditional reference enquiries asked of libraries and particularly of public libraries. Interestingly, many of the reference librarians interviewed, in both Australia and overseas, did not report that reference enquiries were decreasing. According to the statistics maintained by Local Government Victoria, Department for Victorian Communities[i] (see Table 1 below), there has not been a decrease in the number of reference enquiries handled by Victorian public libraries. There has actually been an annual increase of more than 1.6% per annum in the total number of reference enquiries received in Victorian public libraries since 1996. However, it must be noted that these statistics are based on one of two counts – either figures kept only for four sampling weeks spread across each year, or on figures collected on a continuous basis throughout the year. Interviews conducted with Reference/Information Services librarians have suggested that the increase is due to anomalies in the collection of the statistics within libraries rather than a 'real' increase.

Table 1 Reference Enquiries across Victoria

Year	Reference Enquiries across Victoria	Percentage Increase
1996 – 97	2,590,957	
1997 – 98	2,667,748	2.9%
1998 - 99	2,744,437	2.9%
1999 – 00	2,788,337	1.6%
2000 – 01	2,858,951	2.5%

Source: *Annual Survey of Victorian Public Libraries 2000-2001.*
Local Government Division, Department of Infrastructure. p.18.

Access to the Internet as a reason for the decline is presented in some of the literature reviewed and in interviews conducted with librarians overseas, but it appears that no research directly related to this perception has been conducted. Until proven, this hypothesis provides a good reason for the decline rather than a verifiable one. Where a library service's reference enquiries increase, the increase is also attributed to greater access to the Internet so the equation of greater Internet access = less reference enquiries is debatable.

Reference librarian respondents to the survey conducted as part of the VISioN review, indicated increased confidence in their searching the Internet as an information source. The survey results also showed that there is great variance across library services regarding policies on dealing with reference enquires, the staff resources available for reference services and the amount of reference training available to staff. Responses about increases or decreases in the number of reference enquiries were interesting. In 82% of library services, reference enquiries had decreased by an average of 15.5% per annum, whilst in the remaining 18% of library services, reference enquiries had increased by an average of 17% per annum. Where there had been an increase in reference enquiries, respondents commented that this could be due to either a population increase in the area the library served, or a growing awareness by the public of the electronic and other information sources libraries had available. Decreases in the number of reference enquiries were perceived to be due to more families having Internet access at home, more effective use of OPACs, the Internet and CDROM resources by library users, and more use of the Internet in general. Ninety-two percent of Victorian public libraries were using the Gulliver databases, and of these 82% reported an increase in their use. The survey results also indicated that the use of the Internet for answering reference enquiries had increased by 55% over the past three years. More users, especially students, were observed to be able to access the Internet and other online resources without staff assistance, and this also led to more efficient searching of online library catalogues.

In interviews conducted with librarians, many commented that greater online access did not appear to decrease face-to-face reference enquiries, but actually increased the number of clients and reference enquiries and also lifts the profile of the library service as a source for all types of information from books through to online databases (Cox 2002, Hohmeister 2002, Larsen 2002). For example, the Division of Library and Information Services in the Florida Department of State, which provides library, records management, and archival services at the state and local level, has seen an increase in the total number of reference queries received in the past five years, from 17,508 in 1997/1998 to 30,314 in 2001/2002. The increase was attributed to questions to the email reference feature on the library's website and on MyFlorida.com, the Florida Governor's web portal (Hohmeister, 2002).

Some uses of the Internet include: live reference chat, intranets where clients access information from their desktops, and the use of email for reference enquiries. Some notable libraries using the Internet effectively in these ways include Brisbane City Libraries in Australia (Mackenzie 2002), the Victorian Parliamentary Library (Davidson 2002) and the National Library Board Singapore (2000). These libraries are using the skills of librarians, the people most able to direct clients to credible verifiable information, whether that be in hardcopy, from fee-based database, chatrooms/lists or free to all on the Internet.

Another factor that may potentially affect the decline of reference enquiries in public libraries is the growing number of competitors who supply answers to esoteric questions for end users. Public libraries are no longer the only ones with a key to finding the answers for people. There are a small number of companies who provide information for a fee; they include information brokers, database vendors, stockbrokers, Internet search companies and search engine Ask facilities. Some examples are: Ask Jeeves, www.ask.com, Information Please, www.infoplease.com and FIND SVP, www.findsvp.com, Australian Financial Review www.afr.com.

There are now a number of library consortia in Australia that utilise different technologies to answer reference enquiries offsite either via chat or via email. Some examples are the *AskNow!*, *Answers Now* and *Global Librarian* initiatives. *AskNow!* is being run collaboratively with all the State and Territory Libraries, and both *Answers Now* and *Global Librarian* are services offered by public libraries in collaboration with other overseas public libraries, as part of their service offering to clients.

Changing nature of reference enquiries

This issue has an added complication in terms of what is defined as a reference enquiry. The review and the data collection carried out by the Department for Victorian Communities uses the definition provided earlier in this paper, but there are many other definitions to be found in the literature and in various library service policies. Whilst there are state, national and international definitions they are not applied consistently in libraries, thus rendering comparisons of data across states and countries unreliable.

The general perception of most librarians interviewed is that reference enquiries are changing; there are more short sharp questions and then the more complicated ones whereby people have already undertaken some preliminary research themselves and turn to a librarian for additional help. Thus many reference enquiries are either basic or complex, and the middle of the range is disappearing. An additional issue in this increasingly electronic age is that many people reject technology and seek more face-to-face contact. These people require a far greater amount of assistance when answering their enquiries, and the time taken with them is growing. However the time taken in this instance is not necessarily in proportion to the complexity of the question, but related to the need of the user to interact with another person.

Impact of end user access to electronic information

So, what impact will increased end user access have on reference services? At the moment, very little. Whilst there is a 50% Internet penetration in Australia, usage is heavily biased towards those under 25 who are studying part time or full time, and the main usage is email
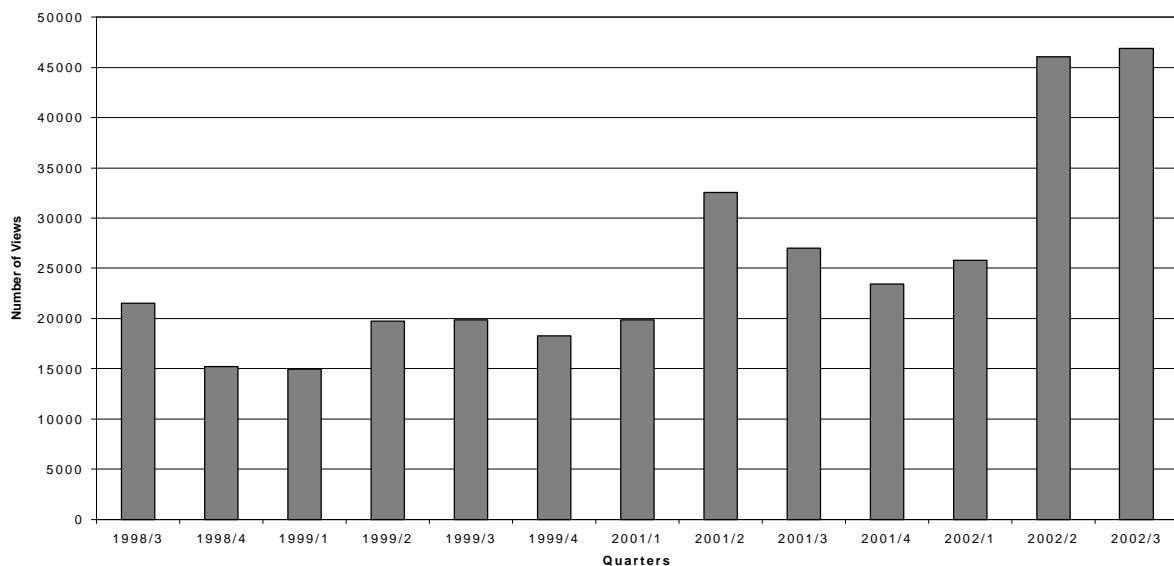
and sourcing information for study and browsing (Australia Scan 2002). This may have some effect on the educational questions being asked of public libraries but should not impact on other types of enquiries.

Services such as *AskNow!* may change this trend. The biggest users of *AskNow!* are people in the 35 to 49 year old age bracket (Mercer 2002). It is too early in the life of *AskNow!* to measure what impact this will have on the demographic profile of end users of online reference services.

Interviews were conducted with Victorian Reference/Information Services Librarians to ascertain amongst other issues, the use of Gulliver and other online sources by end users. Most interviewees believed that library users rarely accessed these resources remotely from home or office, and that they are used in libraries far more by the library staff in answering enquiries, than by users themselves attempting to find information for themselves. In fact, many had observed a reluctance by library users to use these resources themselves. The statistics collected by Gulliver (see Table 2 below) are based on a per view metric and at this point they cannot be broken down by type of person, i.e. library staff or library user, or whether the databases are used inhouse or remotely.

Gulliver statistics show that there has been a dramatic increase in the number of views over the last two quarters, but this can be attributed to a marked increase of use by a few public libraries services, not an across the board increase.

Table 2 Gulliver Usage

Source: Statistics provided by Vicnet.

Conclusion

In summary, this study indicates that the number of reference enquiries asked in public libraries may be decreasing, but there is increased complexity in some of those that are received, and more can be answered inhouse by use of the Internet and other resources, such as the local example of the Gulliver and Bruce databases. Some librarians may also lack confidence in using the Internet or other electronic information resources, or not be fully

aware of their coverage, which indicates that the situation observed by the Williamson study (2001) had not changed significantly in the following two years. Certainly, the availability of Internet access in public and State libraries has enabled more users to initially attempt to find information independently, but often they will eventually turn to librarians for additional assistance. There appears to be a need for more research to discover which users access electronic resources held by libraries remotely.

What we should also be asking is whether the basics of reference service are still being upheld; does every reference transaction commence with a properly conducted reference interview, and are reference services staff receiving sufficient professional development opportunities?

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Jill Best	Tauranga Public Library, NZ
John Binnion	CEO, Eastern Regional Libraries Corporation
Shane Carmody	Acting CEO, and Director, Collections & Services, State Library of Victoria
David Clark	Australian Capital Territory Library Service
Joyce M. Cox	Head of Reference Services Nevada State Library and Archives, USA
Karen Crane	State Library of Alaska
Bruce Davidson	Parliamentary Librarian, Government of Victoria, Australia.
Fiona Emberton	Director, Public Library Services State Library of Queensland
Susan Feeney	State Library of Western Australia
Anja Friese	Bertelsmann International Network of Public Libraries
Gary Hardy	Centre for Community Networking Research, Monash University
Linda Harrowfield	Tauranga Public Library, NZ
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Therese Lake	State Library of New South Wales
Jens Ingemann Larsen	Library Director, Herning Centralbibliotek, Denmark
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Maggie Paton	State Library of New South Wales
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[i] At the time of the review, this unit was entitled Local Government Division, Department of Infrastructure.