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## Reference Services in Minnesota: Alive or Dead?

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# Reference Services in Minnesota: Alive or Dead?

## A Minitex Reference Conference

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Keith Ewing

Let's be honest--traditional academic reference services, at least in publicly funded institutions of higher education, are dead. If the politics of reductionism, of cost efficiency, don't pull the plug on a lingering death, then the dislocation brought by the rapidly evolving digital world will. The transformation of libraries from print and place to bytes and space requires new definitions (new definitions that we are all struggling to develop, but which may not be possible by our generation--we are too rooted, cling too tenaciously, to our traditions to articulate a viable future). Most of us never anticipated that we might become, like so many other professions that arose at the end of the 19th century, obsolete.

The tools of traditional reference services, the catalogs, indexes, abstracts, and bibliographies, were largely developed by bibliophiles, the predecessors of librarians, or by librarians. Even many of the computer resources we use, our online public access catalogs and database versions of indexes, are modeled upon previous library print predecessors. Many of the new tools we are using, e.g., [Webcrawler](#), [InfoSeek](#), and [Excite](#), are familiar yet different; others, e.g., [Yahoo](#), are similar but are unable to fulfill our expectations. Reference librarians are adapting to these tools and often creating interim tools, but the relationship is uncomfortable. [OCLCs InterCat](#) project has come too late and is too oriented toward traditional monographic and serial formats to be useful in identifying the more discrete intellectual artifacts encouraged by the Net. There are already more intellectual artifacts on the Net than in any individual library or regional group of libraries (including all the libraries covered by [Minitex](#)), but not necessarily more intellectual value. This lack of intellectual depth combined with the dynamic nature of many Internet, especially hypertext, documents (dynamic with respect to content and location) requires mediation. But mediation will more likely come in the form of programmable knowbots, personal information harvesters, the prototypes of which are already appearing on the Net, rather than reference librarians.

Many of us will point to the handouts we create to instruct a user how to access the Net, or the traditional pathfinders on how to find information in the library on international marketing, or point to the newer resources we are creating, the "webliographies" that are electronic versions of pathfinders to show that librarians still perform a valuable role. Others will point to our library instruction programs and how much time we reference librarians spend with individuals instructing them in the use of this or that tool. But do our 50 minute instruction sessions really help the students? Do we help the students to navigate through the jungle of information tools or better filter the deluge of information? Or do we heighten their expectations and increase their frustration? It seems rather that we have devised these tools to compensate for the inadequacies of the system in which we work rather than change the system. No matter how much effort librarians put into creating pathfinders or providing instruction, we probably have little long term impact, or impact commensurate with the effort, on the majority of students. (Is the "system" really so large, so taken a life of its own, that individual librarians are unable to effect change?) Many more will point to the valid questions put forward by scholars who believe that scholarship will not advance without a stable, fixed intellectual record. Maybe scholarship will change, become more dynamic, just as libraries are changing and education is changing. Change rarely comes from within a community, and the change we are experiencing in libraries is largely coming from without.

Information technologies are only a symptom of larger changes swirling about us. Traditional education is being challenged, the validity of its outcomes, rightly or wrongly, are being questioned. Many of us in public higher education are already trying to cope with the problems of serving non-traditional, dynamic, populations. In the past, we expected those students to use the library and its resources and services in the same ways that traditional, on-campus students did. Except, now instruction is delivered to the individual (rather than the individual coming to the instruction) and the individual can be as far removed as Warroad, or Terlingua (Texas) or Port Elizabeth (South Africa). Institutional libraries have not been removed from the process of providing and delivering resources and facilities in support of learning, they've been forgotten. The responsibilities have been passed on to others, to local public libraries or other academic libraries who may not have the resources to support unaffiliated students. Computer centers are beginning to step in, not because they recognize an opportunity, but because others are seeing what [City University](#) and [Athena University](#) are doing to distribute accredited degree programs from site-less institutions. Email has largely replaced snail mail for the delivery of course materials and to facilitate communication between student and instructor (except for the delivery of video-taped lectures or support material); listserv conferences are offering some degree of student-to-student and student-to-mentor interactivity; multi-user domains (MUDs and affiliated MOOs and WOOs) are now entering, and with their multi-threaded conversations are creating a new type of interaction and a new grammar of discourse. Limited applications of desktop videoconferencing are appearing, reducing dependence upon interactive television. Virtual "classrooms" or academic forums where scholar/mentors interact with students (not radically different from the real world interactions of scholarly communities that preceded the development of universities--e.g., the rise of the University of Bologna nearly 700 years ago--except that students will "travel" to interact virtually) are also appearing, operating much like small tutorials.

The learning environment of the not too distant future could well be constructed around these delivery mechanisms, providing educational opportunities for people without regard to time or place. Indeed the whole educational enterprise may be reduced to a group of administrators, systems engineers and programmers, instructional and graphic designers, and, if we're fortunate, a few information specialists who work with content specialists (scholars) to develop and produce educational environments with learning opportunities (curricular packages) and scholarly resources (hypertextualized multi-media texts and scholarly environments) that could be distributed to students anywhere. Other instructors/tutors would be available to provide individualized support and direction, but the service would be entrepreneurial. "Students" will not so much "receive instruction" as pursue interactive opportunities to construct collaborative projects. The educational enterprise will negotiate licenses and copyright to access or distribute access to registered clients, "members of the academic community." This is already happening, and the educational enterprises that are implementing this scenario are determining the direction and content of the discussion. While there is no mention of the "library" in this scenario, there may be a continued role, but it will operate as an archive, with "librarians" relegated to preserving, stabilizing, or digitizing the crumbling artifacts of a prior time.

And how will the information needs of "students" be fulfilled? They will have their information knowbot, perhaps a virtual reality agent called the "librarian" (with a nod to Neal Stephenson), who will "know" the "student," that is, have some understanding of the reading level, knowledge base, and capabilities of the "student." The student will "negotiate" a query with the agent (determine the parameters of the harvest), perhaps the use of metaphors in Abkhazian or the historical development of computer mediated communication. The agent will then go off to seek the required information; it may search a profile of set locations, including the distribution site from the educational environment where an account is maintained and where licenses and copyrights for access have been cleared, or distribution sites for which the "student" has paid personal access rights; or it may search globally. It may interact with other agents and brokers. The agent will format a list of potential resources (a "bibliography") if that was the set parameter, or it may provide an "answer" (What was the dollar amount spent on child care in Minnesota in 1996?). From the list, the "student" will connect to the retrieved information. (Will the "student" discern that the

"librarian" is merely an artificial construct in cyberspace--will the "student" care?) The student probably won't know (or need to know) from where the information comes (although the agent could probably provide that information). The entire nature of "fixity" in scholarly publication (of "place") will need to be rethought with dynamic, annotated, networked publications. Retrieval of designated resources and required applications may be allowed to the "student" as a result of membership in a group (the educational environment, the state), or because of independent contracts arranged by the "student," or (in a world viewed through rose tinted glasses) because it's free. "Students," and everyone else in the data stream, will no longer have to learn the arcane language of network addressing (URLs, URNs, IPs, etc.).

Is this scenario so really unrealistic? Many people outside the library profession believe, including many of the cultural commentators (it is unfair to call them technophobes, because many of them are not) who are concerned about the social, economic, and ethical implications of this scenario, believe it is highly probable. Reference librarians are pretty good at what they do, but, as Peter Drucker once said, there is nothing worse worse than being the best at doing something that doesn't need to be done.

The scenarios described above haven't been created by librarians and seldom include librarians. They are being dreamed by futurists and science fiction (cyberpunk) authors and being developed by systems and computer engineers. They are promoted and hyped by journalists writing for Time, Newsweek, the New York Times, the Sacramento Bee. Legislators, civic leaders, academic administrators, social pundits, and the general public accept the scenarios, not as possible but as probable. The absence of libraries from the issues of information access and distribution in the electronic environment does not appear to be a concern. Those who are concerned about the increasing incursion of technology, who continually point to technology's unpredictable and potentially negative effects are often "beyond the pale of serious consideration," (Tom Maddox, *Wilson Quarterly* 18:29-36 1994) and are unable to stop (although they may influence) the inexorable changes brought about by technology.

Many of the comments Bob and I included in our original article have been posed by others, from outside our profession. They weren't posited as the result of any scholarly inquiry into what possible roles libraries will have in the future. There are principles, "reality checks," which we use to guide our actions and even our thinking, whose value lies less in their abstract "truth value" than in their ability to help us accomplish things of value. Our intent was to present a "diabolic advocacy of prejudices" (to borrow a phrase from Hunter Kevil--posted on cristal-ed, 3 Nov 1995) to serve as a stimulus to discussion, and hope to avoid unproductive "religious wars."

The ASIS Mid-year conference (to be held in San Diego next May) is focusing its discussion on the digital revolution, a revolution that will profoundly alter not only the way libraries and education conduct business and provide services, but has the potential to profoundly alter the way societies function at the personal, local, and global level. It seeks to discuss (and probably not answer) what it means to participate in this revolution; it also seeks to discuss what it means to ignore it. We shouldn't seek ways to postpone or manage the future; we should accept that the methods of information distribution and use have and are changing and seek ways to create the future. Greg Farrington (Dean of the School of Engineering at the University of Pennsylvania; at the LITA/ACRL President's Program at ALA/Chicago 1995) exhorted the audience to "prepare for change whose form is uncertain but whose inevitability is sure, by rushing out and (at least) pretending to lead it."

We welcome all rebuttals to our idiocy, along with other comments.

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This document was written to guide my comments at the MINITEX conference: Reference Services in Minnesota: Dead or Alive, held on Thursday, November 9, 1995, at the Earle Brown Center at the University of Minnesota, St. Paul Campus. The conference was organized to discuss the themes set forward in "Is Traditional Reference Service Obsolete," the lead article for the Symposium on Reference Service in *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, volume 21, number 1, January 1995.

This version of the paper was completed December 1995