Libraries and Distant Users: An Evolving Relationship

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"Rather than thinking of our users as remote, we should instead recognize that we are remote from our users."[50] — Anne Lipow

When I was first hired as Distance Education Coordinator at the University of Montana Library, I stumbled across Anne Lipow's statement above and found it resonated with me, so much so that I have added it to my email signature to help remind me on a daily basis why I am here. The longer I am a librarian, the more I agree with her, not just from the aspect of providing services to distant students but in my library's general activities as well. Those who use libraries are changing, and their expectations of service are changing too. It is now unheard of, for example, for a library to go without its own website, or to not offer reference assistance via email or chat. How did we learn to be less of a library-as-place and more of a library-as-service? How have we changed the way libraries work and are used? And how should we continue to bridge the gap between our users and ourselves?

It seems our original motives were simple enough. We wanted to compete with the rising tides of the Internet, 24-hour news, and patrons' ability to access information anytime and anywhere. Naturally, we wanted to demonstrate and prove our relevance in this new arena. Between 1990 and 2000, Internet access in public and academic libraries went from almost non-

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[50] Lipow, Anne G. "'In Your Face' Reference Service," *Library Journal* 124(13) (August 1999), p. 51.

existent to nearly omnipresent. Libraries and librarians were quite often the groundbreakers in providing Internet access to their users, and our use of technology to digitize our library catalogs, provide access electronically to resources, and communicate online via listservs and email was definitely forward-thinking.

Internet access and electronic services offered by U.S. academic libraries began to be tracked in the annual *Digest of Educational Statistics* in 1996.[51] 80.9% of institutions offered Internet access at this time. By 1998, 94.6% of academic libraries offered access.[52] Public libraries offered Internet access in 87.8% of their locations in 1998, which was up to 95.7% by 2000.[53] 35% of public schools in 1994 offered access to the Internet, versus 99% by 2002.[54]

Home and workplace access followed a similar pattern but the raw numbers of those with access lagged behind. In 1997, 16% of people in the U.S. had access to the web from home, and 14% had access from work.[55] By 2003, 54.6% of U.S. households had access to the Internet at home.[56] There still exists a significant gap, called the digital divide, between those with ready personal access to the Internet and computing technology and those who don't.

Libraries positioned themselves during this time and through to the present day to help reduce the digital divide — we get our users onto the information superhighway. Access to a computer at home varies widely based on race and income, and many public libraries see it as part of their mission to

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[51] College and University Libraries — Summary: 1982-1996. No. 323. *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2000 (120th Edition).* Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000.

[52] Academic libraries—summary: 1998. No. 1152. *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2003 (123rd Edition).* Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 2003.

[53] Public library use of the Internet: 2000. No. 1155. *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2001 (121st Edition).* Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 2001.

[54] Public schools and instructional rooms with access to the Internet, by selected school characteristics: 1994 to 2002. No. 421. *Digest of Educational Statistics 2003.* Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, 2003.

[55] Public's access to computers from work and home, by selected characteristics: 1995, 1997 and 1999. No. 8-31. *Science and Engineering Indicators, 2000.* Washington, DC: National Science Foundation, 2000.

[56] Households with computers and Internet access: 1998 and 2003. No. 1150. *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2006 (126th Edition).* Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 2006.

provide Internet and computer access to those who don't have it.[57] In fact, some libraries see most of their physical users, and incidentally many of their problem patrons, in those who come to the library specifically to use the Internet.[58]

However noble and useful these intentions are, what about reaching those who are able to be online all the time, the patrons who are wired but remote from the library? As far back as 1986 librarians were imagining the library's role in a future where research could be done in an office relying upon database access and email rather than looking through the physical holdings of the library collection.[59] Key to this vision of the future was "convenient, focused interaction with the library (p. 156)," including consultations with librarians and other staff during the research process. The researcher was not left alone but was able to find most of what she needed on her own, with the library providing valuable advice and assistance over email and phone when necessary.

The ease of use, availability and speed of the Internet caused our users to expect more from the library, especially as many libraries began using and offering these new online tools as well. We were cautioned that "[u]nless we take action to close the gap between our patrons' expectations and our ability to perform, I predict we will try to serve an ever larger and more demanding user population without having the necessary resources...We must take stock of what it takes to meet the patrons' expectations and offer new and properly staffed services that satisfy those expectations".[60]

Taking stock of patron expectations was a driving force behind the movement to 'rethink' or 'reinvent reference' in the 1990s. Online services like About.com, featuring personal guides and a human touch, were seen as

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[57] Bertot, Juan C., Charles R. McClure, P.T. Jaeger, and J. Ryan. *Public Libraries and the Internet 2006: Study Results and Findings.* Tallahassee, Fla.: Information Use Management and Policy Institute, College of Information, Florida State University, 2006.

[58] Lipow, Anne G. *The Virtual Reference Librarian's Handbook.* New York: Neal-Schuman, 2003, p. 4.

[59] Lipow, Anne G. and Joseph A. Rosenthal, "The Researcher and the Library: A Partnership In the Near Future," *Library Journal* 111 (September 1986): 154-156.

[60] Lipow, Anne G. "The Online Catalog: Exceeding Our Grasp," *American Libraries* 20 (October 1989), p. 865.

proof that those who were venturing online would still want and need help finding information. The difference was that users of the Internet were able to find these services conveniently online, rather than having to visit the reference desk during the hours the library was open. Anne Lipow stated that under these new conditions, "Library reference service will thrive only if it is as convenient to the remote user as a search engine; only if it is impossible to ignore — so 'in your face' — that to not use the service is an active choice".[61]

One of the most pioneering ways that libraries and librarians attempted to meet with remote users was through virtual reference services. Chat and email reference, often in consortia with other libraries to ensure 24/7 coverage, began to be offered more and more widely. Asking and answering questions became less associated with the reference desk and more a service that libraries provided in many different ways.

Dovetailing with this new service came remote access to resources. Instead of being tied to print indexes or CD-ROMs, research tools became increasingly available online to researchers outside the library and accessible at any time. More recent innovations have included distance education offerings for training and continuing education of librarians as well as for instructing our users in resources and services. Libraries also are beginning to offer access to e-books, downloadable audio books, wi-fi, and a host of other services to attract technologically savvy users.

Libraries and librarians were always meant to provide assistance to information seekers at their point of need. However, over the last thirty years, this point of need has shifted from the physical library building to the digital realm. Unfortunately, librarians are used to being somewhat invisible to our users, and this has persisted into the online sphere. We have managed to increase the convenience of our services, but not the 'in your face' attitude Anne Lipow deemed necessary. Further, Bonnie Nardi's studies on intelligent agents led her to conclude that no one besides ourselves understands exactly what we do, but that what we do, which she called 'information therapy,' is key to helping users navigate through computerized searching. She also likens librarians to a 'keystone species' — serving as protectors of diversity in the information community. Without our

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[61] Lipow, Anne G. "'In Your Face' Reference Service," *Library Journal* 124(13) (August 1999), p. 52.

protection of the diversity of resources and defense of the human side of information, libraries may not survive.[62]

The library continues to directly compete with other, more commercial, services. Anne Lipow observed that question answering services were popping up on the web around the late 1990s and felt that these were inferior to what libraries could and did offer.[63] This has only proliferated in recent years. Some examples include Yahoo Answers, Google Answers, and AskMeNow. Questions are sent to these services, which then are answered by any interested party regardless of expertise (Yahoo Answers) or for profit (Google Answers, AskMeNow). Why would people ask unqualified strangers or pay for answers, when they could ask a trained librarian with access to a wealth of resources? Convenience is of course vital, but perhaps a key aspect to being 'in your face' is clarifying our role to users.

In 2005, OCLC produced a report on a study of the public's perception of libraries. A surprising 96% of those surveyed had visited their public library at some point, and over 60% of those surveyed were familiar with search engines on the Internet. Unfortunately, few people knew that their library had an online presence beyond a website and perhaps an online catalog. The report indicated that in the library, our brand is 'books.' That is still what our users think of first when they think of libraries, and they are still tied to the idea of library as a physical place. Search engines are the first choice for 80% of respondents when looking for information, versus 11% who turn to their library. [64]

This study demonstrates a clear and continuing need for libraries and librarians to be proactive in reaching users. If libraries continue to be associated with just 'books,' we do not stand a chance in either bridging the digital divide, since users will not think of the library as a place to access technology, or between us and our more wired users, since users will not

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[62] Nardi, Bonnie A. "Information Ecologies: Highlights of the Keynote Address," *Reference and User Services Quarterly* 38(1) (1998): 49-50.

[63] Lipow, Anne G. "'In Your Face' Reference Service," *Library Journal* 124(13) (August 1999): 50-52.

[64] Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources: A Report to the OCLC Membership. Dublin, Ohio: OCLC Online Computer Library Center, Inc., 2005.

think of the library as a place to use technological resources. This also raises issues regarding the role of librarians within their library and the redefinition of professional work within libraries. If librarians are no longer staffing a physical reference desk as one of their primary responsibilities, who will be? Or will the desk cease to exist? If libraries are about more than books, what defines a library?

We will continue to work at an increasing distance from our users. Some library users will always be on the cutting edge of technology, pushing us to expand the limits of our services. Other library users will need assistance moving into the newer ways of doing things as they develop. We need to 'mind the gap' between these users, and the gap between ourselves and our patrons, to become and continue to be relevant. There will likely always be a library, both physically and as a service, but only if we continually reinvent ourselves to fit in with our patrons and offer our services conveniently and ubiquitously. In order to preserve our place in the information ecology, we have to make our role more obvious in order to defend our position and that of libraries. Perhaps most importantly, we must inform our users that we provide "...relevant, quality information at no charge. No other profession is so tied to the principles of democracy; we have a code of work principles that guarantees open, equitable access; we are thought of as a lifelong learning center; we provide a range of viewpoints for our users to make informed choices. And best of all, we offer a world of information that began before the World Wide Web".[65]

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[65] Lipow, Anne G. and Gail A. Schlachter, "Thinking Out Loud: Who Will Give Reference Service in the Digital Environment?" *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 37:2 (1997) , p. 129.