



Review Paper

Media and Interpersonal Communication in Reference Service

Oyewo, Abiola O.¹ and Olusipe, Abiodun A.²

¹University Library, Igbinedion University Okada Edo State NIGERIA

²University Library, Adeleke University Ede Osun State NIGERIA

Available online at: www.isca.in, www.isca.me

Received 13th June 2015, revised 19th July 2015, accepted 28th September 2015

Abstract

Communication is described by scholars as situations in which human communication take place, they view communication in terms of strategic relationships, signs and symbols, sharing of experiences and achievement of goals, and most important what the perceptions of the parties involved is. They seldom depict “media” as an important component of human communication. Definitions of media have watered it down and its role positioned as a channel in the communication process; the emphasis now has been on the number of participants involved, relationship between source and receiver and the forms and functions of messages. The definitions here did not take cognizance of the influential role of media in interpersonal communication. As a means of filling this gap, this paper uses analytical tool to examine the role of media in interpersonal communication, with specific reference to its use in modern reference service in libraries. Media, such as the Internet and other telecommunication devices, has made the delivery of reference services to users more efficient and effective. Virtual services such as chat services, e-mail, web forms, and instant messages are now possible. This is not, however, without its problems: in most countries of the Global South including Nigeria, media mediated interpersonal communication faces serious challenges. The paper examines such challenges and offers pragmatic solutions.

Keywords: Media, interpersonal communication, mediation, reference services, libraries, library user, virtual reference.

Introduction

The reference service is crucial in libraries and information centers as it enables librarians to meet the information needs of information users¹. Reference service describes the functions which trained librarian performed in the reference section of the library; such is geared towards meeting the information needs of users. Reference service include answering questions, instructing users in the selection and use of appropriate tools and techniques for finding information, conducting information searches on behalf of the user, directing users to where library resources are located, giving assistance to users in the evaluation of information and referral services to patrons to resources outside the library at appropriate times.²

The communication process whereby users convey their needs and the reference librarian meets these needs with the information resources at his disposal is the reference interview. The reference interview is an adaptive system which not only plays an important role in information retrieval systems but also allows for adapting the reference process to the patrons and vice versa to establish a consistent match between the needs of patrons and what the system can identify occurs³.

However, communication is described by scholars as situations in which human communication take place, they view communication in terms of strategic relationships, signs and symbols, sharing of experiences and achievement of goals, and

most important what the perceptions of the parties involved is. They seldom depict “media” as an important component of human communication. Definitions of media have watered it down and its role positioned as a channel in the communication process; the emphasis now has been on the number of participants involved, relationship between source and receiver and the forms and functions of messages. The definitions here did not take cognizance of the influential role of media in negotiation through interpersonal communication. The fact, however is that media mediated reference interviews have gone a long way in meaningfully reshaping reference services in recent years. This paper tries to examine how media has influenced reference transactions in libraries, the advantages of such influence and the challenges faced by librarians using media to deliver modern reference service.

Background of Reference Services

The assistance rendered by professionals in the reference section of the library is better appreciated by someone who has experienced frustration when in need of information and being overwhelmed somewhat or confused by the amount available and the complexities of shifting through what is available to find what is needed. The expert however work the patrons through the intricacies of the available information⁴. Such personal assistance is the essence of reference services and it is the fundamental role of the reference librarian. The reference

librarian is an intermediary between the library collection and the library user.

The reference librarian originally answered questions and assisted library user from the reference desk and the users' advisory desk. Often times, the reference librarian prepared query slips and handed them out to the library users to ascertain their information needs. The major constraint of this process is that the presence of users at the reference desk is required for the service to be effective. In recent times, the situation has changed. Library clientele are scattered all over and yet, most have needs that can only be attended to by the services provided at the reference section of the library. The need for media in this instance becomes imperative.

The Need for Mediated Interpersonal Communication in Reference Service

Reference service cannot stand alone. The library clientele are the hub of reference service. However, the reference librarian and the clientele belong to different communities. The process which integrates the duo and makes reference service happen is interpersonal communication. When the user expresses his/her needs, the reference librarian considers what resources to use to meet them. The reference interview is the crux of interpersonal communication in reference transactions.

Interpersonal communication can be media mediated or take place face to face between the librarian and the library user. Media mediation in reference service has been branded as mediated communication. Mediated communication is viewed as a situation where a technological medium is employed into face to face interaction. Telephone conversations, letters, electronic mail, instant messages, multimedia messages, faxes, etc are modes of interpersonal mediated communication. The application of these technologies in reference interaction has impacted greatly on relationships and made face to face contact dispensable. Although immediacy of feedback is ensured, however privacy and communication control is altered.

Librarianship scholars are of the opinion that progress in computer applications during the past few decades have brought radical changes in the way information is gathered, stored, organized, accessed, retrieved and consumed⁵. According to Phillip, whilst information could be obtained both in hard copies and electronic format, it is commonly found that library patrons, especially those in the active age groups are increasingly becoming passionate about accessing information and interacting via electronic means, although she went further to say that this poses threat to the use of physical collections of a library⁶. However, benefits of mediated library resources and services have been stated to include preservation and conservation of physical collections, maximization of space, added value of, and easy accessibility to library resources and services⁷.

In this vein, libraries with access to electronic data networks continue to grow and this is beginning to impact the way the libraries' parent bodies conduct their business⁸. For library patrons, this promises and pave way for more convenient access to information and to library professionals. Library patrons will increasingly expect to access information and the services of librarians at work and from home. However, to make remote reference services common and smooth access ensured, information professionals must prepare adequately now by identifying both the advantages and problems for library patrons and reference intermediaries alike.

The Modern Reference Desk

The delivery of reference services has experienced dramatic changes in the twentieth century. It is generally becoming more efficient and effective at times and in certain settings to deliver reference services by means other than face to face interactions. For many, the Internet has become the modern and basic way for the information access for many, especially in teaching, learning and research⁹. Thus, the phenomenon of the World Wide Web, the Internet and attendant proliferation of electronic sources have greatly impacted the delivery of reference services. The context of the web is limitless and highly dynamic such that the task of the reference librarian is reshaped. The reference librarian's tools now consist of a computer work station with a web based library catalogue and periodical databases, full Internet access, a fax or data modem and email, all networked to the local or wide area network. A telephone is also an essential tool; so are ready reference print resources with access to a larger reference collection of print materials. Today's reference worker is equally at ease in a world of print and electronic information.

Media and Interpersonal Communication in Reference Service

Interpersonal communication in a reference transaction consists mainly of the reference interview. Authors have defined the reference interview as the conversation between a member of the library reference staff and a library user for the purpose of clarifying the user's needs and aiding the user's meeting of those needs¹⁰. The essence of reference interview is to help the librarian respond adequately and provide answers to the library user's queries. The following are identified as the stages of reference interview: Welcoming, gathering general information from the user and getting an overview of the problem, confirming the exact question, Intervention, like giving information, advice or instructions, finishing, including feedback and summary. The stages identified may occur in loops, for instance, clarification of questions may leads to the need to establish the background information on the query topic expressed by patrons. These steps are structured to ensure that users are put at their ease and that they have correctly explained what they require. After the reference librarian as ascertained that the query is fully understood, they proceed to provide

resources that satisfy such. A final step that is important and often overlooked- checking that the information provided was indeed what the user required need to be addressed. It is important to note that reference interview is structured to ensure that the library patron's information need is satisfied. The librarian can employ a number of techniques to help identify the patron's exact need. Any short fall in the application of reference interview skills may lead to misinterpretation of the real query expressed, absence of real help and leave library users unsatisfied.

There are many techniques librarians employ to help identify a user's information need¹¹. Using body language, repetition, and paraphrasing of what the user says, the librarian interviewing the user can encourage them to give more information about their need. The use of open questions help to establish context and to identify the exact thing required. One of the commonest mistakes in reference interview is lack of follow-up, or checking that the user found what they required. Effective reference service is paramount to information professionals and to achieve this, good reference query must be formed. It has been pointed out earlier that badly formed queries is one of the biggest problems with creating an effective reference service¹².

Often times the librarian either fail to take cognizance of or typically has little insight into the social and psychological barriers that might work against the interest of users and thus preventing them from explaining their questions clearly and accurately. Elements such as anxiety, approaching deadline, lack of confidence with language use can get in the way of users. Traditionally, all the above occurred in person or face to face communication, between the reference librarian and the library patron. In recent times, however, the use of phones, email and other media has brought about the concept of the virtual reference interview. Thus, all the above may occur in person, by telephone, or any other electronic media, (usually via email) at the request of the user.

The Virtual Reference Interview

Virtual reference is defined as "using computer and communications technology to provide reference service to patrons anytime and anywhere" or "the use of human intermediation to answer questions in a digital environment."¹³ The idea of virtual reference interview came to light as libraries began to embrace technology and apply such in their operations. Virtual reference is initiated electronically, is conducted often in real time. For virtual reference, the user and the librarian are separated by gaps and do not meet face to face, but a medium bring them together. Virtual reference services can be conducted through Internet chats, videoconferencing, email, co-browsing, and instant messaging. However, virtual referencing is not without hurdles. It has not been as swift as some had predicted. Authors however have suggested that the issue behind this is the complexity of virtual reference; they argued that users want information quickly and with minimum of stress^{14, 15}.

Procedures of Virtual Reference: Virtual reference can be conducted in various ways.¹⁶ A few are examined below;

Email: user sends library an email with a reference query, supplying whatever information he or she feels is necessary. The library may reply by email, phone, fax, letter, etc.

Web form: user fills out an outline form on the library's website. The form asks the user to answer clarifying questions that will help the reference librarian in responding to the query. The user sends the completed form to the library by clicking a button on the page labeled "send" or "submit". The library may reply by email, phone, fax, letter, etc.

Chat reference: User logs onto chat software linked to the library's website. User types in an opening query or greeting to get the attention of the librarian. The user and the librarian may exchange a series of short messages the user's request. This exchange of messages is live (it takes place in real time) and allows for negotiation of the user's query.

Web contact: Borrowing technology from online customer service, web call center devised programmes not only provide chat software that allows the user to interact in a live setting with the librarian, but they also offer software giving the librarian power to control the user's browser. With virtual reference software based on web centre technologies, a librarian can actually make the user's browser display a recommended web page, such as a database (with a sample query already entered) or the main page for the library's online catalog. As the librarian pushes pages onto the user's browser, the chat window can also appear on both user and librarian's screen, allowing the patron to be escorted by the librarian to online resources while simultaneously maintaining a typed conversation (reference interview) about the materials and research strategies being sent to the user. A librarian can actually make the user's browser display a recommended web page, such as a database (with a sample query already entered) or the main page for the library's online catalog.

Many of these software centered packages allow the librarian to: i. See what IP address the user is coming from, ii. See what browser that user has, iii. Send a floating icon across the user's screen inviting them to chat, iv. Push web pages that will open up a new browser window on user's screen (including pages from proprietary databases if users are given remote access), v. Send an online form to obtain more information, vi. Transfer user to another librarian (perhaps one at a member library in a consortium, or a subject specialist)

Reference Search Tools: These are tools that are sometimes recommended by the reference librarian to library users and are important tools in helping the user find answer to their reference queries. They are otherwise called Internet search tools. They are designed for searching the Internet for sites and resources that can benefit both the reference section of the library and its

users. These tools are ranked based on their interface, versatility and ease of use. They include search tools, Meta search tools and subject directories. The search tools are the main instrument for navigating on the Internet, they are otherwise called search engines. The Meta search tools look into the search engines to compile entries for use and the use and the subject directories are the digital room for online resources. It is a companion of the reference librarian to assist the users to meet their information needs.

Table-1
Search tools, Meta search tools and subject

Search Tools	Meta Search Tools	Subject Directories
Google	Ixquick	Infomine
Yahoo	Dogpile	Academic Info
Ask Jeeves	Surfwax	Best information on the Net
All the web	Search.com	Internet Public Library
Bing	Clusty	The Scout report archives
Exalead	Mamma	Digital Librarian
Alta vista	Kartoo	About.com
Gigablast	Beaucoup	Open Directory Project
Lycos	Highway	World Wide Web Virtual Library

Other search tool used by librarians to serve the user is ip12. Ip12 is the result of a merger of the Internet Public Library and the Librarians' Internet Index (LII). These resources group subjects of interest together. They are managed by ip12 staffs who carefully select Internet resources for their usefulness in providing accurate, factual information on particular topics. The reference librarian can find these resources useful in the discharge of his duties.

Benefits of Virtual Reference Services

The following are some of the benefits of implementing virtual reference services: i. Virtual reference services provide immediate assistance for remote users, ii. It is good for distant education students. iii. Since the patron is already online, he or she can attempt to implement the librarian's instructions right away. iv. Many software packages default to virtual reference (e.g. email) when a librarian is not available. v. Virtual reference services raise the awareness of the library and the user community to sources of information hitherto unnoticed. vi. Telephone reference has been offered as a service to those who for reasons cannot physically visit the library. Vii. Virtual reference is the medium itself, rather than receiving verbal answers alone, the patrons have the option to print a copy

of the entire transaction. viii. Virtual reference service provides for anonymity that is not possible with in-person reference service. ix. Patrons of virtual reference services enjoy accessing their information requests at their door step since the stress and cost expended has been removed.

Challenges Facing Implementation of Virtual Reference Services in Nigeria

Although there is scant literature on challenges faced by Nigerian libraries in implementation virtual reference services, some challenges have been associated with the implementation in the countries which make up the Global South, and the present authors are of the opinion that these challenges are also peculiar to Nigeria. Some identified problems include problems of ICT infrastructure like availability and maintenance of workstations and peripherals such as scanners, printers, e.t.c., affordability of software (the cost of licensing proprietary software as distinct from open source), connectivity (the availability of reliable telephone lines and other telecommunications connections), equity (in most developing countries, access to the infrastructure is skewed towards a small, mainly urban elite) and bandwidth (the amount of traffic that can be carried and at what cost). Home Internet users in developed countries have more bandwidth at their disposal at less cost than is available – or was until recently – to even some universities in African countries where the traffic is throttled by telecommunications monopolies¹⁷. Other identified challenges include financial constraints, lack of skilled manpower and lack of understanding of virtual reference operations on the part of both librarians and library patrons¹⁸. Question negotiation has also been identified as a challenge, since the librarian has little knowledge of the user's status and is short of nonverbal cues, difficulty in controlling interview time effectively in a digital conversation, and cost of both software and staff time which is quite expensive. It was suggested that inappropriate emphasis on digital reference may also undermine the value of library services¹⁹. Other identified challenges include environmental problems such as power supply, connectivity and networking, insufficient communication infrastructure, lack of security and confidentiality i.e., electronic mail when being transferred from sender to receiver and vice versa goes through several modes where unauthorized access to the message is possible. Many African countries especially do not have adequate access to electronic devices making it difficult to enjoy electronic email reference services.

Conclusion

Libraries with access to electronic data networks continue to grow and this is beginning to impact the way the libraries' parent bodies conduct their business.⁸ For library patrons, this promises and pave way for more convenient access to information and to library professionals. Library patrons will increasingly expect to access information and the services of librarians at work and from home. However, to make remote

reference services common and smooth access ensured, information professionals must prepare adequately now by identifying both the advantages and problems for library patrons and reference intermediaries alike. In this process, library education curriculum must be broadened to prepare information professionals adequately to offer remote reference services. In this light the following recommendations are made: i. Training and retraining of librarians in ICT competencies. ii. Deliberate formulation of policies to integrate e-reference services into library operations. iii. Formulation of policies favorable to integration of virtual reference in libraries by government and stakeholders. iv. Provision of funding by the government and other stakeholders. v. Provision of adequate infrastructure for virtual reference integration in libraries. vi. Evaluation and assessment studies should be carried out in areas of virtual reference integration into library operations, usage and satisfaction by librarians and the library user

References

1. Chowdhury G.G., Digital Libraries and Reference Services: Present and Future, *Journal of Doc.*, **58(3)**, 258-283 (2002)
2. Bopp R.E. and Smith L.C., Reference and Information Services: An Introduction, 37 (2001)
3. White M.D., Evaluation of the Reference Interview, *Ref. Quart.*, **25(1)**,76-83 (1985)
4. Bopp R.E. and Smith L.C., Reference and Information Services: An Introduction, 37 (2001)
5. Sk. Mamun M., Use and Impact of E-Resources at Some Selected Private Universities in Bangladesh, *Res. J. Library Sci.*, **1(1)**, 10 (2013)
6. Philip K.J., Challenges of Managing Research Collections in a Semi-Automated Academic Library in Nigeria, *Res. J. Library Sci.*, **1(1)**, 15(2013)
7. Nagar H. and Salve M., Digitization of Library in 21Century-Digital Library, *Res. J. Library Sci.*, **1(1)**, 21(2013)
8. Abels E.G. and Liebscher P., A New Challenge for Intermediary-Client Communication: The Electronic Network, *The Ref. Lib.*, **41(42)**, 185-196 (1994)
9. Sarita A., Internet and Its Use in the Engineering Colleges of Udaipur, Rajasthan, India: A Case Study, *Res. J. Library Sci.* **3(3)**, 8(2015)
10. Bopp R.E. and Smith L.C. Reference and Information Services: An Introduction, 29 (1995)
11. Nielsen K., Virtual versus Face to Face Reference: Comparing User's Perspectives on Visits to Physical and Virtual Reference Desks in Public and Academic Libraries, *World Library and Information Congress: 71st IFLA General Conference and Council*, IFLA, 6 (2005)
12. Murphy S., The Reference Narrative, *Ref. and User Serv. Quart.*, **44(3)**, 1 (2005)
13. Lankes D.R., Virtual Reference to Participatory Librarianship: Expanding the Conversation, *Bulletin of the American Soc. of Inf.Sci.Tech.*, **34(2)**, 11 (2008)
14. Stormont S., Looking to Connect: Technical Challenges that Impede the Growth of Virtual Reference, *Ref. and User Serv. Quart.*, **47(2)**, 119 (2007)
15. Radford M.L., A Personal Choice: Reference Service Excellence, *Ref. and User Serv. Quart.*, **48(2)**,108-115 (2009)
16. Connaway L.S. and Radford M.L., Seeking Synchronicity: Revelations and Recommendations for Virtual Reference, *OCLC Online Comp. Lib. Cent.* (2011)
17. Lor P.J. and Britz J.J., Challenges of the Approaching Knowledge Society: Major International Issue, *Libri*, **57**, 111-122 (2007)
18. Shariful I., Library Digitization in Bangladesh: A Developing Country Perspective, *Res. J. Library Sci.*,**1(1)**, 4(2013)
19. Han L. and Goulding A., Information and Reference Services in the Digital Library, *Inf. Serv. and Use*, **23**, 251-262 (2003)