Assessing Content of E- Reference Services at the National and University Library in Zagreb - from usage to quality measures – establishing baselines for service

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Introduction
The growing use of Internet for information storage, retrieval and communication is perhaps the most significant development shaping library and information services. The information-seeking preferences and communication patterns of library users are rapidly changing. Easy - to - use digital libraries enable users to access information on their own.

Definition and Scope of Information and Reference Services
Rothstein’s (1961) definition of reference work “being the personal assistance given by the librarian to individual readers in pursuit of information” is applicable even today. Bopp and Bunge (2000) categorized reference services as a) Information services b) Guidance and c) One-to-one or Group instruction. The American practitioners, differ the reference services as: a) informational, b) instructional and c) advisory/guidance services. Cassell and Hiremath (2009) generalise reference questions being of three types: ready reference questions, research questions and bibliographic verification. Grogan (1991) sees the reference work, after 90ties as being significantly affected by technological development, leading to explosion of various services far beyond the traditional reference services.

Terminology is still fluid in this area. Namely, E-reference (electronic reference), Digital Reference (DR), Virtual Reference (VR) and Reference at a Distance (RAD) are used interchangeably in the professional literature.

The growth of online reference services is undoubtfully the most significant development over the past decade. Such services has developed from asynchronous electronic digital reference using email or web forms to synchronous live or virtual reference using chat technology, videoconferencing, instant messaging or social media. E-reference services are very often provided in collaboration and in partnership.

Using e-reference is convenient because it saves the time for users, and the Internet is generally cheaper than a telephone. Reference at distance provides the user with a degree of anonymity or at least minimises any embarrassment that they might feel in a face to face reference interview. It is also a free service. For librarians it lacks feedback, they are addressed for information help by the unknown user, with unfamiliar information needs.

Provision of E-reference at the National and University Library in Zagreb
The NUL provides the tired information services separating directional and simple queries from complex questions for walk-in users. Comparison of statistical data for e-reference and subject searches for walk-in users indicates a minor reduction of subject searches done by librarians for walk-in users since 2011, and a steady grow of e-reference services.

Many libraries have experimented with different reference delivery models when introducing e-reference services. In 2004 the NUL started to develop an effective library portal to act as the front end of the service, provided a wireless network, set up the Croatian digital archive, launched several digitization projects of newspapers, journals and dissertations, and opened the Facebook profile in 2010, along with Twitter, Pinterest and Library blog in 2012.

E-reference service Ask Librarian (QuestionPoint) was introduced at NUL in March 2005. Since 2013 e-reference services are provided using home - made application. From its beginning, the number of reference question was growing - almost doubled every year. E-reference service permits creation of clearer delineation of responsibility based on 3-tier mode: level 1 - minimum human intervention- FAQ; level 2 paraprofessional staff; level 3; librarians, subject specialist and experts. The service at NUL was supported by the network of subject specialist within and some outside the institution.
The Research

As an administrator of QP services I have applied a structured observation of questions received at NUL in 9 months of 2012. Observation, as a method, is particularly suitable for observing the use of electronic services because precise quantitative or qualitative instruments for evaluating them are still in the process of formation. In 2012, users have sent 1,471 questions by QuestionPoint application.

In order to identify practices of user behaviours and types of questions, I analysed question transcripts applying the different reference delivery models; The Warner Model – of categorising questions at four levels and Meserve et. al., (2009) and Whitson (1995) who propose five types of information service (basic, technical, broking, consultation and instruction). Those classifications are all used to analyse service demand and assess staffing needs, although the reality of providing timely help in multi-use both physical and digital environments separating the duties is unworkable. The questions in QP AskLibrarian were coded using 5 levels of content analysis in order to acquire user input. The method is effective and simple for evaluating the effectiveness of services, for counting questions by difficulty and determining who can best answer aiming at increasing the efficiency of the reference librarians.

Some verbatim were selected as quotes to support the type and style of questions (formal structure, defining the information need, the length of questions…). They will be presented on poster.

Findings

In order to encourage librarians – as service providers to think about service in the larger context I have adopted Evans and Heft’s (Introduction to Technical Services, 4) view of service as bibliographic, physical and intellectual access to library materials. Access and assistance for gaining access are the essence of library and information services because they represent the fundamental requirements that must be fulfilled before any benefits can be derived from library’s efforts, such as support of education, intellectual enlightenment, or knowledge. Questions about the availability of resources and assistance in finding the relevant resources were the most common topics. They are predominant in a generic question level matrix.

Majority questions, 65 % were questions of the 3rd level that need consultation, 30% were connected to bibliographic instruction, 5% were non-resource oriented questions, only 0,5% skill-based questions and 0,95% demanded strategy based instruction.

The ratio of questions received and the questions answered was rather low (45%). This poor score indicates a need of staff training, improving the organization and developing service quality guidelines. Whitlach (2000), RUSA reference guidelines (2000) and ISO TR/ 28118 (2009) state that National libraries should assess both speed and accuracy of responses when evaluating their reference services. The score was in favour only for accuracy of answers.

Discussion

The NUL has to set up its own evaluation framework, because it is not an exception and it needs repeated customers to survive. We witness that users tend to be loyal only as long as they are satisfied with the sense of quality of service provision.

The quality guidelines should address the quality measures as proposed by Novotny, (2011) and performance indicators, as indicated in international standards and guidelines in order to be comparable and reach the benchmarks.

This research was focused on gathering information about how well the service has met the goals of accessible, timely and reliable information.

Conclusion

Librarians and library services must understand their users to provide systems that better meet their information needs. User want librarians to provide needed and specific information quickly and in a variety of formats, expecting courteous service. The information provided must be convenient, authoritative and reliable. Those are the goals which information services at NUL have to fulfill in the future.

In e-reference assessment the most critical are the standards and benchmarks by which to judge the performance. The real problem, as Novotny states, is the inability of professionals to reach a consensus on quality standards.

REFERENCES


Keywords: e-reference services, e-reference questions assessment, Warner model for tiered reference

Curriculum Vitae

Marina Mihalić, PhD in Information Science at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb (Evaluation of Digital Information Services and Resources in Libraries), Master of Information Sciences – Communication Sciences. She works at the National and University Library in Zagreb as a Head of Central Information and Reference Section. Since 2000 to 2007 she was appointed Director of the National Division, deputy director, at NUL, Gabriel-European Library contact person from 1998-2008, Web editor of NUL web pages, administrator of QP. From 2004-2006 she led an EU TEMPUS project A Model of the University Library of Zagreb Library System. Active in National Library Association since 1987: President of the Professional Board 2004-2006, and 2006-2008; President of the Commission for Library Statistics and Performance Indicators in Libraries. Author of 35 articles and several book chapters. She gives workshops and professional training. She was active in many conferences as a speaker and a participant.