

Electronic Reference Services In Nigerian Law Libraries.

By

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Abstract

The paper discussed provision of reference services including collaboration between library users and librarian using a computer-based medium. The services enumerated various media including e-mail, web forms, chat, video conferencing web, customer call centre software, Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP). It also provided an overview of today's reference environment along with data and practical examples from services like "Question Point" (Library of Congress) to demonstrate the importance and effect of understanding audiences appropriately using technology and working cooperatively for libraries in electronic reference.

Introduction

The reference service is one of the services offered traditionally by many academic, special and public libraries. It is as old as the evolution of library of the Gutenberg age. According to William (1974), reference service is "the formalized provision of information in diverse forms by a reference librarian who interposed between the questioner and the available information source". It involves assisting users to find information in recent and past enquiry handling especially using face-to-face interaction or interviewing techniques. The transaction is performed by a librarian and a user at a reference desk.. In practice, this service has little relationship to the desk and in actuality, it has no boundaries and can be performed in a myriad of locations.

Reference service is also described as human mediation or as the ability to analyze a research question, apply critical thinking skills to the question, and use information resources through knowledge of how information is organized to find the answer. The reference transaction connects resources to the interaction of the user and the librarian.

Utor (2004) classified four major objectives of reference service, these are:

- i. To assist users;
- ii. To develop the role of the library as an educational institution;
- iii. To help users make best selection of the library from the universe of recorded knowledge; and
- iv. To justify the existence of the library by demonstrating its value to those who support it.

These objectives underlie the rationale and justification for reference services in libraries. The need to rethink about reference

transactions in libraries has come largely due to the new technology.

Having learned the use of new technologies and databases the reference librarians have to teach the users the new information technologies apart from their busy schedule. The growth of law collection in the twentieth century has been reflected in the changing role of the law librarian from a mere custodian of law books to an information specialist organizing and coordinating research activities concerned with law. The law librarian therefore participates actively in informing legal practitioners, research scholars and law students about recent laws, Acts as well as resources and services in the law library. This statement may be corroborated by what Henke (1980) who wrote;

"The role of a legal information centre is vital because the missions of its users are essential in the civil and criminal matters of interest in society. Without law, there would be no order, without well-organized readily accessible legal information, ruling executive council, legislative, the judges, lawyers, and the regulators will be severely impeded in their activities".

Gorman (2000) summarizes the eight central values of librarianship as stewardship; service; intellectual freedom; literacy and learning; equity of access to recorded knowledge and information; privacy; and democracy. Against this backdrop, libraries encounter wave after wave of technological innovations, each offering new options, features, opportunities and potential distraction. Libraries face the ongoing and sometimes paradoxical challenges of keeping up with the implementation of the new technologies, and maintaining a

perspective on the technologies in relation to libraries' work and core values.

Jane (2002) sums up the challenge of providing reference services in an increasingly electronic environment in this way. "All professions and sectors must pay greater attention to how ever-increasing connectivity and the digitization of resources are affecting their work, their professions and the communities they serve". To this end, it become critical for law libraries to understand the current technological landscape and to have an articulate vision of the customers or patrons they intend to serve. Without this clarity, technology-rather than vision and needs may end-up becoming the driving change. Abid, (2002), observed it is now common to find reference resources such as dictionaries, encyclopedia gazette and guides in electronic form. This has posed challenges for library and information services all over the globe, many of which have had to expand their services to accommodate the new trend.

Katz (1997) categorized reference resource into five categories. They include encyclopedias; dictionaries; yearbooks; handbooks; and biographical and geographical sources. The weakness of the above submission is that information technology and audiovisual resources, which have revolutionized reference information provision, were left out. In the light of the above shortcoming, this study focuses on the growth, challenges, and the future of electronic services in Nigerian law libraries.

Developing Electronic Referencing In Law Libraries In Nigeria

Considering the evolution of libraries in an international standard, it is evident that reference services have played a substantially larger role in the developed countries such as Anglo-American or Scandinavian countries than in the less developed countries such as Nigeria.

Askey (2001) ascribed the superiority of American Libraries over German libraries to the following two facts:

The first of these is the lack, in Germany, of reference librarians of the type commonly found in the United State. This combination of reference training and subject expertise, a common element of reference desks in the United State, is what distinguishes library service of the developing countries model. Secondly, American libraries are service-oriented, while German libraries are collection-centered. In a broader perspective,

American libraries, because of their continued funding from the state, or sponsoring institution, have evolved into organizations constantly looking for novel ways to serve the user populations.

Askey has well described a situation that is found in most developing countries especially, Nigeria. There have been signs now that Nigerian libraries have been trying to improve their service mentality and some even the quality of their reference services.

Besides, there is the issue of the internet and the rising information society which have modified users' habits and the expectations of libraries in Nigeria. They have to meet these demands if they don't want to be marginalized. The effective use of a library depends on how it organizes its activities. Morse (1968) wrote that modern libraries certainly cannot be operated as though they are passive repository for printed materials. A library set-up must be sure that majority of its users can find their way to the items of information they need with minimum delay and frustration

Forms of Electronic Reference Services

Electronic reference services otherwise called "Digital reference" or "Virtual reference" or "Ask A Services" which could also mean "Ask an Expert" are the Internet-based question and answer services which connect users with experts in a variety of subject areas such as law. Due to the new dimensions in technology, different forms of electronic reference services have been developed in the last two decades. All of them possess their own strengths and weaknesses but they all have the advantages that patrons are able to use their library's reference services without physically having to enter the library buildings. They also don't have to keep to any opening hours.

Rosch (2003) listed the following forms of electronic reference services: E-mail Reference, Web forms, Chat reference, Web contact centre, Voice over Internet protocol (VoIP), Video conferencing and digital robots.

An electronic reference transaction will usually include the following elements:

- i. The user;
- ii. The inter-face/web form, E-mail, chat, video etc;
- iii. The electronic resources –(including electronic CD-based resources, web resources, local digitized material etc) as well as print resources;
- iv. The information professional.

(i) **E-mail**

This is a major format for online information delivery. E-mail reference services come in two basic varieties: basic E-mail and web forms. The common practice for basic e-mail services involves an e-mail address specially designated for the reference or information service e.g. <http://www.nials.gov.ng>, libref@publibrary.gv.uk) etc. Users can either click directly on the e-mail address on the library web page which activates e-mail software or send a message to the e-mail address. E-mail improves the accessibility and scope of law libraries inquiries in a particular subject like the law which can be stored easily and effortlessly for future use. Libraries offering basic E-mail reference services usually provide an E-mail address (in the form of a link) on their website to which users can send a query or question. All that the user is required to do is to click on the link which automatically launches the user's E-mail software, Microsoft outlook. The user then types out their question and clicks on the send button.

E-mail is the most popular form of communication of user's perspectives for the following reasons:

- i. It is widely available;
- ii. It does not require extra software;
- iii. It is relatively non-threatening and non-intrusive transaction;
- iv. The question can be plain by stated without the need to respond to what users would consider to be extraneous questions.

According to Kadiri (1994) "law libraries are known for effective library services and have always been guided by the principle of the right book or information to right reader and at the right time". Therefore, a working knowledge of E-mail reference service would meet the demand and satisfaction of a law reader in terms of need and importance. It is important to note that, E-mail as a method of delivering information has remained quite popular; especially in developing countries where connectivity and the high cost of chat technologies make it extremely difficult for libraries to embark on such ventures. Thus, many libraries in the developing world, Nigeria inclusive, are yet to expand their services to accommodate this new trend even though E-mail based services have been in existence for over a decade.

(ii) **Web Forms**

Web forms transaction can be initiated from a designated web site, where users must respond

to specific queries in addition to asking their questions. In order to send the form, which will usually be received by the library in the form of e-mail, users must click on a button specifically designated for that purpose.

Web forms can be useful to librarians and users alike in that they provide a structural format for asking questions. Librarians not only can guide users in framing questions, but also gather information important for service evaluation. This method is favoured over the ordinary E-mail reference because it relies on the ability of the user to describe what he or she wants. The structured method minimizes miscommunication and misunderstanding on the part of both the librarian and the user. Web form of referencing will provide the legal practitioners, researchers, and law students with a means of referencing legal literature in their field on current and periodic basis. No wonder Bagley, (1978) suggested the use of computer as an answer to retrieval of problems in law libraries. Alabi, (1988) on the other hand, is of the opinion that, of the equipment represented by modern technology, the one with greatest potential is the electronic data processing equipment, specifically called the computer. Law Libraries in Nigeria therefore are in the process of transition by implementing electronic referencing in their operations.

Form Design And Use

Designing a form to send to the user can make it easier for the librarian to understand a query and to ascertain sufficient information to respond to the user. The information requested in the form can include:-

- i. Personal data – name and E-mail address; other possibilities include address, phone number, fax number, rank/occupation.
- ii. Subject – describe in sentence or in keyword form, the purpose of the request, (for example, a term paper, thesis, seminar date, any other requirements such as languages, dates of the material, geographical locations, and formats of material.

Form For Recording E-Mail Requests

Name
Address
Request
Purpose of Request
Sources Checked
Special Requirement
Date

(iii) **Chat Reference or Real Time Reference or Live Reference**

The Chat Reference Technologies started towards the end of the 1990s in the United States libraries. It allows for live interaction between the user and the reference librarian in real time over the Internet. That is, it is where librarians and users can 'speak' to each other in real time on the Internet using special text-based software. The transaction involves a split web screen, librarians can call up web pages or other electronic reference where the required information can be found. Although chat reference is associated with the 24/7-service model, this level of service is often impossible for single libraries to implement. Usually, the service will be offered at specifically designated times throughout the working day. The 24/7service model is easily delivered through collaborative services.

It is difficult to answer research questions by chat and it is also impossible to transmit documents like printed statistics and tables etc. The main disadvantage of chat reference is that it restricts the amount of information that can be sent back forth. In addition, it does not allow for non-verbal communication between the user and librarian. Sometimes an impatient user may log off before the librarian had chance to provide the information.

(iv) **Web Contact Centers:** It provides a variety of interactive cooperation between reference librarians and patrons. such services include, browsing, file transfers, escorting etc. Web Contact Centers afford users the opportunity to choose from any of the above mentioned electronic reference categories i.e. E-mail web form, or chat depending on individual needs. This software does not allow for instant messaging.

(v) **Video Conference**

This tool had its origin in the middle of 1990's. This form of electronic reference includes the visual element, which may be an antidote to the communications problems inherent in the more text-based services. Librarians and users are able to use both text and speech for reference transactions. Instead of a window for the textual exchange; there is a window in which librarians and users can see each other while conducting a face-to-face interview. Web or other electronic sources can be 'be pushed' to users via another window. This technology provides distance learning, as well as research and reference applications. It requires additional hardware requirements.

(vi) **Voice Over Internet Protocol (VoIP)** – It enables the user to make telephone calls to

other Internet applications. That is, it accepts voice only instead of typing. It's major advantage is that it improves and speeds up Internet communication. The following Web Contact Centres offer VOIP; click care (<http://www.clickandcare.Com>), Live Helper <http://www.Wehelper.Com> and live person <http://www.Live.person.com>

(vii) **Digital Reference Robot** use artificial intelligence to respond to questions. This technology works through software that searches databases of questions and answers, otherwise known as knowledge bases.

The above forms of electronic references have individual advantages and disadvantages. They cannot be substituted for each other. Looking at these electronic references described above one may ask which one is desirable? This depends on a number of factors, such as the type of library (special, academic, or public library), the dominating Question types received by the reference librarian and the information habits of a library's specific patrons. In Nigeria law libraries; electronic references are yet to be provided, due to the archaic nature of librarianship services provided. Nevertheless due to the presence of Internet, political pressure due to changes in global structure as well as the need to adapt to new societal requirements, Nigerian law libraries have begun to increase the value of reference services. In the late nineties, it was discovered that E- mail was useful not only for the communication between librarians but also to improve contact between librarians and patrons. Over time, libraries in the cities such as Lagos Ibadan, Enugu, Jos, and Abuja have created websites (nails.ng.com) and provide E-mail services. However, this cannot be considered as organized form of Electronic

Reference service.

At present, e-mail is regarded as an additional way to communicate with users. It is treated in the same way as letter or fax .The e-mail addresses offered have the same status as the technical facilities of a telephone connection. No precaution is taken to take into account the special features of the new medium to fully exploit its potential. E-mail received were often answered sporadically depending on other work loads at hand. The law librarians in Nigeria are yet have e-mail addresses dedicated to reference purposes only.

These kinds of e-reference facilities characterized by the use of technology and channels of communication are considerably facilitated by digital media and the Internet. In order to utilize these facilities to better the

reference services, some libraries have merged together in the United States to provide cooperative reference services. Harkonen (2003). The most important and probably the best of these the 'Question point' operated by the Library of Congress and OCLC. These facilities should be available to law students, legal practitioners, academics as well as judges.

Omekluwu (2005) highlighted the need to keep abreast of professional views and developments. These are vital to researchers. Online magazine and journals are among the scholarly articles published in web journals of legal education. Some are free, others by subscription, while yet others make their tables of content and abstracts available as public domain documents. An example of such web address include:

www.lawindiana.edu/law <http://www.lawcornel.ed/journals>

Examples o E- Reference Services.

(a) The Library of Congress Global Reference network i.e <http://www.loc.gov/rr/digiref>

The Library of Congress has set-up the Global Reference Network (GRN). It is a collection of libraries and librarians who bring their professional experience to bear on such issues as electronic reference.

Question Point is a service that was developed by the Library of Congress Public Services Collection Directorate and the OCLC online computer library certain and Dublin, Ohio. "It is set-up to respond, track and manage reference questions from patrons via the web". Omowunmi (2003).

(b) San Francisco Public Library Reference Service

Info@sfpl.lib.ca.us

The INFO library's E-mail reference services answers specific and ready reference questions. The appropriate questions are those that can be answered with short factual responses. In addition, INFO provides comprehensive or lengthy bibliographies.

(c) Electronic Access To Resources In Libraries (Earl) Of The United Kingdom (www.earl.org.uk).

This is a consortium of Public Library Network known as 'Ask a Librarian'. This was launched in 1997 as a national reference service. About forty libraries answer the questions posed on this service. Not less than twenty questions are received per day by this service mostly from the residents and from other countries including Singapore, the United States and Australia.

(d) The Redwood City Public Library relinfo@pls.lib.ca.us

On this service, users can ask the reference question and receive an answer by E-mail, phone, fax or mail. Users can order photocopies of articles via books on inter library loan. A fee of US\$15 is attached to photocopy request and US\$2to the inter library loan request.

(e) Enquiring Reference Service Of The British Council, Nigeria <http://www.britishcouncil.org/nigeria>

The 'Enquiry Service' is the reference services of the British Council's Library. It is situated to provide information and learning centres about the United Kingdom and education training services. It provides access to databases such as ERIC and Medline search services. There are seven service point centers across Nigeria to cater for students and researchers seeking bibliographic information and abstracts for theses and dissertations. Thus, lawyers, students and researchers may want to obtain abstracts and photocopies of the documents from the British Library supply centre in United Kingdom using this service.

Target Audience For Global Electronic Reference (GER)

The goal of a library's electronic reference is to define critically the target audience and understand the context and condition of those using an electronic reference service. By considering users point of view, libraries can shape technology systems better and define their own service offerings more clearly.

The users of GER

According to Nua's survey (2002), there are over 600 million users on the internet (see Table 1: How many online)

Table 1 How Many Online (In Millions)

World Total	605.60
Africa	6.31
Asia/Pacific	187.24
Europe	190.91
Middle East	5.12
Canada & United States Of America	82.67
Latin America	33.35

These numbers provide a qualitative view of the potential global audience for libraries providing services through the Internet and carry the implications in terms of electronic reference practice and research. Practice and research areas include the need to understand the technology used by these users, the nature of the reference services provided and the

models for collaboration by libraries globally to meet the needs of this shared audience.

Problems o Electronic Reference

The problems of electronic reference are as many as the different forms discussed above. For example, the problems affecting 'chat reference' is different from 'web form' and also different from 'web contact centre'. Generally, the problems include:

Infrastructural facilities – For IT to function effectively require the existence of certain infrastructure, such as;

- i. An adequate and reliable supply of electricity which is in short supply in Nigeria;
- ii. A good telecommunication infrastructure such as the GSM;
- iii. Qualified technical expertise to maintain the equipment; and
- iv. Literate population.

Costs – The building IT-based system could be expensive and requires huge capital out lay. The cost of equipment and installations do militate against acquisition of I.T in Nigeria. In addition, the subscription to host databases such Lexis, Nexis can be very costly. For example the cost of installing CD-ROM suites ranges between 4000 to 5,600 US Dollars. Likewise the cost of searching online can be beyond the reach of average library patrons.

Conclusion

As more and more people have access to the World Wide Web, demand for instant services on a 24/7 will be a challenge for law libraries in Nigeria to experiment and develop interactive software that will provide electronic reference services similar to the face-to-face interaction.

In order to gain were knowledge and to improve the learning process, Law Libraries should organize exchange of experience fora with those who already provide reference services by E-mail, web form or chat. Perhaps the Nigerian Law Libraries Association and the National Library of Nigeria could organize a conference/workshop tap the experiences of digital/virtual reference librarians involved in the project. A study on the evaluation of reference services in law libraries in Nigeria could be carried out with the view to determine how to forge ahead.

Much would be gained if these two umbrella bodies could embark on such giant stride. Nigeria law libraries should create a discussion list as a means of exchanging information. This will boost and improve their reputation in the country. The libraries should not hesitate any longer to adopt the model of experiences

from abroad such as by the Anglo-American or Scandinavian libraries with regards to reference and virtual reference services. This enhance information acquisition and usage through E-reference services in the Nigeria law libraries.

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