What is Reference Good For?

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“[Reference] has become an indispensable public service because it saves the money of the individual...and by furnishing skilled bibliographical aid in the use of reference materials it saves the time of busy people and ensures possession of facts which by themselves they could not obtain.”


**reference**

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**why is mediation necessary?**

lots of stuff
hard to find (choose, understand, use, evaluate,…)  
**how are these changing?**
more stuff, more kinds of stuff
easier to find…and harder
nothing new on either count

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**what we do**

examine the information needs of our communities and individuals
survey and understand the *information environment*
device, evaluate, plan, manage and refine the most efficient and effective ways of meeting those needs or else

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**what is “reference”?**

“…readers in popular libraries need a great deal of assistance…this is particularly needed by persons unused to handling books or conducting investigations.”

Samuel Green *Library Journal* 1 (1876)

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**what is “reference”?**

“Reference work includes the direct, personal aid within a library to persons in search of information for whatever purpose, and also various library activities especially aimed at making information as easily available as possible.”

Margaret Hutchins *Introduction to Reference Work* (1944)

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**what is reference for?**

a better question
the circumstances which gave rise to it
increased number, variety of information resources
increase in complexity of those resources
hence, increased difficulty in finding resources, information within increase in number & diversity of people using libraries; wider range of needs, enquiries, sophistication in searching
all things we could say about today
reference is in transition

as the information environment changes

§ continually evolving technologies, allowing/fostering
  increased self-investigation, sharing, interaction
§ mobile/cloud/social nexus
§ constrained $, competitive and volatile information
  marketplace (publisher and consumer)
§ perceptions of libraries and librarians, increasing
  marginalization
§ changes in society

what is reference for? (ca1950)

a new technology that widens access to the library
  telephone
  important v. less important questions, people
  centralized or dispersed?
  different staffing models?
  dedicated information resources?
  policies?
  different levels of service?
  service reflects contexts (tech, social, econ, professional)

what we are best at

our traditional strengths

  service orientation
  determining needs & understanding context
  multiple modes of searching
  evaluation of resources
  when to stop
  education about the process
  tool-making

what we are best at

our traditional strengths in a modern context

  service orientation where, when
  determining needs & understanding context distributed
  multiple modes of searching beyond Google & Wikipedia,
    sophistication
  evaluation of resources tweets
  when to stop even more critical
  education about the process they have to know what we do
  tool-making apps, videos, widgets, LibGuides

secret weapons

interview (esp in tech mediated domains), embed/liaison
  print, in the short/medium run?
knowledge of stuff, sources (finding, evaluation)
  memory and imagination (wisdom)
areas where we can shine (readers adv/guidance, research
  support, depth & quality)
search, how to make a system sit up and beg us
stuff comes and goes; method over material

changes

searching changes (but many things persist)
services change (tho basics with great slowness)
stuff changes (more, more kinds, genres rarely evaporate cf
  morph, but individual sources & items sometimes do)

  memory and imagination
  content over containers
  method over materials
components of professional work

knowing what you’re looking for, and what to look for
knowing stuff—where to look
knowing how to search stuff, and for stuff, and when you’ve
found it, or aren’t going to
service basics (understanding needs, evaluation,
technology, ethics & guidelines, etc)
plus advice, evaluation, guidance, instruction,
personalization (within community)
in the contemporary context…whither the middleman?

thriving middlemen

which ones are thriving, and why?
providing additional, high-level, personal service
good value
niche, unique
community building
taste-making

reference

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