New Technologies and Reference Services

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Bill Katz, ed.
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In this volume Bill Katz presents nine articles on various aspects of library reference service in the new world of information technology. Today's reference librarian, according to Katz, has the job of ensuring that information seekers are "satisfied with the answers those technologies call up." That's a tall order indeed, given the bewildering array of electronic resources available and the various skills librarians need to unlock their secrets. Search engines, at this point in their evolution, are rather blunt instruments that place heavy demands on a librarian's analytical abilities. Moreover, sometimes the best source is a traditional printed one, not an electronic substitute. The trick, as always, is knowing where and how to seek out information that suits a client's needs.

As you might expect, these authors regard libraries and librarians as key players in the digital information environment. Most people agree that books will survive, although print will give way to electronic publication in the production of many reference works. Even as that trend continues, and affects scholarly publication in general, the problems of archiving, access, and technological migration will multiply and permutate. All library users — students, faculty, and the general public — face the challenge of learning to use information technology effectively. In these circumstances the teaching role of librarians is indeed likely to grow.

A consensus appears to exist on what an "information literate" individual needs to know (p. 47), but there's little agreement on how to achieve the desired result. Should there be required courses, or is it more effective to teach electronic research skills in the context of specific disciplines? Opinions inevitably differ on the question of which strategy proves more effective. It comes down to the relationship between the library staff and the teaching faculty, and the mutual respect that has to precede successful collaboration among them. The College Librarian model at Virginia Tech, described by Jane E. Schillie et al. (pages 71–78), offers one interesting possibility. The interaction among librarians and teaching faculty seems to have produced a useful synergy.

The essays in Katz's book don't share a strong thematic link but rather examine the reference landscape from several angles and altitudes, ranging from the view at 30,000 feet to life at the library's reference desk. The authors give the impression that reference service in many academic libraries is in a state of flux. No one can see just how current trends will develop nor, indeed, whether librarians can ever again claim mastery over territory they once ruled: the reference desk. The library nevertheless remains the central place on campus where research support is most readily available to all who need it.

Everyone in academe should ponder the librarians' dilemma: how to ensure that clients obtain the best results from a comprehensive search of relevant sources, both printed and digital. Skilful exploitation of electronic resources is the key to a satisfactory outcome and the reference librarian's chief contribution to the research process. Libraries are pioneers among institutions grappling with information technology. As they go, so goes the universe of scholarly communication. *e*

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