

Old borders, new borders, bridges, and new relationships

Transforming academic reference service

by James Rettig

Consider a map of Europe and the Middle East in 1914 at the start of World War I. It depicts the United Kingdom, France, Belgium, Switzerland, Italy, and Germany; it also depicts Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire, and Serbia. Next consider a map of that same territory in 1946, after two world wars. Gone are Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire, and Serbia; new to it are Ireland, Yugoslavia, Austria, and Hungary; Germany's and Poland's borders have been redrawn. Borders may have changed, but the importance of borders remained.

Similarly, in recent decades borders in academic reference service have changed; yet the importance of borders remains. Borders are rarely as absolute as the Berlin Wall that once separated West Berlin from East Berlin. As well as being changeable, most borders are permeable or can be bridged.

Old borders

The borders affecting reference service were once obvious and easy to identify. Consider the situation 30 years ago. Students and faculty in need of reference service generally went to their campus library to use resources in its print collections to satisfy their information needs. Beyond the informal boundary of the library building, telephone calls, visits to other (usually local) libraries, and hit-or-miss interlibrary

loan supplemented visits to the campus library. Then the universe of information sources available to reference librarians was almost exclusively printed resources, especially indexes, abstracting services, and reference books. The reference desk—often large and long, some of them formidable and even forbidding—established a distinct spatial border between reference librarians and their users.

When the early online databases from providers such as DIALOG and BRS established themselves, their arcane search commands requiring dot-dot prefixes or imbedded slashes established a boundary between the expert searcher and the end user, even when the two worked collaboratively side-by-side as they watched citations scroll on thermal paper from a Texas Instruments Silent 700 300-baud portable terminal with an acoustical coupler for a phone handset.

Within the profession, a long, vexing, and ultimately unproductive debate about the proper role of reference has pitted "information" against "instruction" as mutually exclusive modes of service. Adherents of each position erected formidable defensive fences around their respective positions, firmly resting on conviction.

Copyright law, in its intent to balance the interests of creators of intellectual property with the public good and the public's use of

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intellectual property, has long formed a boundary of varying strength between librarians and publishers. In the print-dominated era, publishers and librarians were usually able to come to agreement, or at least grudging acquiescence, to guidelines for responsible use of intellectual property in library services such as interlibrary loan and course reserves.

New borders

Fast forward to 2002. Information technology has transformed reference borders as dramatically as the last century's world wars transformed national borders.

The Web, of course, has all but rendered the geographic borders of print and in-person reference service obsolete. Today students and faculty rely more and more on Web-based resources offered by a wide range of providers. They may use their institution's homepage as a starting point, but their destination and source of information may be the Web site of another institution's library, a scholarly society, a government agency, a not-for-profit advocacy group, a corporation, or some other information provider. The physical geography of a campus no longer gives the library de facto centrality as an information provider to a particular community.

The library as a place for obtaining reference service was irrefutably important in the pre-online era because of the integral collaborative relationship between a person with a query and a reference librarian whose knowledge of the resources in the print collection could satisfy that person's needs. End-user access to academic databases—many of them supplanting their print precursors and other new creations designed to capitalize on the online medium—has diminished this once significant boundary. First e-mail reference, then online interactive chat reference have further faded it.

High tech and high touch have not always gone hand-in-hand. Remote access to databases has rarely been accompanied by easily accessible assistance from a reference librarian. "Chat reference" offers promise to integrate high-tech and high-touch approaches to reference service. However an unintended consequence may be an intensification of the growing border separating the ways in which print information resources and electronic resources are used.

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An examination of transcripts of chat reference transactions shows that incorporation of information from a print resource into one of these transactions is a rarity. Library users are probably not conscious of this boundary between electronic media and books, microforms, sound recordings, videos, sheet music, CD-ROMs, etc.

A recent research study conducted by the Pew Internet and American Life project reveals that "Nearly three-quarters (73%) of college students said they use the Internet more than the library, while only 9% said they use the library more than the Internet for Information searching."¹ In other words, they miss out on a lot of good information.

Even if most aren't conscious of the Web-print boundary, students' collective behavior in their Web-first-and-last habits affirms it. The rise of this border rightfully worries librarians. We know that a significant portion of current academic publishing, especially publishing of monographic reference works, continues to rely on print as its distribution medium. Older information resides in other media. This student preference for online and its immediacy and convenience demonstrates how untenable the border separating "information" from "instruction" is today (if it ever had legitimacy).

Along with all of the information available at their fingertips through their computers and the Web, library users can benefit from being introduced through any mode of reference service to the broad realm of information resources beyond the Web and from being instructed about those resources' value to their work.

In the Pew study, "students doing academic-related work made use of commercial search engines rather than university and library Web sites."² Even within the intensively interconnected Web, a boundary analogous to the Web-print boundary has arisen. That border separates the vast free Web from authori-

tative, scholarly licensed databases. Google doesn't link students to the latter.

Robert Frost observed that "good fences make good neighbors," a statement laden with poetic ambiguity. What makes a fence or a border good, particularly in reference service? Another way of posing the question is: How, despite borders, can we guide the ongoing transformation of academic reference service so that it supports to the fullest possible measure our institutions' collective mission of teaching, learning, and research?

The interrelated processes of teaching, learning, and research are complex. However all of them depend at least in part upon the availability of information, the quality of the available information, and the ease with which students and faculty can retrieve and select relevant information. Clearly, academic libraries and their reference services have an integral role in fulfilling this mission. In our current environment bridges are as important as borders.

As Gloria E. Andzaldúa has observed, "Bridges are thresholds to other realities,"³ and to new relationships. The challenge to reference today is to discern existing and developing boundaries and to bridge these through new relationships with those whom we serve.

Creating bridges

Some library users continue to visit a library facility for reference service. Nevertheless, a reference desk is no longer a given in academic libraries. Some libraries have eliminated them; others have merged them into multipurpose service points; and many more have moved away from built-in desks suitable for a judge's bench to smaller furniture that implies a welcoming rather than an intimidating message. Through the consolidation of service points, libraries themselves have eliminated internal borders, thereby cultivating a new relationship with their clientele.

Without sinking into the quagmire of faculty status for academic librarians, it is safe to say that a border of some sort between faculty and librarians is more common than not. By transcending the archaic rigid information-instruction debate in favor of the relevant, pliable movement to infuse information fluency skills and concepts into college curricula, librarians at many colleges and universities are bridging the librarian-faculty border. They are

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forming constructive partnerships with faculty for the benefit of students.

The benefits are both immediate (i.e., students learn skills and concepts applicable to the work in a particular course or discipline) and long-term (i.e., they learn skills and concepts that can be generalized in solving information-dependent problems throughout their lives).

These relationships, as valuable as they are to all parties, usually require persistence, commitment, and zeal on the part of librarians. Creating other needed bridges and relationships may be even more challenging. A successful and seamless way of integrating print and electronic information resources will also require creativity. There is no self-evident bridge that crosses this border to create a synergistic relationship among library users and the full range of information media. Success in information fluency efforts will increase the possibility of success in this effort.

In addition, the technologies that now allow a librarian to push a Web page to the other participant in online chat reference would contribute to the solution to this problem if they can make pushing the image of a page from a reference book just as easy. Thereby high tech, old tech, and high touch could come together to further high-quality reference service. A relationship between librarians and vendors of chat reference systems is developing; librarians should do all they can to strengthen it and influence the development of these increasingly important products.

Integrating the free Web and licensed databases may be just as difficult as integrating information media. There is no technological or other type of bridge to bring together the best of the free Web and licensed databases into a new relationship. Nevertheless, standards organizations and new product development by integrated library systems vendors point the way.

A border that has definitely changed for the

worse is the border between producers of intellectual property on the one hand and the public interest and rights of users of intellectual property on the other. Between the Sonny Bono Copyright Term Extension Act (PL 105-298) and the Digital Millennium Copyright Act of 1998 (PL 105-304), rights of users have been constricted. A renewed relationship between producers and users of intellectual property, especially intellectual property created and distributed in digital form, seems unlikely, especially given the aggressively adversarial stance of the entertainment conglomerates that have influenced the direction of U.S. copyright law in recent years.

Reference service has always involved bridge building and relationship cultivation among information seekers, librarians, information resources, and producers of information sources. The borders have changed over time. Good relationships can build good bridges across new borders.

(*"ACRL takes up the challenges..." continued from page 787*)

available to the profession and will work to articulate and find funding for projects intended to fill in these gaps. In addition, there will be an effort to create case studies of individual academic and research libraries of all types and sizes to document the effects of the scholarly communication crisis in a concrete and understandable (to the lay public) manner. Once these sets of information are available, ACRL hopes to develop a profile of faculty research in liberal arts colleges, medium-sized and smaller universities, and community colleges.

Regional accrediting agencies will be contacted to determine the extent to which accreditation at some institutions may be affected due to deficiencies in library resources. The findings of this survey will be incorporated in the case studies mentioned above, as appropriate, and will be conveyed to librarians and academic administrators for their use in planning.

Conclusion . . . or a beginning

ACRL has taken a giant step in identifying scholarly communication as an issue requiring the immediate and intense attention of its membership and in providing support for a program officer position. With only two months' experience under my belt, it is already obvious to me that it will be tremendously effective to have someone whose responsibility is fully to

What makes a fence or a border good, particularly in reference service? The benefit of the new borders described above (and others) is that each one of them identifies a challenge we need to work on to assure that reference service meets our users' needs in the current wired world. Each of those challenges calls for a bridge built from new relationships.

Notes

1. Steve Jones et al., "The Internet goes to college: How students are living in the future with today's technology." Pew Internet And American Life Project, 15 September 2002, <http://www.pewinternet.org/reports/toc.asp?Report=71> PDF file, p. 12.
2. Ibid., 13.
3. Gloria E. Andzaldúa, "Beyond Traditional Notions of Identity," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 11 October 2002, sec. 2, B11. ■

pay close attention to these issues on behalf of the ACRL membership.

Most librarians who are concerned about scholarly communication—and that accounts for the vast majority, one would suspect—have multiple responsibilities and are not able to give the time and attention to these questions and concerns that they perhaps would like. A few organizations have devoted all or part of a position to scholarly communication; ARL is one of these. But there are not a sufficient number of library advocates to address all the many and various issues that arise constantly in this world of information that is changing even more rapidly than we had projected.

In the role of program officer, I hope to make ACRL very visible within academia and with our colleague organizations as an association with a clear and distinct focus on scholarly communication issues and with sufficient voice to be heard on this continent and potentially worldwide. The ACRL leadership has provided the groundwork; the Scholarly Communication Committee and discussion group are providing the ongoing support and direction. As the task force originally hoped, their recommendations and subsequent ACRL action will allow ACRL to play a prominent national role in shaping the future of scholarly communication in partnership with other groups. ■

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