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Societal Transformation and Reference  
Services in the Academic Library:  
Theoretical Foundations for  
Re-Envisioning Reference

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## **Societal Transformation and Reference Services in the Academic Library: Theoretical Foundations for Re-Envisioning Reference**

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### **Introduction**

The death of reference has been predicted for a number of years. While library reference service is far from dead, the decline in the number of reference questions is startling. The number of queries in libraries as a whole continues to fall: transactions have declined by 48 percent since 1991 (Kyrillidou and Young 9). In addition, students consistently rank personal attention last out of the 22 core library issues in LibQUAL surveys, coming in just behind instilling confidence in library users (Thompson, Cook, and Kyrillidou). A Pew Internet and American Life survey supports this data, showing that teenagers (whether correctly or incorrectly) already feel confident in their online search skills and thus do not see the need for our services (Fallows). These low-ranking services are associated with reference and instruction, although many other library departments also interact with the public. Personal attention is at the very heart of the reference interview, and the goal of information literacy is to create confident information consumers. To reverse the decline in use of reference services, academic reference librarians must transform their approach.

Many libraries have tackled change in reference services by examining generational differences and technological advances. Millennials (or Generation Y or the Net Generation) have been targeted for surveys, focus groups, and observation in many library studies (Gardner and Eng; Holliday and Li; Breeding; Thomas and McDonald). Librarians have tweaked and prodded technologies to see if they can produce more effective reference service and generate more reference traffic. If librarians are to generate a true reference revolution, however, they must consider transformation that is broader than generational differences or technological advances. Dismissing downward-spiraling reference trends as merely generational effects is irresponsible. Discussion about generational change too often encourages a dismissive, “those kids” mentality. While there are undoubtedly generational issues facing the library, this article highlights opportunities afforded by a more significant change that extends beyond generational issues. Technological change is also important, but technology alone does not hold the solution to increasing use of our services, and reference librarians are not traditionally systems experts. Reference departments often have neither the skill nor the responsibility to make immediate, large-scale technological improvements. Instead of focusing primarily on generational and technological issues, we need to examine the heightened importance of information, the increased demand for online information, and the shifting perceptions of our patrons in a context that takes a much broader view than generational differences or technological advances.

New ideas and experiments in reference services should be based on theories that describe our patrons and their environment. Societal transformation has more immediate relevance to reference services than technological advancement. Serving people is the core mission of the reference department. Theories of societal transformation – specifically information society theory and postmodernism – clarify the changing nature of information and examine the society and culture of the people we serve in academic libraries.

Together, information society theory and postmodernism offer insight about our patrons and provide a theoretical foundation for re-envisioning reference services. Simply put, the information society is a society completely transformed by information and information technologies. Information society theory goes beyond technological advancements and postulates a world that uses and creates information in profound new ways. In one sense, information becomes ubiquitous, but information also becomes commodified and, for those who control it, a source of power. Postmodernism is the cultural landscape of the information society. Postmodernists celebrate differences and relativism, and distrust authority and order. They believe universal truth cannot be attained, for one person's truth will never be valid to everyone. These theories offer obvious challenges to reference service. If information is viewed as power, and expertise and classification schemes are suspect, how should reference services reposition themselves? How can we encourage patrons to use library and reference services in light of their postmodern sensibilities and the ubiquity of information? Information society theory and postmodernism can pinpoint challenges and offer concrete advice for re-envisioning reference services in the academic library, including traditional reference work and formal library instruction.

### **Societal Transformation: The Information Society and the Postmodern**

The information society opens up new opportunities that may allow us to reverse the downward trends in use of reference services. But first we must acknowledge societal transformation and understand its implications. It may seem counter-intuitive to librarians that the movement into the *information* society would draw patrons away from the library, but in a society where so much information is easily available, the library can no longer claim a unique role as the portal to all knowledge. Rather than wait in breathless anticipation for the warm embrace of the coming societal transformation, libraries must transform right along with society or be left behind.

Theories of the information society and postmodernism attempt to explain this transformation. According to Frank Webster, there are many different conceptions of the information society, but similarities exist. The central theme of all information society conceptions is that the flow of information has been transformed and is all-transforming. The information society emerges as advancements in information and communication technologies fundamentally change the way we live, make money, and share and create information. In addition to espousing different perspectives on the information society, theorists debate whether these changes in society constitute a total transformation or a gradual transition. Whether society is changing fundamentally or not, the very emergence of information society theory is a reaction and attempt to explain rapid and broad societal change.

The information society is known by different names: the post-industrial society, the network society, the information age, etc. These names indicate varying conceptions of a society transformed by information. In this article, "information society" is used as an umbrella for all the different conceptions. The interpretation of these theories is also a distillation: definitions that help re-envision reference services in this age are offered, but there is no attempt to give an exhaustive explanation of either information society theory or postmodernism.

The information society is identified by the shift from industry to an information/service-oriented labor market and the prevalence of information communication technologies. The theoretical origins of the information society stem from labor analysis in the mid-20th century. No longer was industrialization the driving force of the markets as it had been since the Industrial Revolution. Daniel Bell used findings of labor analysis to identify this discontinuity and conceptualized the "post-industrial society," in which the information and service markets predominate. Fritz Machlup also recognized the growing importance of information in the economy, when, in the 1950s and 1960s, he identified a trend in labor away from industry and towards information. This shift in the economy signified not only the increased importance and value of information, but also the emergence of a new society.

Information and communication technologies, which speed up the pace and increase the quantity of information sharing, have been described as harbingers of societal development by Dordick and Wang.

According to Webster, some theorists have asserted that “such a [massive] volume of technological innovations must lead to a reconstruction of the social world because its impact is so profound” (Webster 9). In other words, technological developments, such as the Internet, cell phones, and PDAs, have directly and inevitably led to the emergence of the information society.

Information saturates the information society. Perhaps the best example of this is the cable news show: the anchor tells you the news, the graphic or video to the left of her head further explains or represents the story, and news tickers at the bottom provide the day's other headlines and financial market information. Information is thrown at the viewer in every possible way: every inch of the screen is used to convey news. And this information overload is not limited to television. Information society members are surrounded by unsolicited information – from advertisements on billboards and in buses to the flat screen displays and maps in the student center to junk mail and spam. The prevalence of information also makes it easier for library patrons to locate needed information. To find answers to their questions, information society citizens have many options, including desktop access, cell phones, and PDAs. As a result, the library does not have a monopoly on fact finding. Patrons no longer contact the reference desk with simple factual queries because they can locate much of this information on their own, often by consulting the Internet. In addition, because there is so much easily accessible information in the information society, information seekers feel confident without library assistance.

Information society theory raises an interesting question: is the current societal transformation moving us from the Industrial Age and into the Information Age? Not all scholars agree that an entirely new society is emerging; some believe that the changes occurring do not constitute a revolutionary break with industrialization, but are part of a natural progression. Nevertheless, there is agreement that the current importance and prevalence of information is a relatively new development. The trend towards prominence of information may be viewed as revolutionary or evolutionary, but either way scholars agree that information is playing a larger role in shaping society.

Postmodernism, like information society theory, is a complex field with many different conceptions that are too numerous to discuss exhaustively here. Postmodernism is the cultural backdrop for the information society. It can be considered an artistic movement – one that breaks with modernism. Or postmodernism (or postmodernity) can be seen as a larger movement that breaks with modernity and rejects theories of the Enlightenment. This article does not aim to define postmodernism perfectly, but to use aspects of postmodern theory that will help to re-imagine reference services.

Jean-Francois Lyotard examines the cultural dimension of the information society and refers to the “condition of knowledge” as postmodern (xxiii). He roughly defines postmodernism as a rejection of grand narratives and claims it is the cultural equivalent of the post-industrial society (aka the information society). Lyotard believes that there is no universal truth to be discovered; one person's truth does not necessarily hold true for another person. There is no singular truth but only multiple truths. Like Lyotard, David Harvey sees postmodernism as the denial of universal truth and the celebration of differences, fragmentation and “otherness.” Postmodernism offers a worldview that emphasizes the individual and celebrates relativism.

Libraries should be particularly concerned with postmodernism's hostility towards “anything which smacks of arrangements ordered by groups” and “judgments from anyone on high” (Webster 233). Classification schemes are seen as disingenuous in the postmodern view. Not only are the Library of Congress classification numbers imperfect, the entire system is dishonest in the eyes of the postmodernist. The complete world of knowledge will never fit tidily into our fabricated organizational schemes. We are trying to impose the grand narrative of organization on our varied resources. Through its rigid classification system, the library imposes its privileged understanding onto all knowledge and inadvertently creates an image that is decidedly un-postmodern and therefore distasteful to members of the information society. Because they celebrate relativism and reject universal truth, postmodernists also suspect the notion of an expert. How can experts assume to know what is right for all people if there is no body of independent, universal truth from which they manifest their expertise? Librarians must recast

themselves without espousing our expertness, without claiming that we know the only correct way to conduct information seeking.

Societal transformation, as seen in theories of the information society and postmodernism, examines movement not only in labor trends and technological developments, but also in culture. The economy has become more dependent on information, information and communication technologies have become more prevalent, and postmodernism has emerged and flourished in this environment. All of these factors should be considered when rethinking reference and instruction in academic libraries.

## Reference

Traditionally, reference work depends on patrons approaching librarians. Students, faculty, and other users must actively seek reference help. It is much more common now, however, for patrons to seek answers from the Internet, rather than approaching a reference librarian. The web is many things a good library ought to be: confidential, non-judgmental, providing easy access to a wealth of uncensored information, and offering a creative and inspirational space. In the age of the web, reference librarians are less frequently approached with simple reference queries because Google or Wikipedia can often answer such questions not only quickly and effectively, but also comfortably.

Librarians need to avoid the harsh assumption that lazy patrons are simply fleeing the reference desk for easy answers on the Net. If we examine this behavior in context of the information society, the abandonment of the reference desk becomes more than laziness. As one of the transforming technologies of the information society, the Internet has changed the flow of information, and this has undoubtedly affected the information seeking behavior of our patrons. The ubiquity of the Internet has affected not only how our patrons use (or do not use) the library, but also how they conceive of the library and information, and perhaps more importantly, how they conceive of themselves. The library is no longer viewed as the sole keeper of all information. Rather than requesting library assistance or even seeking out library resources, college students typically begin their information searches using a search engine (De Rosa and Cantrell 1-7). Holliday and Li explain that, largely due to the influence of the Internet, students "expect to be independent in the [research] process and do not seek help from librarians" (364). By using the Internet, patrons, especially students, have become convinced that most information is easy to locate and available freely online. And because so many queries can be answered quickly online, patrons feel ashamed if they cannot locate answers on their own. The ease and convenience of the Internet convinces our patrons that they are skilled information seekers. Thus, it is important to examine not only the fact that people do not consider the library as *the* portal to information in the information society but also the reality that patrons judge themselves to be capable information seekers. This, coupled with prevalent postmodern mistrust of the "establishment," can increase reluctance to seek library assistance.

While the Internet boosts students' search confidence, the library often has the opposite effect. Using library resources to obtain satisfactory results requires more finesse than using Internet search engines, and most library systems lack the simplicity and intuitiveness of the online search box. Our libraries, instead of offering simplicity, often feature search tools that can be manipulated to create precise searches. But while librarians see power in our database and catalog options (such as Boolean operators, truncation, and multiple search boxes), patrons see obstructions. And when our self-confident patrons fail in their searches for academic information, they are left feeling ashamed, confused, and, above all, frustrated with the library.

In addition to the frustration that users experience, cumbersome library systems perpetuate the perception that the library and librarians desire to repress information rather than to disseminate it. In the postmodern view, librarianship has "become a discourse of control rather than of liberation" (Muddiman 7). This issue of image and perception is not insignificant given that didactic, institution-imposed control is contemptible in the postmodern information society. Thus, the library offends postmodern sensibilities when it *appears* to hide information. At least symbolically, the library is seen as suppressing what the

information society and postmodernism value most: information. Our opaque library systems are hampering access, resulting in a distasteful, decidedly un-postmodern image of the library. We cannot afford to broadcast this negative symbol of the library in the information society.

Libraries are experimenting with new kinds of catalogs and interfaces that might work well in the information society (for example, faceted catalogs, catalogs with tagging capabilities, and meta search engines). In the meantime, there are many approaches reference librarians can take until these tools reach their full potential and are available to all libraries. Some reference departments are experimenting with popular and free web sites to attract students. These sites include social bookmarking and networking spaces, as well as wikis and blogs. We must reach out to students where they are and be a part of their wired, information-saturated landscape if we are to help them navigate it.

There is some disagreement among librarians concerning these technologies, particularly the library's role in social networking sites and Wikipedia. Many heated listserv discussions have percolated over these two online phenomena. Some librarians consider social networking sites outside the realm of the library. These are social spaces, after all, and does an authority figure like the library really belong in a space such as Facebook? But perhaps the problem is our image rather than our involvement in social networking spaces. While these spaces can be useful for communicating with students, social networking sites can also help us shed the library's stuffy image and cater to postmodern sensibility. Social networking sites offer libraries an online space in which we can interact with members of the information society in a playful, non-authoritarian way.

Wikipedia is a similarly hot issue in the library world. Because this encyclopedia relies on thousands of anonymous contributors to create articles, some librarians have been wary of it. Rather than fighting it, librarians should work with Wikipedia to create a better library image and even increase traffic to our library resources. The University of Washington Libraries has used Wikipedia to locate (or create) articles related to their library's collections and add links to their digital collections (Lally and Dunford). By embedding links to library resources – especially digital collections – in related Wikipedia articles, we can not only increase traffic to library sites but also enrich the information available on Wikipedia.

Understanding patrons' degree of interconnection in their current information environment is only one aspect of necessary change in reference services. Librarians must keep in mind the cultural context of our students, who view the expert with suspicion, when working with patrons at the reference desk. Also, members of the information society are likely to have extensive experience with the web, and we must acknowledge this. A tactic of the reference interview is to ask patrons what strategies they have already used, and this becomes even more important in the information society. Our patrons have been searching online for years, so to assume they know nothing about information seeking is offensive and naïve. Giving these patrons detailed instructions that directly contradict what they have been doing for years is not going to help them or our image. Rather, we must encourage and acknowledge the benefits of experimentation with library tools and demonstrate our appreciation for learning from our patrons' approaches to searching. We must also keep in mind that their online searching experience might differ from ours. In the fragmented postmodern world where diversity and contradictions are celebrated, differences do not make either librarians or patrons wrong. Instead, by pointing out the differences between the search strategies of the librarian and patron, the postmodern citizen can celebrate diversity and appreciate the contradictions encountered in the information seeking process.

Librarians must also be willing to experiment creatively with ways to promote the library and librarians. Libraries can interact playfully online (with social networking sites and wikis), at home in the library building, and in other settings around campus. Reference departments have experimented with roving librarians and combining or dissolving static service desks. In our traditional practice we relied on patrons approaching us, but in order for them to approach they need to know what we offer and what to expect. The reference librarian should play the “non-expert” who provides research help and shares professional knowledge with the patron “in a relational, interdependent, and non-hierarchical manner”

(Stover 292). Rather than acting as experts to whom all patrons should defer, librarians should serve as helpful guides and fellow explorers.

## Instruction

Fostering information literacy among students requires leaning into the chaos of the current information landscape. In a recent Pew Internet survey, leading thinkers revealed grave concerns about the chaotic nature of online information (Anderson and Rainie). While concern is warranted, we cannot allow our fear to prevent us from promoting information literacy. Reference librarians tend to direct people away from chaos and toward our subject-specific databases, our lovingly maintained reference collections, and our carefully-crafted catalogs. While this can no doubt help patrons, especially with their academic research, guiding students away from chaos and to tools to which they will not have lifelong access contradicts the goals of information literacy and undermines mastery of important skills in patrons' lives. Library instruction should help students develop lifelong information literacy skills. Knowing how to use databases will not make you information literate, and avoiding chaos does not help you harness the power of information. Instead of guiding patrons in an open-ended exploration through the universe of information, too often the library plays the part of the overprotective parent. By acknowledging and employing the chaos of the Internet in library instruction, we can encourage information literacy while embracing postmodernism. Information literacy is about exploration, not information control. It is about learning skills and ways of thinking, not particular tools.

We can embrace the chaos of the information universe by adopting new technologies such as social bookmarking, wikis, blogs, and video sharing sites to support our teaching. Students often already know how to use and manipulate these technologies, but they may lack the skills to interpret the information that they retrieve critically. How do people share information? How does the medium change the content? Who will save this information? Is it important? Web-based technologies can be used in activities in class or to spur class discussions based on these questions. Librarians can use Wikipedia in library instruction sessions to initiate discussion and debate over the nature of information, truth, and reality on the web. For example, in an introductory composition class, I collaborated with an instructor to create a lesson plan that uses Wikipedia as a topic selection tool. In order to find a topic for a persuasive paper, students are instructed to search for topics of interest in Wikipedia and explore the discussion behind the encyclopedic entry. Each Wikipedia article includes additional information in the form of a discussion page and an article history page. These pages detail what changes have been made to the article, why these changes have been made, and future questions the article should explore. Students must consider what the discussion sections for their articles reveal not only about their topics, but also about the nature of information on the web. Taking this "meta" view and looking behind the scenes in Wikipedia invites students to think critically about their topic in the context of a familiar website.

By examining technologies patrons often use, we can widen the scope of information literacy beyond library databases and catalogs. Information literacy as a lifelong skill must be integrated into the daily lives of our students. Curriculum-integration of library instruction is useful but remains insufficient. When librarians can also relate information literacy skills to everyday experience and not just academics, students will become truly information literate. For instance, in a class that requires students to research and apply for a scholarship, grant or job, I lead students through a discussion on managing one's online presence. Students are asked to think critically about the information they broadcast online through sites such as Facebook or personal blogs, and consider that this information is available not only to friends, but also possible employers. A variation of this discussion is a "reverse introduction" which works well especially if the librarian has a fairly common name. I start class by giving students my name and asking them to look me up in Google. Then, rather than introduce myself, I let the class introduce me based on the information they find online. The introductions are usually partly accurate and partly laughable. (One class informed me that I was a competitive racquet ball player.) We then launch into a discussion on the nature of searching, search term selection, and online identity.

These are examples of effective library instruction activities that encourage experimentation and playfulness in class. Postmodern students do not appreciate one-size-fits-all instructions. Jason L. Frand suggests encouraging a trial-and-error approach to information seeking (17-18). Today's patrons, especially those familiar with video gaming, are used to jumping in and exploring while learning from their mistakes. Library instruction sessions should facilitate such experimentation and allow for such failures, which can become teachable moments in discussion about what happens and why. While it is tempting to lecture students on all the services and opportunities afforded by the library, this approach does not encourage genuine learning. More effective library instruction allows students to explore, discover, and evaluate resources on their own with guidance from the librarian, the instructor, and their peers. Library instructors need to build on the strengths of the students, helping them expand their search abilities and develop a critical eye. This method suits not only how our information society patrons learn, but also helps the library and librarians to cultivate an image that is more postmodern and less didactic.

## Conclusion

Society is changing and we may be entering a radically new era – the information society. Libraries must examine this societal transformation, which is broader than generational differences or technological developments, and respond to it. Exploring the information society helps to explain downward trends in use of reference services and to identify techniques to reverse these trends. Postmodernism – the cultural side of the information society – can help academic reference and instruction librarians reframe their services to be more attractive to today's patrons. Studying the information society and postmodernism together will help librarians to better understand and serve our patrons. Though we have used technological advancements by creating online catalogs and databases and embracing electronic journals and books, we have failed to adapt and make our ideology and culture more inclusive. Rather, libraries forced the new technologies to fit our old pre-information society conceptions of information and organization. We must adjust our services in reference and instruction to be more accessible to the postmodern information society worldview. To do this, libraries and librarians must be seen as liberating information rather than controlling it.

Libraries should emphasize the values that we share with the information society and postmodernism. Two values in particular seem nicely suited to the library: the importance of information and the celebration of differences. Libraries have long recognized the importance of preserving information, but even more importantly, our primary mission is to disseminate it. Librarians must make patrons aware that library resources are collected in order to share different opinions, different theories, and different truths. Reference services are the frontlines in academic libraries and can help promote common values. Through serving patrons as guides and experimenting with new attitudes and lessons in library instruction, we can recreate the library as the “bibliothèque fantastique:” a playful space in which information is unlimited and no single idea dominates (Radford).

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