



Reference and Resources: The Human Side

by Sara Fine

When librarians make assumptions about their own or their users' behavior and act on those assumptions as though they are true, the reference process and the flow of useful information are impeded. This article presents some assumptions and principles about users' and librarians' behavior in the library.

In the best of all possible worlds, the library is designed for maximum beauty, comfort, efficiency, and use. The collection is comprehensive and current, developed with painstaking care and thoughtful deliberation over a period of many years, constantly weeded of the obsolete and useless, and replenished by the best that comes along. The librarian is skilled in listening and searching, highly specialized yet broadly knowledgeable, experienced, approachable, and committed to service. Technology is the powerful but unobtrusive tool in the hand of the librarian, humming quietly and dependably, quickening and enhancing the flow of thoughts and words and data throughout the system and supporting the activities of the system itself. If human limitations or technological mishaps or external constraints disrupt the process, librarians generally adapt and compensate, quietly working around obstacles and keeping problems invisible to the public. The stage is set for excellence in reference service.

But setting the best possible stage, while a necessary condition, is insufficient for excellence. The best resource collection, the most efficient access to those resources, the most sophisticated delivery system, and the most knowledgeable librarians are still not enough to constitute good reference service. Reference is not just about resources. It is about users, whether they are students or scholars, browsers or borrowers, novices or seasoned researchers; whether they present themselves as purposeful or vague, secure or timid, cool or agitated, hopeful or discouraged, competent or inept—or somewhere in between. Reference is about how users and librarians behave in their respective roles, and about how each responds to the complexities of the other's behavior in their joint information-seeking endeavor. It is this interactive behavior that ulti-

mately makes the reference process happen creatively or happen feebly—or not happen at all.

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While librarians are aware that there is some predictability about the way users behave in libraries, they are less likely to be aware that there is predictability in their own behavior as well. Subtle psychological barriers, those brought to the interaction by the user or imposed unwittingly by the librarian, can impede the transfer of information. Assumptions about the way people and information interact can also inhibit that flow: for example, a tenaciously held assumption by both librarians and users is that *having* information is the same as *using* information. This belief seems innocent enough, but such unexamined assumptions about human behavior and motivation can become self-fulfilling prophecies that restrict the effectiveness of the librarian and inhibit the user from reaching the best result.

This article presents a set of principles, observations, and assumptions about behavior in the library, few of which have been empirically tested. All of these principles have, however, survived the “flagpole” test; they have been run up the flagpole and saluted. Librarians or users, or both, have said of these principles, “Yes, that’s how it is.” In fact, these principles are only confirmation that human beings are imperfect in information-seek-

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ing, as they are in all other activities and enterprises. The real issue is that being aware of the way people *really* behave, not the way we *think* they behave or *pretend* they behave or *wish* they would behave, allows librarians and information professionals to see themselves and their users more clearly. Awareness lets them respond more kindly, interpret more accurately, and perhaps render their methods and encounters with users more effective. These "principles" may draw attention to our own behavior and that of our users as together we navigate the complexity of information service.

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Principles About Users

The Principle of Least Resistance. Librarians and users alike are inclined to select resources that are easily available and accessible rather than those resources that are most relevant to the problem at hand. Availability is not only what exists; it is also the *knowledge* of what exists. Accessibility starts with a knowledge of *where* the information is and how to find it. Availability and accessibility are complex concepts that are sometimes direct and clear, other times confusing and disconcerting. For example, sometimes librarians approach an information inquiry with the belief that if they do not know where to find it, then the information *simply does not exist*.

Librarians as managers of information are inclined to believe that users demand the most popular resources and that responsive librarians must, therefore, exhibit the most frequently used materials in the most accessible places. In fact, the Principle of Least Resistance may be operating; that is, users may simply be making the most use of materials that they can see and reach without bending down or standing on a ladder.

The Principle of Lost Sources. Once the consumer has digested information,

the source of that information is often lost in some memory bank and forgotten. More significantly, the *credibility* of the source may also be forgotten. Most significantly, the *bias* of the source may be forgotten as well. The author heard a story about a university professor who found his daughter reading the *National Inquirer*. The father was appalled at his daughter's taste in reading matter but the daughter assured her father that her reading was for a scholarly purpose, that she was interested in the popularity of the paper and the appeal of its contents in connection with a class project for her sociology course. Several weeks later, during an argument between father and daughter, she quoted "information" from her *Inquirer* reading and presented it to her father as fact. When her father challenged the credibility of the information, the daughter had totally forgotten its source. [Author's note: This story may be apocryphal. I would be glad to furnish its source but I can't remember where I heard the story!]

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The Principle of Compatibility. The degree to which a source is seen as credible and the information as accurate is directly related to whether the information from that source agrees with the user's prior knowledge and bias. When users of information come across new information that negates what they already know, if it denies what they believe to be true, or if it contradicts their non-negotiable values, they will be inclined to reject the information and deny the credibility of its source, even if the source is neutral. "The encyclopedia is wrong," they will say. "You can't believe everything you read," or "The research method used must be flawed." It is human nature to defend what we know; it is an act of intellectual discipline and emotional courage to have an "open mind," to allow one's opinions and values to be changed.

The Saturation Principle. If the user is already saturated with information, additional information will not help in making a decision or aid in solving a problem. The reverse is more likely to result:

the user will become psychologically incapacitated until some balance has been achieved between the amount of information tendered and the person's ability to absorb it.

The Principle of Information Digestion. Information appears to be digestible only after passage through a photocopy machine. Before being photocopied, information is not perceived as belonging to the user. Often the mere act of photocopying is perceived by the user as having made full use of the information. The photocopying act is often perceived by the librarian as a signal that the reference task has been completed. The same principle applies to other acts that are perceived to imply satisfaction or closure; for example, placing the information in a computer file, thereby "owning" it, or walking away from a reference interview with a great quantity of materials, thereby "having" it.

Principles About Librarians

The New York Principle. Here is a fact of human life: no one can live in New York! People who *say* they "live in New York" have, in fact, carved out a small section of the city and established clearly defined boundaries for themselves. Their existence is confined within those invisible lines. So too do many reference librarians tend to carve out boundaries. They establish ritual pathways for answering most reference requests, sticking to those well worn paths regardless of the particular circumstances of the query. According to learning theory, there is a tendency in all of us to follow certain paths that have been successful in the past, even if they are not appropriate to the problem at hand. This principle is related to the common wisdom that the shortest distance between two places is the way you know.

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The more creative New Yorkers will on occasion, and perhaps with some trepidation, venture beyond those self-imposed boundaries and go to the Bronx or make their way to the Cloisters. The more cre-

ative librarians will also on occasion take courage in hand and venture into uncharted territory to find new and different and perhaps even unconventional ways to get there. They may even find a few new ideas along the way.

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Here is an example: In the context of a reference query, a young woman tells the librarian, "My lover has left me. I'm so depressed I can't get on with my life. Reading sometimes helps. Can you suggest something?" The librarian, with confidence and efficiency, turns to her keyboard and with a quick mental calculation pulls up PSYCH LIT, which she then queries for books on depression. Being very conscientious she then pursues MEDLINE with the same term. With the deep satisfaction of having once again done her job well, she hands the user a printout with an excellent bibliography on clinical depression.

The user is first surprised, then confused, and finally disconcerted. She leaves the library with many books, most of them wrong. She had assumed that since she explained the situation, the librarian would understand that "I'm so depressed" really means "I have a broken heart." A better choice for healing a broken heart might have been Fay Weldon's *She Devil!* or something like *Fifty Things to Do While Waiting for your Heart to Heal*. Too bad the librarian was stuck in her own pathway.

The New York principle, whereby a disorganized and confusing universe is reduced to manageable proportions, serves human beings very well in keeping them psychologically sound—for the most part. But sometimes people engage in repetitive behavior even in the face of its failure. Perhaps the only really stupid aspect of human behavior is that when something does not work, we simply do it harder, and expect different results.

The Principle of the Obscure Question. If they do not understand a question, reference librarians tend to

answer a question they *do* understand, the result being a *non sequitur* answer. Similarly, if reference librarians do not know the answer to a given question or where to find it, they will often redefine the question into one they *can* answer. In another form of the same behavior, the librarian will attempt to put a complex question into an easily accessible subject category. This pervasive human tendency can be seen in many areas of life. Consider the frustration of the professor when a student writes an excellent exam paper but the discussion bears no relationship to the question asked. Or reflect on the responses given in an interview by a politician when sensitive areas are scratched. Many reference librarians, like most people, respond to what they think they heard or what they choose to hear. The paradox is that the more complex the query, the less likely the librarian is to try to clarify the problem before offering to "solve" it. And yet we know that the best information that relates to the wrong problem is useless.

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The Instant Gratification Principle. Librarians often believe that they must give users something—anything—to hold in their hands when they leave the library, even if it is not the right thing. Users believe that they must take something away with them lest they hurt the librarian's feelings and will never get any help in the future, have wasted the librarian's time and used up their good will, have wasted their own time in the library, or have demonstrated without any doubt that they are inadequate scholars and now everyone knows it.

The Principle of the Missing Problem. Reference librarians like to believe that their service fills a "need" for information. Yet no one has been able to demonstrate what an "information need" looks or feels like. No manifestations or symptoms have been identified in the psychological or medical literature, so it is unclear whether a "need" is like an itch, a frog in the throat, a rumble in the stomach, a free floating anxiety, or a panic reaction. Perhaps people do not come to libraries for information; perhaps, instead, they

come to solve problems, or to relieve anxiety, or to enhance their lives. In order to provide the response and resources appropriate to solving the problem, the reference librarian needs to understand the problem, or the anxiety, or the way in which a life needs to be enhanced. However, when asked a reference question, the librarian tends to ignore the underlying problem prompting the inquiry. If you asked the user if the librarian was helpful, the user is likely to say, "Yes, he was very kind," or "Yes, she tried very hard."

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Principles Involving Failed Interactions

The Principle of the Encoded Question. To further complicate the previous principles, users have a tendency to disguise the real reference question with a generality, thereby causing the librarian to believe that the "information need" has been expressed when, in fact, it has yet to be identified. The user, in effect, has diagnosed the problem and given the librarian the subject category to search. The result is that the user, the lay person, has told the librarian, the professional, what the treatment should be. The process would be analogous to going to the doctor and asking for penicillin rather than presenting the symptoms.

The Principle of Emotional Investment. Users often have an emotional investment in their reference work that disguises the problem and rejects the solution. This emotional layer that exists beneath the overt behavior may cause the user to reject *information* in favor of *confirmation*. The manifestation of this principle can be observed when the user verbally appreciates the librarian's efforts but rejects the products of the reference search. This confuses the reference librarian who is likely to offer the following interpretation: this user "just does not know *what* he wants."

When engaging in this dynamic, the librarian searches and searches and the user rejects and rejects. The user and the librarian play a game that goes like this:



"Is this what you want?" "Yes, but..." "Then is *this* what you want?" "Yes, but..." The outcome of this game is always the same: a frustrated user facing an irritated librarian, each wondering what is wrong with the other. Sometimes the user plays the game by finally accepting something that is offered, whether it is right or not. The outcome is a frustrated user and a slightly less irritated librarian, both wondering what went wrong between them and why they feel the way they do. The game suggests that the librarian did not stop to find out the nature of the problem before presenting the solution.

The Principle of Denial. All of the above principles can be denied and probably will be. If not denied, they will be ascribed to other librarians, not to one's self.

Principles Involving Scholars

The Principle of Scholarly Inquiry. Librarians often grudgingly accept that sometimes users may not have a clearly defined notion of what they want. At the same time, however, they believe that *certain* users—scholars—do know what they want and know how to ask for it. They also believe that a scholar involved in important research is cool, objective and devoid of emotion. Neither of these beliefs is necessarily true.

The Principle of Conflicting Results. In many areas of research, for every "truth" there is an opposite truth. No question, therefore, can be considered answered and no information considered complete until varying points of view or contradicting research results have been presented, whether the user wants them or not. The way the principle operates, how-

ever, is that sometimes researchers will track down everything that supports their own point of view or their own hypotheses. Then, in a desire to be objective, they conscientiously ferret out information that opposes their own point of view but which is essentially weak! The rigorous scholar and the conscientious librarian, recognizing this tendency in human nature, are very careful to resist it.

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The Principle of Crisis-in-Research. Doing research is often a life crisis for the investigator who may have a high personal stake in the outcome. Librarians may have to use crisis intervention strategies in dealing with scholars in distress such as reducing the intensity of panic feelings, identifying and segmenting the critical components of the problem, enhancing feelings of control, identifying sources of support, and choosing a small manageable course of action. The librarian who disregards this principle is likely to become a crisis-escalator rather than a crisis-defuser.

The Principle of Research-in-Crisis. When faced with crisis, many people, begin to cope by researching the problem. The librarian who disregards this principle may become a crisis-escalator rather than a crisis-defuser.

Conclusion

A growing body of research on user behavior has given us some important insights into the way various users search for and interact with information. The principles presented in this article concern more general and broader tendencies of human nature, and the observations concern the way these natural human inclinations manifest themselves in the library. Along with studies of information-seeking behavior, these observations too need to be researched to determine the degree to which they operate in the information environment and their impact on the delivery of reference service. The finest collection and the best technological advantages are lost if librarians fail to manage the reference process in light of the reality of human behavior. And, of course, librarians need to be aware that when they themselves become researchers, information seekers, all of the principles that apply to users will apply to them as well.

Librarians as well as users suffer from human temptations—to stick to well worn roads and easily available solutions, to avoid that which is new and untried, to confirm existing beliefs and values, and to appear competent and agreeable. The information search that meets the librarian's own needs for quick action and the appearance of competence is not service; it is *disservice*. In a professional setting, the user is permitted these human temptations; the professional is not. Librarians must be aware of them not only in the user but in themselves. Only then can the human factor become a strength rather than a limitation in the seeking and sharing of information.