

Chapter 9

Managing Change in Reference and Information Services in Digital Environment

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ABSTRACT

Libraries and librarians are no longer the sole providers of reference and information services. Reference services have traditionally played a crucial role in the delivery of library services both in the public and academic spheres. However, developments in Web technologies have seen the emergence of online or digital reference services, which many initially feared sought to replace the traditional library-based personalized service. A digital library is not merely a means of access to information over the network. As long as “library” word is attached to the concept, a digital library does and should care about users and communities that are in need of information and services just like conventional libraries. “Services”, therefore, should be one of the crucial aspects of digital libraries. In the recent trend, reference services have taken a central place in library and information services. Sometimes, they are also regarded as personalized services since in most cases a personal discussion takes place between a user and a reference librarian. The librarian point to the sources that are considered to be most appropriate to meet the specific information needs of the user. Since the Web and digital libraries are meant for providing direct access to information sources and services without the intervention of human intermediaries, the pertinent question that appears is whether we need reference services in digital environment, and, if so, how best to offer such services. This chapter looks at the inevitable change taking place in the platform of reference services.

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INTRODUCTION

Library is the richest information treasure of human knowledge and cultural wealth, and should be able to meet effectively the challenges of the new technology revolution. However, the developments in advanced technology have provided good opportunities for the survival and development of traditional libraries of different types. The library, as a traditional information institution, is undergoing radical changes in its information service in the new era. With more and more digital materials available to the reader, the library no longer simply collects printed materials only but provide access resources 24x7. As for library users, their reading habits and usage of reading materials have also changed. The increased use of computers and especially expansion of internet based resources has led to some modifications in the methods of academic work, such as undertaking research, writing articles, and producing teaching materials. Developing an efficient digital library cannot be “the” answer for the digital user community, but providing an effective digital library services can only suffice the requirements. For this reason, both before and after developing a digital library, user studies are helpful in both improving the library system’s performance and user satisfaction.

Recent changes in computer and communication technologies, especially the introduction and development of the Internet and its associated Web technologies in the course of the past decade have significantly influenced both the way libraries provide information services to their patrons and the way patrons choose to access information. For example, a large number of Web-based reference services have appeared over the past few years. While dotcom companies provide most of these services, some libraries and library consortia have also introduced Web-based reference and information services. Such services are termed “virtual” or “digital” reference services. Digital reference services in India are slowly picking up the race to compete.

Functionality, Usability, and Accessibility in the Digital Library Context

Functionality, usability, and accessibility testing of digital library information services and products are essential for providing high quality services to a broad and diverse population of users. A number of specific methods, as shown in this paper, can be readily developed to provide such evaluations. In this paper, specific goals guide the presentation of the development through time of the methods and instruments created, tested, refined, and operationalized in functionality, usability, and accessibility testing by the researchers. The goals of this paper are to:

- Demonstrate the potential roles of multiple, iterative evaluation strategies in the development and refinement of digital libraries;
- Detail the methodologies that focus on how the services meet the needs of users; and
- Encourage further discussion of the uses of these multiple evaluation approaches in assessing these libraries.

Functionality, usability, and accessibility are methodologies that provide different data regarding the ability of a digital library to meet the needs of users. More specifically:

- Functionality testing determines the extent to which a digital library, in whole or in part, is able to perform desired operations (e.g., basic search, multiple languages).
- Usability testing determines the extent to which a digital library, in whole or in part, enables users to intuitively use a digital library’s various features.
- Accessibility testing determines the extent to which a digital library, in whole or in part, provides users with disabilities the ability to interact with the digital library.

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