

Chapter 1

Reference Products and Services: Historical Overview and Paradigm Shift

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ABSTRACT

There is a paradigm shift in progress in reference collections affecting the content, format, and use of reference materials. This shift is a result of changing formats for reference products, and it presents challenges to traditional reference services. In order to better understand where reference collections are heading, we must take a look back to see how we got here. This chapter defines a reference paradigm, looks at the history of reference in libraries, and examines the shift from both a reference library product and reference service perspective. It also describes how major changes have impacted traditional reference titles and how libraries and users have adjusted to those changes.

INTRODUCTION

What does “paradigm shift” in reference really mean? To best answer this, we need to also ask a series of related questions. Among them the following questions stand out: What do the rapid changes affecting reference today mean for products on the one hand and the tried-and-true

reference service on the other? How are libraries and publishers adjusting to the changes in both areas? What are the key differences between e-reference sources and print reference books, and is there still room for both? Does the format even matter, and is the content still primarily about authority, objectivity, and accuracy?

The emergence of electronic books—especially electronic reference books—presents challenges and opportunities for authors, publishers,

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Table 1.

Clay tablet	First Punctuation	2500 BC
Papyrus Roll	Second Punctuation	2000 BC
Codex	Third Punctuation	150 AD
Printing	Fourth Punctuation	1450 AD
Steam Power	Fifth Punctuation	1800
Offset Printing	Sixth Punctuation	1970
Electronic Book	Seventh Punctuation	2000

librarians, and readers. This chapter presents an overview of how reference publishing is changing and what those changes mean for everyone involved. It provides answers to the questions that emerge while placing reference products and services in the context of library history.

PARADIGM DEFINED

Thomas Kuhn's classic 1962 book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, first introduces the concept of a paradigm, defining it as a conceptual framework from which common practitioners can discuss and evaluate their discipline. For example, if someone doesn't believe in evolution, then there can be no discussion of the significance of a fossil find. They have no commonality from which to frame their conversation. A classic example of paradigm shift comes from physics. Aristotelian physics led to Newtonian physics, which in turn led to Einstein and relativistic physics. Kuhn also covers a practical dimension of a paradigm, defining it further as not just a set of common principles but also a practice by practitioners. The 1989 edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines paradigm as "a world view underlying the theories and methodology of a particular scientific subject." In short, a paradigm is more than a good model; it presents common standards, common aims, and "a fundamental agreement about the nature of the world and its processes." (Horowitz, 2005, p. 1715)

REFERENCE PRODUCT PARADIGM

Fred Kilgour, founder of OCLC, discusses in his 1998 work, *The Evolution of the Book*, the historical pattern of the book, "in which long periods of stability in format alternate with periods of radical change" (Kilgour, 1998, p. 4). He lays out the seven punctuations of equilibria of the book (see Table 1).

In that same book, Kilgour also identifies five concurrent elements necessary for this radical change to occur: 1) societal need for information; 2) technological knowledge and experience; 3) organization experience and capability; 4) capability to integrate a new form into existing Information Systems; and 5) economic viability.

REFERENCE SERVICE PARADIGM

The history of reference is well documented in books and articles from several giants in the field. Some of the authors who have written on this topic include Bill Katz, Louis Shores, Charles Bunge, Herb White, and Samuel Rothstein. Rothstein's 1953 article, "The Development of the Concept of Reference Service in American Libraries, 1850-1900" seems strangely modern. Several clear articulations of what reference is are presented in this article. Rothstein quotes William Warner Bishop, who wrote in his 1915 work *Theory of Reference Work* that reference was "the service rendered by a librarian in aid of some sort of

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