"What are We Stopping?" And "What is Shifting?"

David A. Tyckoson and Nicolette Warisse Sosulski

*Correspondence concerning this column should be directed to **Nicolette Warisse Sosulski** and **David A. Tyckoson**, email: librista@gmail.com and davety@csufresno.edu.*

Dave Tyckoson, and Nicolette Warisse Sosulski met because Sara Kelly Johns, a mutual friend, told them "you have to meet each other! I don't know that I know anybody else as obsessed by reference [as you are]!" They friended on Facebook in October 2011 and have been chatting, sharing, and sometimes debating about reference ever since. Dave has had a notable career in academic reference, has written extensively on the reference interview, chaired the committee that developed the RUSA behavioral guidelines, and was the recipient of the 2005 Isadore Gilbert Mudge-R.R. Bowker Award for reference excellence. His most recent contribution to reference literature was the editing of *Reimagining Reference in the 21st Century.* Dave has been a reference librarian for thirty-eight years—and expects that number to grow.

Nicolette has been in public libraries as a business librarian. She was the winner of the 2011 Gale-Cengage Award for Excellence in Business Librarianship. Since graduating from library school, she has spent more than 15,000 hours providing chat reference in both academic and public queues. Both Nicolette and Dave, like the author of the Lemony Snicket books, "like to receive reference books on my birthday."

This column, "A Reference for That?," was Dave's brainchild, and is intended to be a forum for praxis-grounded discussion of reference services at a time when some say that reference is fundamentally changing and others think that reference questions are going away entirely. We hope that all of you, as readers and potential contributors, will be interested in sharing ideas—the more varied, diverse, or hotly (though courteously) contested the better. We plan to sometimes solicit/offer space for contrapuntal columns in the same or subsequent issues of *RUSQ*, so if you enjoy a debate with another librarian on a reference praxis topic, or approach the same skill in two different types of libraries, you have the option to submit your contributions together or to give us that person's name to us to solicit a contribution. And we are always looking for guest columns, so contact us with your ideas. We hope this column will, as Nicolette might say, "percolate" ideas on the art that is dear to our hearts.—*Editors*

"WHAT ARE WE STOPPING?" BY DAVID A. TYCKOSON

With all of the changes in librarianship over the past several years, what activities have we stopped doing?

A REFERENCE FOR THAT

This is an easy question to ask, but an impossible one to answer. Over the years we have stopped doing things like filing catalog cards, revising loose-leaf services, and mailing articles through interlibrary loan, but those are all pretty minor activities. And each one has been replaced with something that is the equivalent process done in a better way online. These things are just tinkering with our processes. To answer this question, I chose to look at the bigger picture of what libraries do and how that is evolving.

The way that I define libraries, we have four primary functions that we do to support our community. Those functions developed over centuries (millennia, really), but they are the four central things that all libraries do for the communities that they serve. We have done those functions for a long time (three of them for at least a century) and I believe that we will continue those four functions for the foreseeable future. These are not easy or small things, but they are what makes a library important to its community. And if libraries are not important to the community that they were established to serve, then we can just stop doing this whole library thing. Fortunately, that rarely happens.

By now you are wondering what my four functions are, so here are the four functions (presented in historical order) and why they remain important.

1. *Collecting and preserving information.* Libraries have been collecting information since they were first invented. As far back as the year Zero (and in fact even earlier), libraries have been building collections. In ancient times, the sole function of the Great Library of Alexandria was to gather and preserve information. It was the largest library of its time (the Library of Congress of ancient times) and did a good job of collecting information, but failed on the preservation side (although being destroyed by invading armies was hardly the librarians' fault). Today, we still build collections. If you tell someone outside our field that you are a librarian, their immediate mental image is one of books. That is certainly one form that we collect, although in the twenty-first century it is more likely to be electronic data. No matter what the information is, what format it takes, where it comes from, or what language it is in, libraries continue to build collections of interest to their communities. This is a core function of libraries and is not something that is going to go away in the near or even far future.

2. *Organizing information.* What differentiates libraries from other information-related organizations is the skill of librarians at organizing the information that we collect. I like to date this function back to the seventeenth century and the publication of the book catalog of the Bodleian Library. Librarians are experts at cataloging, indexing, abstracting, and classifying information. What began as simple (yet effective) author lists of books now includes MARC records, FRBR, RDA, and metadata. How we organize information has changed significantly, but I see no time in the future when librarians will stop organizing the information in their collections.

3. *Assisting users.* Starting in the mid-nineteenth century, librarians have been providing direct assistance to library users. Samuel Green of the Worcester (MA) Public Library usually gets the credit for starting this function, but he was really just the first to speak and write about the idea at the first ALA conference in 1876. We librarians are all eager to help members of our communities find the information that they are seeking. Whether we call it reference or research or just plain help, librarians provide personal service to make sure that each person finds the information that best meets his or her needs. Whether it is an individual or a group, through face-to-face, telephone, email, or chat assistance, finding a single document or researching a broad subject area, librarians are there to help. This is the service that personalizes the library for members of the community—and it is what attracted me to this field. Wikipedia and Google will certainly provide you with information, but the librarian ensures that you get the best information. As long as libraries serve communities, people in those communities will want help—and librarians will be there to provide it. This function is not going away.

4. *Promoting the information unique to the community.* This is the newest function of libraries, having begun in earnest only in the last two decades. This area also reflects a change in what is valued in the collections that libraries build. In olden times, when information was relatively scarce and hard to find, the library was often the single source for information for the community. Books were valued because they were rare and not easily available elsewhere. In today's world, where information is abundant and instantly available, it is the unique information in the collection that has the greatest value. If you want to read Shakespeare or John Grisham or the Internal Revenue Code, you can find it easily in many places. However, if you want to watch a past local production of *Hamlet*, see what local authors are writing, or find out how to fight a city parking ticket, you come to the local library. Librarians are the ones digitizing these resources and making them available. Whether we call this publishing or distributing or some other term (I am still not sure what to call it), this is how libraries make the information produced within our local communities available to the rest of the world. Commercially published books, journals, videos, and music can easily be replaced, but this local information cannot. This role is not only not going away—it is becoming increasingly important.

So, what is going away? I do not see any of the functions I listed above as something that we will stop doing. We will continue to build collections, we will continue to organize those collections and develop access tools for them, we will continue to help people seeking information, and we will increasingly digitize and promote local information. *How* we

do those things will vary over time, but *that* we do them will not. We will probably purchase less published information and spend less time cataloging it, but we will increase our efforts in helping people find and use it and will definitely do more to digitize and promote local information. Tomorrow's tools will look as different from the ones we use today as the iPad is from the card catalog. But tools are not what is really important, for they are mere tools. The four functions that we do will continue, not because we have always done them but because they are important to the communities that our libraries serve.

Figure 1. Information overload the Google way

"WHAT IS SHIFTING? BECAUSE THINGS ARE DIFFERENT, RIGHT?" BY NICOLETTE WARISSE SOSULSKI

As we read Dave's reflection on "What are We Stopping?," I think we are reflecting with him on the underlying question as to whether reference is changing in its fundamentals. After reading his points, all of which I agree with, I was tempted to conclude that reference is only changing in mechanics rather than fundamentals. And after some days on the desk, I would most certainly stand by that conclusion. However, I did not think that idea was consonant with my belief in shifts in reference not covered in his essay, or at least not thoroughly explicated in his four points. There is fundamental change that I believe has occurred, occasioned by the advent of the Internet. So I started the first draft of this section ready to open a debate.

When Samuel Swett Green was writing about the art of reference, often the crux of a reference quest was the location of a source of information on a subject, and through taxonomy and classification making it possible for that good source to be found again to be used by and for others. By comparison with the world inhabited by librarians and their patrons today, this orb had an economy characterized by source scarcity: There were fewer findable sources, the finding instruments themselves were far-flung and often discovered only via letter—the national union catalog project at the Library of Congress did not even begin until 1901— and the accessibility for use of the sources located or their indexes might lie through travel, followed by cumbersome and time-consuming hand transcription.

Today's information economy, by contrast, is overly replete with sources: good, bad, indifferent, and, sometimes, crazy. Instead of multiple letters being written to locate one source, typing a few words in a box yields 411,000,000 results.

As figure 1 shows, that last statement is no exaggeration. I typed "a few words" (without quotation marks) into the Google search box, and that is the number of results retrieved. Of course it is a specious search, but it shows the magnitude of *stuff* that is drowning our patrons. Green's patrons may have thirsted, while ours are being information
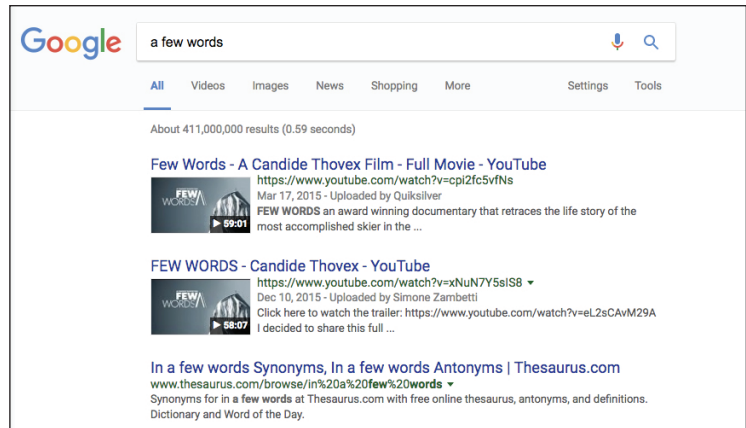
waterboarded. That torrent is creating real sea changes in the reference art, which is also being altered by the virtual nature of many of the sources.

To use the points in Dave's schema above, we are moving from collecting and preserving to locating and road mapping as an ever-higher proportion of the items we collect is digital and thus not as susceptible to loss through the decay of paper. However, webpages can be taken down and links broken, and members of our profession are often the ones who archive snapshots of government webpages for accountability's sake or check to ascertain that links to purchased or found content are working. Collecting and preserving. Point, Dave.

One definitely sees that, as more and more of our content is not "in-house," we do less organizing information. Except that in the finding aids, LibGuides, and discovery layers that we produce, what are we really doing other than collocating like items, or organizing? We may be shifting to organizing more external or remote content rather than that produced by us or contained within our walls. Ben Franklin stated "for every minute spent organizing, an hour is earned." Every day I speak to patrons who have floundered around Google for days or weeks looking for something that I am able to locate or find a pathfinder where another librarian has located and organized a set of resources that delivers to the patron exactly what he or she wants. Our minutes of organizing are saving hours for our patrons. Organizing. Point, Dave.

Sometimes patrons are not coming into the library building, or, if they do, they are not asking us anything, so aren't we doing less assisting of users? They are asking questions of SIRI (that darn cyberchick!) rather than asking us. It is tempting, on a bad day, to think that our future is looking scarily similar to the lot of the Maytag Repair Man.

I actually think, with all respect to my august co-author, that this function, rather than that of promoting community information, is the one that is going to have the greatest change of all and has greatest potential for expansion. Moving from finding *a* source to finding *the* source, as well

as moving from accompanying to guiding and leading the user, increases our role as we demonstrate evaluation and ranking of sources—as well as search precision—and teach our patrons to do the same. This shift and expansion from custodian to whitewater guide is what has the potential to keep us relevant in the information universe—if we only can get our patrons to know this—and the potential to be our downfall if we do not. Assisting patrons. Point, Dave. Reference shift. Point, Nicolette.

Promoting the information unique to the community is a task area that I would not even begin to contest being a growing part of the function of libraries. Digital advances greatly facilitate that customization of content to the needs of the patron base. The additional ease of creation of content afforded by advances in technology makes that task so much more personalized even than the skillful assembly of a collection by purchase. This is a part of librarianship that should grow exponentially if we are being responsive to our information communities, and the curation and creation of content is one of the traditional jobs we do that, if we do it well (and make sure our populace knows that we are doing so), continues and increases our relevance to the populations we serve. Community Information. Dave shoots! He Scores!

We hope that in this first issue of "A Reference for That" we have shown some evidence of the hoped-for flavor of dialogue that we want to express regarding the reference art. Our two voices may be expressed very differently, but our concerns and ideas are very similar. In this column you will hear the point-counterpoint thoughts of the thinker and the doer, the philosopher and the practitioner, the academic and the public librarian, the old and new guard of our profession.

But we are just two voices among many whom we hope will join to create a far-ranging conversation. We welcome—nay, solicit—your suggestions and contributions. They may be prompted by desk interactions, articles and conference presentations, or amendments to or refutations of the viewpoints we here express (of course, if you agree with us, we'd like to hear that, too!). Contact us with your viewpoints and topic ideas! We hope that reading or writing for this column can produce useful talking points about Reference for librarians and patrons. One thing that we all know is that if we are not reflective and adaptive in Reference provision in the information marketplace as it exists now—with all the content provision competitors it presents us with—we are in danger of perceived or real irrelevance. And Dave and Nicolette know that we are all too good to let that happen.