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Digital Reference Assignment

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Running Head: DIGITAL REFERENCE

Reference Interview Analysis II: Digital Reference

by

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Abstract

An in depth analysis of a digital reference interview as experienced by the author. It details the service used, reference interview process, quality of results obtained, and overall success of the interview. The author evaluates the service received according to Joseph Janes (2003) guidelines for reference interview and concludes that there are certain questions that are better suited to the digital environment than others.

Reference Interview Analysis II: Digital Reference

Earlier this week I read an article about a study by Columbia University which suggests that exposure to air pollution may be linked to genetic changes in unborn children associated with an increased risk of cancer. I was intrigued by this premise and decided to do further research on the effects of pollution on fetuses. I expected to receive some information on the topic and at the very least expand my understanding of the issue beyond that learned from reading the article. For this I logged into the San Francisco Public Library (SFPL) website.

I clicked on the link 'Have a Question? Ask a Librarian.' This took me to a screen where several options are given: Telephone Reference, E-mail Reference, Frequently Asked Questions, and Live Online Reference. I selected the last one. The main screen to ASKNOW appeared with detailed instructions on how to submit questions to the online librarian along with system and browser requirements and troubleshooting pointers. ASKNOW is a form of digital reference software which allows users to interact with a librarian in real time. The software necessary for this type of reference service is provided by 24/7 Reference as I learned later on from the librarian who helped me. I filled out the web form on the screen with my name, e-mail address, location, nearest library, zip code, and question. In less than one minute I was chatting with Paula, my reference librarian.

After greetings and introductions, I told her I was looking for information on the effects of pollution on unborn fetuses. After reiterating my question to ascertain her understanding of my needs, she asked if I had done any type of online research regarding my question yet. I said no and emphasized I was looking for more credible resources than the ones I could find doing a browser search, as I didn't have a way of verifying them. She then asked a few more questions aimed at narrowing the focus of the search (i.e. purpose of the search, types of pollution, etc.).

After establishing the research objectives, she asked me to wait while she gathered some resources. Within 3 minutes she provided a link to the Health Articles Database in the public SFPL website. I tried the link but it required a SFPL library card number. I informed Paula I did not have one of these. Upon learning that I have a card from the San Mateo Public Library, she provided me with the same link but rerouted through the SMPL website. This worked like a charm and I was able to access the database. She stayed connected while I accessed the website and tried some searches. When she realized my searches were not producing any results, she suggested using broader search terms along with Boolean operators such as ‘pollution AND fetus.’ Not surprisingly, this worked!

Finally she asked if I was happy with the results and asked if there was anything she could help me with. Before logging off and because she knew I was concerned with source credibility, she also provided me with a link to the Librarian’s Index on the Internet (www.lii.org), a collection of trusted and verified links to factual information on a variety of themes. At the end of the chat, a transcript of our conversation was e-mailed to me. I really liked this feature as it provided me with all the links she had offered in a centralized place and allowed me to refer back to our conversation.

This experience was a really successful one closely reflecting the Guidelines for Synchronous Reference put forth in Janes (2003). Not only was the librarian very helpful and interested in my search but she also showed a genuine respect for my privacy rights as well. She was probing but not inquisitive or insistent in finding out what I wanted the information for. At all times, she kept me abreast of what she was doing and the resources she was checking for me. I liked that the entire process was short, precise, fast, and it only took about 12 minutes of my time. I also enjoyed the fact that only relevant links were provided and they were to free public websites

where I could access a wealth of information. Towards the end of the day, Paula sent me a follow up e-mail to check that I was happy with the resources she had provided and to offer further help in case I had any questions. This was completely unexpected but a very nice surprise that most definitely ensured I would be using the service in the future.

Comparing the service to relevant RUSA's Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Services Professionals (2004), I found out that my experience did not deviate a lot from RUSA's ideal. Barring the limitations of not facing the person I was speaking to, I could still "sense" that Paula had a good disposition: she was courteous, helpful, respectful, and patient. She was also mindful of the time I had available for the chat session and demonstrated a genuine interest in helping me.

While I enjoyed the service and could not see any negatives to my experience, I could not help analyzing on the sort of questions that are better answered through the online service. Using ASKNOW was beneficial to me in that I had a ready-reference question that required little further questioning from the librarian. This allowed the process to take place in a very short amount of time with minimal effort. In addition, it was convenient and easily accessible and it did not require taking a trip to the local library. Obviously, when at the library, the user has a vast array of information and resources available where questions can be answered more in depth. However, when a user has online services available, cannot get down to the library, knows exactly what he wants, and has very specific short factual questions, online reference service provides accessible quality information.

References

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