

Trina J. Magi

# Why discovery tools and information literacy are not enough

## Reconnecting with reference sources

A student once said to me, “You’re like an information wizard” after I placed a just-right reference source in her hands. In truth, I hadn’t done anything extraordinary. I did only what thousands of reference librarians have been trained to do for decades.

When students approach the reference desk or arrive for individual research consultations saying, “I’ve been searching for hours and can’t find what I need,” there is something almost magical about responding with a reference source that does the trick. What looks like magic, however, is actually the expert skill of reference librarianship. Our ability to save users time and relieve their frustration comes from knowing about special sources of information, doing a good reference interview, and matching sources with questions. It also comes from knowing it is sometimes better and faster to consult a reference source directly rather than doing a keyword search for articles or books. Has the availability of hundreds of databases and the adoption of discovery tools made us forget this? A couple years ago, an encounter with a student prompted me to ask myself that question.

The student was investigating the effect of television on sports. I invited him to sit with me at the reference desk while I ran keyword searches in multidisciplinary and subject-specific databases. Despite the use of advanced techniques, the searches were frustrating and yielded an overwhelming number of results. I pushed away from the databases and said to myself, “There must be a better way to approach this.”

I remembered that we had in our reference collection some very good subject-specific encyclopedias. I said to the student, “Come with me,” and I pulled *The International Encyclopedia of Communication* from the shelf. It contained an excellent entry on “Sports and the Media.” Then I consulted *The Encyclopedia of North American Sports History* and found an entry for “Television.” Together the two sources explained ways in which television had affected sports. (For example, “To accommodate broadcast audiences in key markets . . . Olympic marathons may take place in the heat of the day . . .”)<sup>1</sup> The student was pleased and appreciative.

I reflected on my performance at the reference desk that day. With hundreds of databases at my disposal, it was my automatic impulse to search for articles rather than to consult reference works. Had that become a bad habit? My awareness raised, I began collecting examples of reference questions that were answered most efficiently and effectively by going directly to reference sources, not by running keyword searches.

### Examples

- A faculty member wanted to trace the history of several English-language words. She wanted to know when the words were first used

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Trina J. Magi is reference and instruction librarian at University of Vermont’s David W. Howe Memorial Library, email: trina.magi@uvm.edu

and how their meanings had changed over time.

SOURCE: *Oxford English Dictionary*

- A student asked if it would be accurate to claim that Burlington was Vermont's most populous town in all the years from 1860 to the present.

SOURCE: An entry on "Burlington" in *The Vermont Encyclopedia*

- A student wondered where the mythological figure Artemis appeared in ancient texts and art.

SOURCE: An entry on "Artemis" in *Brill's New Pauly Supplements—The Reception of Myth and Mythology*

- A business student needed a broad summary of the U.S.'s current economic situation.

SOURCES: Economic Report of the President and an introductory essay in *Manufacturing and Distribution U.S.A.*

- A student was assigned to develop a proposal for a research paper. He was interested in government surveillance and censorship but wasn't sure what aspect to pursue.

SOURCES: A CQ Researcher report on surveillance and entries in *Free Expression and Censorship in America* and *The Encyclopedia of Censorship* gave the student lots of ideas.

- A student was looking for state mottoes and said she couldn't find the information using the library's discovery tool.

SOURCE: *The World Almanac*, "States and Other Areas of the U.S." section.

How do librarians come to know about these reference sources? A typical library school curriculum once offered a number of semester-long reference courses, each focusing on a different discipline (business, health, science, humanities, social sciences, and government information). For each discipline, aspiring librarians learned about the nature and structure of information, the questions typically asked, and how to use important reference sources to answer questions efficiently. We also learned about reference sources at professional conference programs and by working alongside experienced reference librarians.

Lately, I have begun to fear that our profession no longer values, teaches, and nurtures

reference skills as it once did. If we fail to maintain expert knowledge of sources, our service to students and faculty members will suffer. Will the profession's adoption of so-called user-friendly discovery tools address this concern? No. If a keyword search in a database fundamentally is not the best way to approach a particular question, it is of little help to try a keyword search across multiple databases and millions of records.

Will the profession's emphasis on teaching information literacy address this concern? No. While it may be important for students to understand concepts from the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education<sup>2</sup> (Authority is Constructed, Information has Value, etc.) knowledge of those concepts will be inadequate to help students (or librarians) efficiently answer the questions above.

When answering challenging reference questions, it is not enough to have ideas about the information landscape. It also is essential to know how to use the right tools. I am glad I know how to use a hammer to hang a picture, but I still need expert carpenters who know how to use saws, drills, routers, planes, clamps, scribes, and jigs to build fine cabinets. In the same way, even if we are successful at teaching information literacy and making our websites and research tools user-friendly, some research questions will require the expert help of reference librarians. When users turn to us, I want them to be amazed. In addition to being approachable, patient, and interested, one of the best ways reference librarians can amaze is by having special knowledge of sources that do the trick.

## Notes

1. David Rowe, "Sports and the Media, History of," in *The International Encyclopedia of Communication*, ed. Wolfgang Donsbach (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2008), 10: 4801.

2. "Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education," ACRL, January 11, 2016, [www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework#introduction](http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework#introduction).

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