

# A PARADIGM SHIFT FROM THE TRADITIONAL TO THE MODERN REFERENCE SERVICES IN LIBRARIES

**\*MUHAMMAD MURTALA IBRAHIM; \*\*ABDULKARIM ABDULLAHI; & \*\*MARGARET A AMAO**

\*Moddibo Adama University Yola. \*\*Abu Ali Library, Aminu Saleh College of Education Azare.

Corresponding Author: murtalaibrahim@mau.edu.ng

## ABSTRACT

This paper dwells on reference services in our libraries in both traditional and modern times. The concepts of reference services, reference librarian and reference process were well discussed. The roles of a reference librarian were spelt out clearly. Also discussed were the problems that serve as a bottle neck to the smooth reference services in our libraries. This paper is a clarion call on all the reference librarians and library users to be aware of the new techniques of reference services that goes beyond the four corners of the library. The new approach demands that the reference services take place both within and outside the library. The former style when the

## Introduction

Libraries have long been regarded as custodians of knowledge, serving as essential gateways to information. Traditionally, reference services in libraries have played a crucial role in guiding users to relevant resources, offering personalized assistance in answering queries, and facilitating access to information stored in physical formats like books, periodicals, and newspapers. For centuries, these services were based on direct, face-to-face

libraries only entertain reference questions at the reference desk is no longer adequate. Reference librarians have to go extra miles to assist the users whenever they may be in the world. The technological advancement has made it possible for the librarians to carryout reference services very effectively. All the roles played by both parties are now carried out using telephone, e mail, internet, and social media. The attention of the both parties that is the reference librarian on one hand and the clienteles in the other has been drawn to embrace the new dispensation in order to benefit very well from it. if this system is used those involved will benefit more and will go with the rest of the world. At the end the paper some recommendations were offered to the appropriate authorities. If they are carefully implemented the reference services in our libraries will change for the better and the expected results will be achieved.

**Keyword:** shift, tradition, modern, library users & reference librarians

Interactions between librarians and users, where patrons sought assistance in locating or interpreting information sources. The process was often time-consuming, manual, and dependent on the expertise of the reference librarian (Huettemann, *et al*, 2024)

However, the advent of the digital age, alongside the rapid advancement of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), has caused a seismic shift in how information is accessed, stored, and retrieved. With the emergence of online databases, digital libraries, and search engines, the traditional model of reference services has been fundamentally challenged. The digital revolution has empowered users to independently search for information, often bypassing the need for direct assistance from librarians. As a result, libraries have had to adapt to remain relevant in an increasingly digital and self-service-oriented world (Dalilis, *et al*, 2024).

This shift from traditional to modern reference services marks a significant transformation in how libraries operate and serve their patrons. The modern reference model now incorporates digital tools, automated systems, and online platforms that provide users with 24/7 access to information (Bala, & Verma, 2018). Services such as virtual reference (via email, chat, or video), digital reference desks, and online databases have become common in academic, public, and special libraries. Furthermore, the integration of artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning, and automated systems has enhanced the efficiency of reference services, allowing users to obtain information faster and more accurately.

Despite these advancements, the shift to modern reference services comes with its own set of challenges. While technology has made information more accessible, it has also created new complexities. Librarians now require a different set of skills, including technological literacy, proficiency in digital tools, and the ability to assist users in navigating a vast and often overwhelming sea of information (Diseiye, *et al*, 2024). Moreover, the need for personal, human interaction in reference services remains crucial, as not all information needs can be met solely through automated systems. Thus, this shift from traditional to modern reference services is not just about adopting new technologies but also about rethinking the role of librarians in a digital world. As libraries continue to evolve, balancing the benefits of modern technology with the enduring value of human expertise in information services is essential. This study seeks to explore this transformation in depth, examining the factors driving the shift, the impact on library services, and the implications for the future of librarianship (Aslam, M., 2022)..

### The Reference Librarian

The role of the reference librarian has undergone a significant transformation in recent years due to the rapid advancements in

technology and the changing needs of library users. Traditionally, reference librarians served as gatekeepers of information, providing users with access to physical resources such as books, journals, and reference materials housed within the library. They assisted patrons with their research queries, navigated catalogs, and helped locate physical materials through face-to-face interactions. This traditional reference service model was centered on physical libraries, print-based resources, and in-person communication (Bodemer, B. B., 2023).

However, with the advent of digital technologies and the internet, there has been a paradigm shift from traditional reference services to modern, technology-driven reference models. This shift has redefined the role of the reference librarian, expanding their responsibilities to encompass a wide array of digital tools and online platforms. In modern reference services, librarians must be adept at navigating electronic databases, digital collections, and online information repositories. They often guide users in accessing e-books, online journals, and open access resources, making them more than just custodians of physical collections but also facilitators of digital information. One of the key aspects of the modern reference service is the shift from in-person assistance to virtual reference services (Hervieux, S., 2021). Librarians now engage with users through email, live chat, video calls, and other digital communication platforms. This has enabled libraries to extend their reach beyond their physical walls and offer support to users anytime and anywhere. The reference librarian's role has thus evolved into that of a digital information expert, providing remote assistance and ensuring seamless access to digital resources.

Furthermore, modern reference librarians must be skilled in information literacy, teaching users how to critically evaluate online sources, avoid misinformation, and use digital tools effectively. They often conduct workshops and training sessions on topics such as database searching, citation management, and research strategies, equipping users with the

skills needed to navigate the complex digital information landscape. Another aspect of the modern reference librarian's role is the integration of technology into personalized services. With the help of artificial intelligence (AI) tools, data analytics, and user behavior tracking, librarians can now offer more tailored recommendations to users, improving their research experience. This move from a one-size-fits-all approach to a more customized and user-centered service model is a key feature of modern reference services.

The reference librarian has transitioned from being a traditional information provider to a dynamic, tech-savvy professional who facilitates access to a wide range of digital resources (Vinuta, J. S., 2020). The paradigm shift from traditional to modern reference services reflects the evolving needs of library users in the digital age, and reference librarians are at the forefront of this transformation, ensuring that libraries remain relevant and effective in the information age.

### **Duties of the Reference Librarian**

The role of the reference librarian has been reshaped by the shift from traditional reference services to modern, technology-based models of service delivery in libraries. This transformation has expanded the scope of the reference librarian's duties to include a broader set of responsibilities, driven by the needs of contemporary library users and the increasing reliance on digital technologies (Mupaikwa, E., 2024). Below are the key duties of the reference librarian in the context of this paradigm shift:

### **Facilitating Access to Digital Resources**

One of the primary duties of modern reference librarians is to assist users in accessing and utilizing a wide range of digital resources. This includes e-books, online databases, e-journals, and institutional repositories. As more

libraries adopt electronic resources, reference librarians are tasked with teaching users how to effectively navigate these platforms and locate information. For example, instead of guiding users to physical bookshelves, reference librarians now help them conduct advanced searches on academic databases like JSTOR or ProQuest, and provide access to open access journals and digital archives. This requires librarians to have expertise in a variety of digital tools and platforms.

### Offering Virtual Reference Services

Modern reference services have moved beyond face-to-face interactions to include virtual communication channels. Reference librarians now provide assistance through email, live chat, video conferencing, and social media platforms. This allows libraries to serve users remotely, making reference services more accessible and convenient. In virtual reference services, librarians are responsible for handling real-time inquiries, providing guidance on research questions, and offering support for digital tools. This shift has made the reference librarian's role more versatile, as they are required to be available across multiple platforms and cater to users beyond the physical library space.

### Promoting Information Literacy

Information literacy is a key focus of modern reference librarianship. As information becomes increasingly available online, users must learn how to critically evaluate the credibility, accuracy, and relevance of the sources they encounter. Reference librarians play an essential role in teaching users these skills. Modern reference librarians conduct information literacy workshops, create instructional materials, and provide one-on-one consultations to teach users how to effectively search for and use information. This includes educating users about avoiding misinformation,

understanding scholarly versus non-scholarly sources, and citing digital materials accurately.

### **Supporting Research and Academic Collaboration**

The modern reference librarian supports academic collaboration by facilitating the sharing and dissemination of research through digital platforms. This includes assisting faculty, students, and researchers in using citation management tools like EndNote or Zotero, as well as helping them navigate institutional repositories and open access outlets. Librarians now work closely with researchers to maximize the visibility and impact of their work by advising them on open access publishing, promoting their research outputs in institutional repositories, and helping them with research data management.

### **Integrating Technology into Reference Services**

The integration of technology into library services is a defining feature of modern reference librarianship. Reference librarians now use advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning, and chatbots to assist with reference queries. AI-powered tools can help librarians provide more efficient services by automating routine queries and offering personalized recommendations to users. Moreover, reference librarians must stay updated on emerging technologies and trends, such as data visualization tools, research analytics, and collaborative platforms, to offer innovative services that meet the evolving needs of their users.

### **Providing Tailored, User-Centered Services**

In modern libraries, reference librarians are expected to offer more personalized, user-centered services. They use data analytics and user behavior insights to tailor recommendations and provide customized research assistance. This approach contrasts with the more generalized



support offered in traditional reference services, where the focus was often on providing information rather than tailoring resources to individual needs. For example, reference librarians can now create personalized research guides or curate digital resource lists based on a user's specific research area or project.

### Managing Digital Collections

Modern reference librarians are also involved in managing and curating digital collections. This includes organizing digital archives, metadata management, and ensuring that digital resources are accessible to users. They must ensure that digital materials, such as scanned manuscripts, digital maps, and multimedia, are properly cataloged and searchable in online databases. In traditional libraries, librarians focused on maintaining physical collections. However, the shift to digital libraries has added the responsibility of managing digital formats, ensuring long-term digital preservation, and maintaining access to born-digital content.

### Training Users on New Technologies

With the increasing reliance on digital tools, reference librarians are responsible for training library users on the latest technologies relevant to research and information management (Li, F. 2024). This includes teaching them how to use database search functions, citation software, digital repositories, and other online research tools. Additionally, reference librarians may offer workshops on emerging trends such as open access publishing, research data management, and the use of research collaboration platforms like Mendeley or Google Scholar. The paradigm shift from traditional to modern reference services has greatly expanded the duties of the reference librarian. No longer limited to assisting with physical resources, librarians now play a critical role in navigating the digital information landscape, offering virtual services, promoting



information literacy, and integrating technology into library services (Hirsh, S. (Ed.). 2022). This development reflects the changing needs of library users in the 21st century and positions reference librarians as vital facilitators of knowledge in an increasingly digital world.

### Types of Reference Materials

The shift from traditional to modern reference services has transformed the types of reference materials used in libraries. Traditionally, reference materials were primarily physical, including printed encyclopedias, dictionaries, atlases, handbooks, and almanacs. These resources were housed within the library, and users relied on librarians for access and guidance. In modern libraries, reference materials have expanded to include a vast array of digital resources. These include:

**Electronic Databases:** Online databases like JSTOR, PubMed, and ProQuest offer access to academic journals, e-books, and research articles. These platforms provide comprehensive, up-to-date information that is easily searchable and accessible remotely.

**E-Books and E-Journals:** Instead of relying solely on printed books and journals, modern reference services utilize e-books and e-journals that can be accessed from anywhere, enhancing convenience for users.

**Institutional Repositories:** Many academic libraries now maintain digital repositories that house the institution's scholarly output, such as theses, dissertations, and conference proceedings, offering open access to these materials.

**Open Access Resources:** As open access publishing grows, modern reference services incorporate freely available online journals, research papers, and other academic materials, reducing barriers to access.

**Multimedia Resources:** Modern reference services include multimedia materials like online videos, podcasts, and interactive tutorials, providing dynamic ways for users to engage with information.

This paradigm shift has expanded the scope of reference materials, making them more accessible, interactive, and suited to the digital needs of contemporary users.

### **Process of Reference Services: From Traditional to Modern**

The process of reference services has advanced significantly with improvements in technology and changes in information-seeking behavior. The traditional model, characterized by in-person interactions, printed materials, and a librarian's physical presence, has shifted towards modern, digital reference services that are accessible through various online platforms. This transition reflects broader changes in how information is produced, disseminated, and consumed, marking a paradigm shift from traditional to modern reference services.

### **Traditional Reference Services**

**Face-to-Face Interaction:** In traditional reference services, patrons would approach a reference desk in a library and engage with a librarian in person. This direct interaction allowed for personalized service where the librarian could guide users through printed resources, such as books, journals, encyclopedias, and indexes, often helping them refine their queries on the spot.

**Use of Print Resources:** Reference tools like bibliographies, catalogs, and print indexes were central to this model. The librarian's role was to assist users in navigating these physical resources, which required specialized knowledge to access relevant information.

**Time-Consuming and Location-Based:** Traditional reference services were location-bound, meaning patrons had to visit the library physically to receive assistance. Additionally, searching through print resources often took time, as cross-referencing and locating specific information could be a labor-intensive process.

**Librarian as Gatekeeper:** Librarians were viewed as the primary gatekeepers of knowledge. They held the expertise to navigate vast collections of resources and provide authoritative information. Users were dependent on the librarian's knowledge of the available resources and the structure of the library's catalog.

### **Paradigm Shift to Modern Reference Services**

With the advent of digital technology, the landscape of reference services has undergone a significant transformation. This paradigm shift is characterized by increased accessibility, speed, and interactivity.

#### **1. Virtual Reference Services:**

- Modern reference services are no longer limited to in-person interactions. Libraries now offer virtual reference services via chat, email, or video calls. These services allow users to ask questions remotely and receive immediate assistance, breaking down the physical barriers of the library.
- Examples include "Ask a Librarian" services or online reference chatbots, available 24/7 in some cases, offering assistance regardless of time or location.

#### **2. Digital and Online Resources:**

- Reference tools have migrated online, with databases, e-books, digital archives, and open-access journals replacing or complementing physical materials. Search engines, online databases like JSTOR or PubMed, and e-reference platforms (e.g., Oxford Reference Online) allow users to independently search for information with greater speed and efficiency.
- Users now have access to a broader array of materials, including digitized primary sources, multimedia resources, and real-time data, often from their own devices.

### 3. Increased User Independence:

- With the shift towards digital services, users have gained more independence in finding information. Search engines like Google or library search platforms have become essential tools, allowing users to conduct their own research with minimal librarian assistance.
- The role of the librarian has evolved from being a gatekeeper of information to being a facilitator or coach, helping users develop search strategies and evaluate the quality of digital sources.

### 4. Personalized and Specialized Services:

- Modern reference services can be more personalized through the use of technology. Automated systems can track user preferences, past queries, and search history, tailoring suggestions or guiding users to the most relevant sources.
- Specialization has also emerged, with subject-specific librarians providing expert assistance in niche areas, such as health sciences, business, or digital humanities. Virtual subject guides and specialized online help tools further enhance these offerings.

### 5. Collaborative and Crowd sourced Reference:

- Modern reference services embrace collaborative technologies, including social media, wikis, and forums, where users and librarians can share knowledge and resources.
- Crowdsourcing platforms like Stack Exchange or Quora serve as peer-led reference services, where users contribute to each other's inquiries, complementing formal library reference services.

## Changes in the Process of Reference Services

### 1. Information Discovery:

- **Traditional:** Discovery was based on manually searching through catalogs and reference books.

- **Modern:** Discovery is now largely automated, with keyword searches, algorithms, and personalized search features driving quick access to resources.

## 2. Modes of Interaction:

- **Traditional:** Interaction was primarily face-to-face or over the phone.
- **Modern:** Interaction occurs through multiple channels, including email, live chat, social media, and digital assistants.

## 3. Access to Resources:

- **Traditional:** Physical collections were the main source of information, requiring the user to be on-site.
- **Modern:** Cloud-based systems and online databases provide access to vast, remotely accessible digital resources.

## 4. Speed and Efficiency:

- **Traditional:** Responses were often slower, as librarians needed time to locate the relevant information manually.
- **Modern:** Digital tools allow for instantaneous retrieval of information, making the process faster and more efficient.

## The Role of the Librarian in Modern Reference Services

The role of librarians has transformed in the digital age. They are no longer solely curators of physical collections but are now information specialists who:

- **Guide Information Literacy:** They teach users how to effectively navigate digital resources, evaluate the credibility of online information, and avoid misinformation.
- **Provide Technical Support:** With the rise of digital platforms, librarians help users manage access to databases, troubleshoot software issues, and navigate complex digital tools.

- **Create Digital Resources:** Librarians develop and maintain online guides, tutorials, and digital archives that extend the reference service's reach.

The process of reference services has shifted from a model focused on direct, face-to-face interaction and print materials to a highly flexible, digital, and user-driven system. Modern reference services offer greater accessibility, convenience, and a broader range of resources, reflecting the changing needs of library users in the digital age. As reference services continue to evolve, the challenge for librarians is to maintain their critical role as facilitators of information while adapting to the growing autonomy and digital fluency of their patrons.

#### Factors That Affect the Reference Service

1. **Technological Advancements:** The rise of digital tools, online databases, and automated search systems has transformed reference services. These technologies enhance access to information but require constant updates and training for both librarians and users.
2. **User Expectations and Behavior:** Modern users expect instant access to information and often prefer digital platforms over traditional in-person services. Their growing self-sufficiency in using search engines influences how reference services are delivered.
3. **Availability of Resources:** The quality and breadth of a library's reference service depend on the availability of both physical and digital resources. Limited budgets can restrict access to specialized databases, impacting service quality.
4. **Librarian Expertise:** A librarian's knowledge of reference tools, subject expertise, and ability to communicate effectively impacts the

quality of the service. Continuous professional development is necessary to keep up with new information technologies.

5. **Institutional Support:** The level of institutional funding, infrastructure, and administrative backing influences the efficiency and scope of reference services, including staffing, technology, and resource acquisition.
6. **Diversity of User Needs:** Users come from various educational, cultural, and technological backgrounds, requiring a range of services, from basic help with information retrieval to specialized research assistance. Tailoring services to meet these needs is essential.
7. **Information Overload:** With vast amounts of information available online, users may struggle to filter reliable sources. This increases the demand for reference services that help in evaluating and curating quality information.
8. **Data Privacy and Ethics:** As more reference services move online, issues of user privacy, data security, and ethical handling of personal information become increasingly important factors that influence service delivery.

## Conclusion

The work of the reference librarian is of paramount in the library. No library will succeed without affective and efficient service being rendered by the reference librarian. His work has direct contact with user in other to guide and direct such user to the location of information resources. Over years this trend was carried out on the reference desk. That means the user goes to the library to meet the reference librarian and ask the necessary question, The reference librarian in turn responds to such question. However, with the advancement of computer all services in library are being computerized. Therefore the computerization process has made it



necessary for the reference librarian to also computerize his services to stand the test of time from the write trowel can see that reference services have gone beyond the library complex. It is also carried out using telephone, internet, and email channels. Both the reference librarians and their clients should note and act accordingly.

### Recommendations

- Invest in regular training for librarians on emerging technologies and ensure users have access to digital literacy programs.
- Implement multi-channel reference services, such as live chat, email, and social media, to meet users where they are.
- Seek collaborations with other institutions for resource-sharing and advocate for increased funding to expand resource access.
- Support continuous professional development and encourage specialization in emerging fields like digital archiving and data management.
- Engage in strategic planning to secure institutional support, ensuring proper staffing levels, modern tools, and adequate facilities.
- Customize services to accommodate different user needs, such as offering multilingual resources, accessibility tools, and tailored research assistance.
- Provide workshops on information literacy, emphasizing critical evaluation skills to help users navigate and assess the quality of information.
- Adopt strict data protection policies and train staff to ensure ethical handling of user queries and information.

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