Searching for darlings: The quest for professional status

By Daniel F. Ring

Status-anxiety and the Brandeis model of reference service

Larry Oberg's recent article in *C&RL News*, "Rethinking reference: Smashing icons at Berkeley" (May 1993), bears witness to something I have long felt about librarians: they suffer from status-anxiety and need a variety of artifices, or "darlings," to shore up a weak professional identity. Oberg and company would have us believe that the attack on traditional reference service is a response to a variety of workload problems and methodological differences in reference philosophy. He states that reference librarians are "frantic" and that they suffer from "stress, overwork and burnout."[1] He further asserts that the new model, which utilizes a graduate student at the reference desk, more effectively separates reference "into its two logical components: information provision and research support."[2] Graduate students assume the more mundane information and directional questions while reference librarians, ensconced in their offices, await a thundering herd of eager students who have made an "appointment" for a "consultation" during "office hours." Finally, we are to believe that the traditional reference model is not "professional," according to Virginia Massey-Burzia, because it "doesn't look like it expects to be taken seriously."[3]

How valid are these assertions? Are librarians really burned out, frantic, and overworked? Does traditional reference service obscure the difference between information and research? And what about that old chestnut that reference service is not professional—are these canards really true?

I have met few librarians who are overworked and those who are suffer from self-inflicted wounds. Many cannot separate librarian work from clerical work. Indeed, I have seen too many librarians who love to do nitty-gritty, detailed clerical work, who love to split hairs. Burnout, I would suggest, is the result of doing intellectually undemanding and stultifying work. Moreover, it is something that librarians are expected to say. From the librarian's point of view, such tales might be socially useful as they establish a common bond with other librarians. To use jargon such as "frantic," "stress," etc., evokes a certain shared experience. When I hear librarians talking this way, however, I have to wonder how they occupy their time.

Coupled with this observation is that many librarians have not fully engaged the life of the mind, have not, according to Warren G. Haas, "built into their own professional lives a continuing commitment to purposeful professional growth."[4] Their scholarship, if it exists at all, is of an "introspective nature," studies of library institutions and services,[5] or "scissors and paste" bibliographical aids. Whatever the value of this scholarship, it is not the kind of fare that would evoke passion, love, and intellectual curiosity. Does anybody for a minute think that Stephen Jay Gould, Bernard Lewis, Robert Remini, or Arthur S. Link get burned out? The work that they have chosen is sufficiently interesting to keep their minds keen and alert.

Burnout will end when librarians stop dotting the i's and crossing the t's and fully engaging their minds in meaningful intellectual pursuits. I am not really optimistic, however. I think librarians are too comfortable with routines. The structure of routine gives them comfort.

The separation between research and information is specious. A few months ago, I was helping a student do a research paper on the Students for a Democratic Society. "Do we have this book?" he asked. A simple informational

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question, right? Something that a graduate student could have looked up on the OPAC, right? But since I know a fair amount about the "counter-culture," he kept coming back to me during the next two months. My point is that we shouldn't try to second guess the nature of a reference interview. Yes, from time to time things can be so hairy that we can't give a student undivided attention. It seems to me, however, that it would be better to schedule a "research consultation" with the student. Yes, from time to time we do have to point out the location of the restrooms, and change computer paper. So what? If that really makes librarians feel less than "professional," they have serious problems.

The assertion that the present model is not sufficiently professional betrays the insecurities and status-anxieties of those who would seek to smash the "icon" of traditional reference service. They cannot get gratification or seek to

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have a productive career by being a fine reference librarian. No, they must have "clients," forgetting or ignoring that "clients" pay. They ape the manners of the "real" professions—law, medicine, and dentistry—and lavish their jargon with "consultations," "appointments," and "clinics." If this new model is successful, it will be only a matter of time before "the research librarians" have an appointment secretary.

BI and faculty status

This new model is the latest darling in librarians' endless, relentless, and insatiable quest for professional recognition and ego-gratification. When I became an academic librarian in 1975, the darling of the library craft was bibliographic instruction (BI). BI would fulfill the claims of many librarians that they were indeed educators, and thus legitimize their claims for faculty status, the darling of the early 1970s. Both BI and faculty status have proved to be less-than-successful ventures.[6] The long-term effects of BI are not significant, especially when weighed against the huge expenditure of time. Faculty status is not the "rage" any more and has been revoked by some universities. Any-

way, librarians by and large cannot do academic research. One scholar has written that librarians are interested "in the prerequisites of faculty status, but lacked time and training to carry out active research programs." If they do research at all, they seek their "salvation in surveys, statistics, standards and status."[7]

Computer searching

As we moved into the 1980s, a new darling arrived on the scene to save us from a dowdy image—computer search services (CSS). Computers were "sexy." They utilized a language that only a few cognoscenti could master and that suggested kinship with information science. Librarians had to "get into" computers, we were told, or other people would. And librarians got into computers with a frenzy. I read an article some years ago that said that information scientists in the American Society for Information Science were unhappy about the large numbers of librarians who had joined their ranks. The reign of CSS, as it was known, did not last long. CD-ROMs sounded the death knell for much of what had been done "online." After a bit of instruction, just about anybody can operate a CD-ROM. There was no body of arcane knowledge to which we could lay claim.

The Brandeis model

The new model of reference service is the latest darling that seeks to rescue us from the drudgery of being "only" a reference librarian and that will flatter our egos. It has a certain seductiveness and cachet that will appeal to the uninitiated, to those who lack the ballast of philosophy of what reference service is or what our work must be about, to those that are intellectually lazy, and to the bored burnouts who can't find time or take time for intellectually productive work. The architects of the new model are well-intentioned, I suppose. But they are unrealistic. They would have us believe that one can substitute style for substance and think that by changing the setting from the reference desk to an office we can change ourselves and what we think of ourselves as librarians. The title "smashing the icon" is appropriate. They are indeed wreckers and would destroy a model that has served the public well.

Reference work is not for the graduate student or the dilettante. It takes years to become good at it and one's mind must be constantly nourished and honed by interaction with stu-

dents and productive and sustained reading. Moreover, reference work has become more complex. CD-ROMs have replaced many printed indexes and OPACs have replaced card catalogs. In an age of diminishing resources, we must substitute broad book and library knowledge and I doubt if a graduate student can do that. Because of these changes, we must be at the student's beck and call and not they at ours. We must serve at their convenience lest we fail to make an information exchange a research event.

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Chance and serendipity are important ingredients in a reference interview—the chance that a student may want something more than they asked for, the chance that a first-time and successful encounter could lead to a series of productive discussions over the course of a term. Attempts to make invidious distinctions between information and research could mean that we end up in an office waiting like the Maytag repairman. Even worse, confining reference librarians to their offices raises the real possibility that they could end up being research assistants for the teaching faculty. It is better for us to be in the "trenches" where we belong than sitting in our offices, feeling good about status.

Notes

[1] Larry Oberg, "Rethinking reference: Smashing icons at Berkeley," *C&RL News* 54 (May 1993): 265.

[2] Ibid., p. 266.

[3] Ibid., p. 265.

[4] Warren G. Haas, "Librarianship and the CLR, 1969–1987," in *Academic Librarianship: Past, Present, and Future,* eds. John Richardson Jr. and Jinnie Y. Davis (Englewood, Colo.: Libraries Unlimited, 1989): p. 9.

[5] Wayne Wiegand, "Library history research in the United States," *Libraries & Culture* 25 (Winter 1990): 108.

[6] Tom Eadie, "Immodest proposals: User instruction for students does not work," *Library Journal* 115 (15 October 1990): 42–45.

[7] Maynard Brichford, "The context for a history of the American Library Association," *Libraries & Culture* 26 (Spring 1991): 353. ∎