

President's Column

Libraries and the Telephone: A Look Back and a Look Around

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PLATE I. *Telex in operation in the Commerce, Science and Technology Libraries.*

A Telex teletypewriter machine being used at Sheffield City Libraries in England, circa 1963.¹

A few weeks ago many Louisiana academic librarians attended the 2012 LOUIS Users' Conference in Port Allen. As usual for the LUC conference, all the sessions were excellent (though I cannot speak for my own), and some were conducted by ACRL-LA members. A sizable percentage of the LUC sessions were, as ever, about subjects like emerging technologies, the latest features of publisher databases, and integrating new

digital services into the library. The titles of these often put the trend right in the title, like "Cutting the Cord: Circulating Wireless Laptops and Migrating to the Cloud" or "EBook trends in Academic Libraries." I have noticed over the past couple years that library conferences always bring with them forward-looking subjects, inspiring and showing others how to implement these newer technologies.

Was it always this way? After all, the future eventually becomes the present and later the past. I have given this some thought, and unless someone corrects me, it would appear that librarianship has indeed been both adapting and fretting over new technologies (fortunately more of the latter, I believe). Even I am rather amazed that the Apple iPhone (and its patent-infringing imitators), as ubiquitous as it seems now, was only released in 2007, just over 5 years ago. The iPad is even younger, unveiled in 2010. In human years that might not be so long, but in technology years it has been much longer than that. In that time, adoption of these devices among libraries and our patrons has become common. The touch screen smartphone in particular is now hard to escape rather than hard to find.

For years, the ULM Library Reference Department was tracking the numbers of email questions we received. When it came time to re-evaluate our statistics sheets a few years ago, we decided that it was no longer necessary to do so, and started counting them like any other kind of reference question. It wasn't relevant anymore whether a patron contacted us by email. That is the point when a technology is inextricably linked to our libraries and lives: when we no longer need to talk about it. It faded into pedestrianism rather than obscurity.

Such has happened to the telephone, which is likely not going away for a long

time due to its noisy immediacy. For example, some of us know that phoning a database's support line is often faster than email, even if the call is put on hold for a while. As technology ages and is better adapted into our lives over time, it becomes more of a permanent fixture, cemented into our daily routines so well that we barely think about it. The telephone could be one of the best examples (if not the best example) of this in information technology. It was once a privilege, yet now we assume that everyone has a contact number of some kind, to the point that forms and applications for various services require one. Offices, business, and the ilk are all expected to have phones, and libraries are no exception; it would seem strange if they did not. In librarianship, the telephone is very much integrated at the reference desk and elsewhere, such that we usually do not think of it as a special service; it's just the phone at the reference desk. Telephone directories, once valued ready reference materials, are now practically unwanted refuse.

Yet it was not always so. In literature of the past, being able to call a library and ask a question was so unique that it had its own special name, "telephone reference service." Some libraries still use this phrase: The Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore proudly claims on its Telephone Reference Services web page that they have had it since 1967.² The New York Public Library has been doing it since 1968 when a separate department was created specifically for handling phone traffic. It has enjoyed some degree of fame in New York and has its own trivia book, *Book of Answers: The New York Public Library Telephone Reference Service's Most Unusual and Entertaining Questions*.³ Telephone technologies were being used and written about in Louisiana as early as the 1940s: In 1946 the *Louisiana Library Association Bulletin* published an article titled "Telephone Service at the New Orleans Public Library."⁴ These days a

library only highlights the services that are new, while the phone and even email by now are a given. A library might have a separate department for answering phones (or other devices) if they can afford it,⁵ but patrons need not know that.

In the 1978 book *The Information Society: Issues and Answers*, derived from the 1977 ALA Annual Conference, there is an essay with eerily familiar content on dealing with technological changes, budget cuts, and the future. The only really dated parts are the ones mentioning specific technologies: in a subsection on surviving adverse economic changes the author suggests marketing the library by going out into public places. "Why not have floating information librarians stationed in airports, supermarkets and department stores (to name a few) with telephone access to information materials."⁶

Looking back on this, it does not sound like an effective idea, as it would require a librarian to call another librarian to consult the *Encyclopedia of Associations* and then report back so that the first librarian can give the patron an answer. With the internet, today such a scheme would be more feasible (yet still difficult), but in 1978, a librarian did think of trying it by phone — and "why not" indeed? At the time, the phone was the fastest, easiest, and most cost-effective way to make information travel.

Despite the fact that all living librarians were born after the telephone came to prominence (in developed nations, anyway), doing customer service over the phone is still a skill that must be learned, and library schools have not forgotten this. William A. Katz's *Introduction to Reference Work* textbook, which seems to be a bit popular in LIS curriculum, contains some advice on how to balance the ringing phone and patrons waiting in line. It sounds like a simple thing, but those who have been busy at a reference desk before know that it's not. Katz also points out that email can only be as good as a

phone call "if the answers are prompt."⁷ After all, ringing phones can't be ignored like text messages can. They are still the most immediate substitute to meeting in person.

Margaret Hutchins' 1944 *Introduction to Reference Work* also covers the telephone, including what might seem obvious, such as the idea that the reference phone needs to be kept near ready reference books,⁸ or that it's sometimes hard to "transmit accurately some kinds of data orally."⁹ Like modern internet technology, the rise of the phone in libraries did not come without some friction. Hutchins writes, "In some large city libraries the telephone reference service is a great problem and desperate librarians complain of it as an interference with service to the readers who come to the library." She then spends about two paragraphs talking about how to divide time between the in-person patrons and the phone.¹⁰

Goodness, someone is calling the library to get some information? How awful! Whatever shall we do? It sounds silly now, doesn't it? How did a seemingly simple device annoy these librarians? To be fair, we have become incredibly accustomed to a world where contact with someone else is just a phone call away (at the very least). Without that kind of connection to the world around us, the world itself was different, with a different pace of life, and that is no small thing.

These issues with the telephone have not disappeared over time, even if they are not necessarily in vogue. In 2007 an article by librarian Cheryl McCain appeared in *The Reference Librarian*, "Telephone Calls Received at an Academic Library's Reference Desk: A New Analysis," examining whether or not telephone calls received at a reference desk required the expertise of a librarian. She found that about 66% of the questions did not necessitate a librarian's talents, but acknowledged that customer service

professionalism is a factor.¹¹

Yet even in the 1960s and before, libraries did find uses for telephones other than only talking about reference facts. An article about Mail-Order Library Services (now there's something you don't hear about that much anymore) in the 1976 *Encyclopedia of Library Information Science* mentions a "Dial-a-Book" service which a public library used in tandem with mail order home delivery.¹² Tellingly, the paragraph doesn't explain anything at all about how about what "Dial-a-Book" was or how it worked. In 1976, a reader probably would have known about other common "Dial-a-_____" numbers, such as "dial-a-joke" and "dial-a-prayer" lines. Lines like these were popular at the time as a way of sharing information over long distances, very often in a recorded format which callers could listen to (though not always). A dial-a-joke line would have, of course, a tape playing a bunch of jokes. Yet reading the words "Dial-a-Book" in 2012 seems strange because these lines faded from memory by the 1990s. The article's author also supposes that the ease and approachability of mail-order services could be increased by "the advent of picture phones." Don't laugh yet, though — she also says, "in the halcyon days when every household has its own computer terminal, book and microprint formats may both be superseded or supplemented by on-line access to the entire catalog data base via cathode ray tube... copyright problems, rather than technology appear to be the major stumbling block to full-text computer storage..."¹³ That is more or less correct, although "halcyon" is not quite the word for it.

Indeed, step by step, the technology changed over the decades, though the telephone was a part of it along much of the way. OCLC was formed in 1967, and course remains a giant of library technology while other names and acronyms have been

forgotten.¹⁴ In 1968 the *LLA Bulletin* published an article called “Teletypewriter Exchange Service,” which was as exciting as information could get at the time, though not quite the Internet.¹⁵ Telephone networks eventually bought us further use of “telematics” for communication, which allowed such services as videotex, fax machine, and teletex.¹⁶ Teletex was preceded by telex, which not was digital, yet still was a text communication network and subscription service. It became available in the 1930s. Either of these tele-typewriter systems were used for many years until they were replaced by other networks.¹⁷ Libraries did use Telex for communication, and it was notable enough to be part of a poster session display at a library conference in 1960.¹⁸ In the 1980s, a library could connect to databases this way, including the DIALOG Service, which would accept international “TELEX,” although “the user bears the communication charges directly.”¹⁹ Incidentally, library databases of the past seem peculiar looking back on them: According to DIALOG's 1985 *Database Catalog*, common networks in North America were TYMNET, TELENET, UNINET (among others), each of which cost \$10 per hour connected— and that was only the beginning of the costs.²⁰ Again, it is now taken for granted everything is just “the internet.” The most trouble one typically has is paying or logging in to a site correctly, and simply looking at dialog.com is free.

A 1972 book, *Library Practice in Hospitals*, explains how to run a health sciences library of its time, including a chapter on information networks, which it says had been used by libraries since 1966.²¹ Academic libraries were among these. “Many Universities developed ‘consortia’ following the funding of the Higher Education Act of 1965 (Public Law 89-329)... these ‘consortia’ frequently operate some type of telecommunications network among the member universities to expedite the sharing of

library materials."²² The most frequent use of these networks was interlibrary loan, though they could do other things, such as collection development, training, verifying citations, and even printing "computer-produced bibliographies" from services such as MEDLARS,²³ or Medical Literature Analysis and Retrieval System, which was important for its time and even supported Boolean searching.²⁴

Despite the appearance of computers in the 1960s, expanded use of the telephone still continued to meet some resistance. A 1971 book called *Libraries and Neighborhood Information Centers* reprints papers read for a conference organized by the University of Illinois School of Library Science on the subject of creating information services centered on connecting the community to social agencies, civic entities, and etcetera. Among these is a paper from Robert J. Luce, head of the Free Library of Philadelphia at the time, the end of which I'll reproduce fully due to its interesting tone:

For years libraries have been seeking new ways to place a book in someone's hands, while perhaps finding not so many ways to advertise telephone services.

There is perhaps a danger that people would become more dependent if they only had to pick up a phone to ask a question. Maybe librarians would have to do more work. Maybe fewer people would visit the library itself. One can only assume that a strong telephone service would serve all people, scholarly and uneducated, rich and poor. As before, patrons with difficult questions would be encouraged to come to the library. And in an era when cities are running out of money and books seem less than necessary, great information centers could still emerge as obviously

essential features of modern life.²⁵

Even though the year is 1971, and even though it is the telephone and not the Internet being discussed here, somehow it feels the same. Librarians perhaps feeling threatened by offering telephone reference? Just you wait, 1971 librarians, you haven't seen anything yet! It's comforting to think that libraries and librarians have had a relationship of caution mixed with pioneering enthusiasm in regard to information technology. Budgetary concerns have also haunted us through the decades like a lingering specter. It's very trite, but the more things change, the more they stay the same.

What all this means is that librarians should never be made to feel like the poor relation to other information technology professionals because of our association with *The Book*. Libraries have been moving along with trends for decades, regardless of whether certain librarians have liked it or not. Keep doing as you always have been doing, and do what's right for your patrons, because that's where the real power of a library lies, as we all know. As library history shows, it seems to have been working.

Do keep writing and speaking about how you and/or your library use devices, whether new, not so new, or old. Not all technologies reach the point of universal familiarity and ubiquity. *Second Life*, for example, never had such potential despite the enthusiasm some librarians had (or still have) for it. But does that mean that emerging technologies should be ignored? By no means! After all, someone has to try these out to help the rest of us determine if they worth our time. A couple years ago I tried a test installation of LimeSurvey, a free and open source survey software, for ACRL-LA to use as an alternative to SurveyMonkey. The former was not as good as the latter, and we did not use it. LimeSurvey 2.0 has recently been released. Is it any better? There is only one

way to know for sure. As the Mythbusters say, "Failure is always an option." That is true because failure is a "result," and there is useful data to be found in it: Telling other librarians about how your project didn't work exactly as planned is just as useful as when everything worked perfectly (which will hardly ever happens). You might want to remember that the next time everything is going wrong; if it's any consolation, content like that in writing or a presentation is extremely useful to your audience in that it is realistic and acknowledges the true risks involved. What was "Dial-A-Book" and why didn't it become successful and famous? I'm curious.

It is possible that landline telephones as we know them will disappear in favor of VoIP or exclusive cell phone use. I do think that the telephone will remain with us for a long time in one form or another, though. No other communications device seems to have the same "drop everything you're doing and work on my problems right now!" power that a ringing telephone has, especially when you are trying to do something else. The problems of 1944 are still our problems in a multitude of ways, and by 2066 people might still be complaining about incessant invites to "FarmVille Retro Edition" on Facebook.

¹ Collison, Robert L. *Library Assistance to Readers*. New York: Philosophical Library Inc., 1963. xiii.

² "Telephone Reference Services." Enoch Pratt Free Library. Accessed October 28, 2012. <http://www.prattlibrary.org/locations/infoservices/index.aspx?id=7644>.

³ Ramirez, Anthony. "Library Phone Answerers Survive the Internet." *The New York Times*. Last modified June 19, 2006. <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/19/nyregion/19answer.html?pagewanted=all>.

⁴ Ruckert, Margaret. "Index: Volumes 1-31 1937-1968." *Louisiana Library Association Bulletin*. (1969). 32.

⁵ Katz, William A. *Reference Services and Reference Processes*. Vol. 2 of *Introduction to Reference Work*. Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2002. 34.

⁶ Boissé, Joseph A. and Carla J. Stoffle . "Epilogue: Issues and Answers: The Participants' Views." In *The Information Society: Issues and Answers*, edited by Josey, E.J., 110-121. Phoenix: Oryx Press, 1978. 115.

⁷ William A. Katz. *Reference Services and Reference Processes*, 34.

⁸ Hutchins, Margaret. *Introduction to Reference Work*. Chicago: American Library Association, 1944. 134.

⁹ Margaret Hutchins, *Introduction to Reference Work*, 175.

¹⁰ Margaret Hutchins, *Introduction to Reference Work*, 173-174.

¹¹ McCain, Cheryl. "Telephone Calls Received at an Academic Library's Reference Desk: A New Analysis." *Reference Librarian* 47, no. 2 (March 2007): 5-16. *Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts with Full Text*, EBSCOhost (accessed October 31, 2012). 14-16.

¹² Owen, Jeanne C. *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science*, ed. Allen Kent, Harold Lancour, and Jay E. Daily (New York: Marcel Dekker Inc., 1976), s.v. "Mail-Order Library Service." 460.

¹³ Jeanne C. Owen, *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science*, 466-7.

¹⁴ "About OCLC: Cooperation," OCLC, accessed October 27, 2012, <http://www.oclc.org/us/en/about/cooperation/default.htm>.

¹⁵ Margaret Ruckert, "Index: Volumes 1-31 1937-1968," 32.

¹⁶ Watters, Carolyn. *Dictionary of Information Science and Technology*. Boston:

Academic Press, Inc, 1992. 224.

¹⁷ *Britannica Concise Encyclopedia*. Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2009. s.v. "telex," <http://ezproxy.louislibraries.org:2048/login?url=http%3A%2F%2Fliterati.credoreference.com%2Fcontent%2Fentry%2Febconconcise%2Ftelex%2F0> (accessed October 28, 2012.)

¹⁸ Robert L. Collison, *Library Assistance to Readers*, Plate 8.

¹⁹ DIALOG Information Services. *DIALOG Database Catalog*. Palo Alto: DIALOG Information Services, Inc., 1985. 3.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Duggan, Maryann. "Health Science Library and Information Networks." In *Library Practice in Hospitals: A Basic Guide*, edited by Harold Bloomquist, Alan M. Rees, Norman S. Stearns, and Helen Yast, 243-262. Cleveland: Case Western Reserve University Press, 1972. 246.

²² Maryann Duggan, *Library Practice in Hospitals*, 247.

²³ Maryann Duggan, *Library Practice in Hospitals*, 255-258.

²⁴ Maryann Duggan, *Library Practice in Hospitals*, 284-5.

²⁵ Luce, Robert J. "Model Cities Community Information Center, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania." In *Libraries and Neighborhood Information Centers*, edited by Carol L. Kronus and Linda Crowe, 115-118. Urbana: University of Illinois Graduate School of Library Science, 1971. 117-118.