"My mother can't quite understand why I decided to go to library school"
What patrons say about library staff when asking government documents reference questions at depository libraries

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Abstract

This article examines the written comments of proxies participating in an unobtrusive nationwide study of government documents reference service in Canada. Proxies submitted overviews about the quality of reference service they received. On the whole, proxies were disappointed in how they were treated by depository library staff. For example, reference personnel were criticized for providing numerous unmonitored referrals, telling users that the questions were too difficult, and for not being sufficiently knowledgeable about government documents. Some aspects of reference service, such as use of multiple sources and collaboration among staff, received positive comments. Proxies also made a number of salient recommendations for improving government documents reference service in Canada. If depository libraries are to survive as vital links in the transmission of government information to the public, the knowledge level and service ethic of staff needs significant improvement. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Governments at all levels in the United States and Canada are rapidly moving to the electronic dissemination of official information through Web-based protocols. Many depository libraries, however, still have large collections of historical print material and will continue to do so well into the future. In this dual context, competent and experienced reference personnel skilled in navigating the maze of government information are more necessary than ever. Effectiveness in providing accurate answers to reference queries at depository libraries is a central element in the provision of equitable public access to official information.

Accordingly, rigorous evaluation of government documents reference service becomes an important element in assessing the extent of equitable access. Such evaluations have been few. In 1983, McClure and Hernon unobtrusively examined academic libraries located in the Northeastern and Southwestern regions of the United States[1]. Based on 340 questions, results indicated that library staff members answered government documents questions with an overall accuracy rate of 37 percent. Reference staff in the Northeast did far better than reference workers in the Southwest; the former answered questions correctly at a rate of 49 percent, while the latter did so only 20 percent of the time. Focusing on behavioral aspects of the reference process and using the Wisconsin-Ohio Reference Evaluation program[2], Parker reported a 72.3 percent success rate at one academic depository in North Carolina[3]. Dilevko and Dolan, in a nationwide unobtrusive study of Canadian government documents reference service in which 488 questions were asked, reported a success rate of 29.3 percent (when counting complete answers only) and 42.4 percent (when counting complete and partially complete answers)[4].

The findings of Dilevko and Dolan[5] supported McClure and Hernon[6] with respect to the low level of government documents reference service, as measured by accurate answers. McClure and Hernon's 37 percent overall success rate falls almost exactly midway between the two figures reported by Dilevko and Dolan. In one sense, this is not surprising, since both studies used unobtrusive methodologies. When Parker employed a different methodology, however, government documents reference success rates approximately doubled to 72.3 percent. Her approach consisted of using a two-part Reference Transaction Assessment questionnaire: the reference staff person assisting the patron filled out one part; the patron completed the second part. Separate scales measured success in finding the requisite information, satisfaction with the located materials, and satisfaction with the reference interview interaction. Parker argued that "any instrument that attempts to measure the quality of reference service needs to allow users to differentiate" between "satisfaction with the manner in which services were provided and the quality of information received"[7]. To say the least, the discrepancy in the findings about the quality of reference service between these two types of studies is large. Indeed, it reflects the contrasting viewpoints expressed in Durrance[8], Hults[9], and Tyckoson[10] about the value of equating good reference service with complete and accurate answers to patron queries.

The present study used written open-ended comments of proxies asking government documents reference questions at depository libraries in an attempt to determine the quality of service they received. As such, it is closer to the methodology of Parker[11] insofar as it relies on the feelings and impressions of patrons. Yet, unlike Parker's approach, users did not fill out a limited-response questionnaire while in the presence of a staff member. For Parker and other

studies of this kind, high success rates may have been due to patrons unconsciously believing that positive assessments of recently received service were somehow expected of them—the extraneous variable of social desirability.

2. Background

Dilevko and Dolan[12] conducted an unobtrusive examination of reference encounters dealing with government documents questions in full and selective depository libraries in all five geographic areas of Canada (Atlantic Provinces, Québec, Ontario, Prairie Provinces, British Columbia and the northern territories). Full depository libraries, of which there are 48 in Canada, automatically receive all publications listed in the *Weekly Checklist* of Canadian government publications. Typically, full depositories are located in public libraries in large urban centers and in major academic research libraries. Full depositories have the financial and staff resources to house, maintain, and provide professional access to federal government information. The 754 selective depositories in Canada choose items they wish to order for their collections from the *Weekly Checklist.* Selective academic libraries are typically located in undergraduate university libraries and in community college institutions, while selective public depositories are typically located in public libraries in smaller urban centers. The test questions cover major categories of Canadian federal documents of interest to various sectors of the public and were modeled after actual queries such as those compiled by the Inquiry Desk of the Transport Canada Library and Information Center in 1986.

This study was conducted using paid proxies. Quality of reference service was operationally defined as the percentage of complete or combined complete and partially complete answers to 15 government documents questions. Selection of tested libraries was based on a proportionally stratified cluster sample. On the first level, proportional stratification was effected on the basis of the five geographic areas of Canada. On the second level, clusters of cities and towns within the geographic areas were identified, and a convenience sample of public and academic depository libraries was taken to reflect the proportion of these libraries in the depository system as a whole. Fifteen questions were asked 488 times at 104 libraries in 30 metropolitan census areas as defined by Statistics Canada. A total of 325 questions was asked in-person and 163 questions were asked over the telephone. Proxies were recruited from students enrolled in a Masters of Library and Information Science (MLIS) program at a Canadian university. Recruitment was completely open; that is, it was not restricted to students who had taken a class with either of the authors of the study. The major criterion of recruitment was the need for proxies who could geographically be present in far-flung locations in Canada. Questions were asked from December 10, 1997 to February 10, 1998—a period during which many students traditionally return to their hometowns for the holiday season. Questions asked in each of the five geographic areas reflect approximately the population distribution of Canada as determined by the 1996 Census. Seventy-five questions (15.3 percent) were asked in the Atlantic region; 105 (21.5 percent) in Québec; 165 (33.8 percent) in Ontario; 90 (18.5 percent) in the Prairie Provinces; and 53 (10.9 percent) in British Columbia and the northern territories. In order to ensure complete national coverage, questions were asked in each province and in at least one of the territories. Among other things, proxies were asked to record whether the depository library at which they asked their question(s) had

a separate government documents reference service area, the day of the week their questions were asked, and the amount of time a reference staff member spent with them.

Complete answers were provided to 29.3 percent (143 questions) of the 488 questions. When complete and partially complete answers are taken together, the success rate climbed to 42.4 percent (207 questions). Library staff referred 20 percent (98 questions) of the 488 questions. No answers or incorrect answers to questions were received 37.5 percent of the time (183 questions). Academic full depositories, at 39.4 percent (50 of 127 questions) achieved the highest rate for complete answers. Public full depositories provided complete answers 32.2 percent of the time (19 of 59). Academic selective depositories performed at 29.2 percent (19 of 65), and public selective depositories lagged behind, with 23.2 percent (55 of 237). More complete or partially complete answers were received when questions were delivered in-person (45.9 percent) than by telephone (35.6 percent). Conversely, more referrals were given to telephone questions (23.9 percent) than to in-person questions (18.2 percent). Telephone questions were answered less successfully than in-person questions in all types of libraries. The greatest divergence occurs in public full depositories, where complete or partially complete answers were given to in-person questions 57.5 percent of the time, but only 36.8 percent of the time when asked by telephone. A similar gap exists at academic full depository libraries, while selective depositories showed smaller differences.

Proxies asked 44.3 percent of questions (216 questions) at depository libraries that had separate government reference areas and 52.6 percent at depository libraries that did not have such separate areas (257 questions). About 3 percent of the time proxies indicated that they were unclear about whether the depository had such a separate area. Depository libraries without separate areas for government documents reference service answered 24.9 percent of the questions completely (64 of 257). They provided complete or partially complete answers 39.3 percent of the time (101 of 257). Depository libraries that had separate areas for government documents reference service provided 35.2 percent complete answers (76 of 216) and 47.2 percent complete or partially complete answers (102 of 216).

In those reference encounters where a staff member spent up to four minutes with a patron, complete answers were received only 11.3 percent of the time (18 of 160 questions), while complete or partially complete answers were received at a rate of 21.3 percent (34 of 160). As the amount of time spent with a patron increased, the number of complete or partially complete answers also increased. For example, spending between five and nine minutes with a patron is associated with complete answers 31.9 percent of the time (38 of 119), and with complete or partially complete answers 43.7 percent of the time (52 of 119). In those instances when a staff member spent more than 10 minutes with a patron (i.e., the categories 10–14 minutes; 15–19; and 20 or more), the rate of complete or partially complete answers rose to 56.8 percent (96 of 169). Moreover, when staff members devoted 20 or more minutes, the rate of complete or partially complete answers rose to 65.2 percent (30 of 46). Forty questions were answered through a "phoneback" and are thus not counted in the calculations in this paragraph.

3. Methodology

After completing their round of questions, the proxies were requested to describe how they felt about the service they had just received at the reference desks of depository librar-

ies. Some proxies asked their questions by themselves at depository libraries, while others opted to take along friends or relatives. Proxies were asked to write down their overall impressions in an open-ended fashion, concentrating both on the positive and negative aspects of their experiences when searching for government information. They were not given a specific set of evaluative questions to answer, nor were they channeled in a particular direction by preliminary instructions. They were also not asked to produce, on a deadline, a certain amount of commentary, as measured by page counts. Rather, a deliberate choice was made to allow the proxies to speak about their concerns in an environment free of pressure or time constraints. In this way, proxies were given the chance to reflect on their experiences and emphasize the most salient features of their library visits. In addition, proxies were not required to submit written comments. They were merely urged to do so, and payment of honoraria did not depend on the submission of comments. This was done so that they would not feel obligated in any way to produce accounts of their visits just for the sake of receiving payment. Such coerced testimony might have been tainted insofar as proxies may have unconsciously believed that payment was contingent on a set of expected responses. The list of government documents reference questions asked by proxies at Canadian depository libraries, and to which they sometimes refer in their comments, is provided in the Appendix.

4. Results

Of the 30 proxies participating in the study, 21 opted to submit written responses that ranged in length from three paragraphs to three pages. All written statements were received within two months of completion of the study, and most were received between three and four weeks after the proxy had returned the package of questions. In other words, ample time had elapsed so that first impressions could be tempered by a certain amount of perspective.

The range of emotions expressed in the proxy accounts covered a broad spectrum. Table 1 summarizes the frequency with which proxies used certain adjectival descriptions of the service they received. The most common adjective employed to describe government documents reference service was "helpful," followed by "friendly" and "disappointing." Although the number of positive adjectives (32) is almost equal to the number of negative adjectives (36), there were numerous accounts, almost all of them negative, which could not be classified by adjectival description. These accounts provide an insight into the depth of anger and frustration that proxies experienced when confronted with library staff who, in their opinion, did not provide good service. To be sure, some proxies had both good and bad experiences with government documents reference staff, and two proxies had nothing but positive comments. Some proxies made useful recommendations, while others were adamant that they would never again make use of library personnel when searching for government information.

The main themes raised by the proxies are discussed in the following sections, and are grouped according to whether they believed library personnel were or were not helpful at the reference desk. Separate sections discuss the lack of subject knowledge displayed by reference staff, the overall feelings proxies had at the completion of the study, and salient recommendations made by proxies. Indeed, their comments about the various ways in which government documents reference staff failed to provide adequate service are remarkably similar to the experiences categorized by Ross and Dewdney, who identify 10 strategies of "negative

Table 1
Descriptions of reference service quality

Positive descriptions	(frequency)	Negative descriptions	(frequency)
Helpful	(11)	Disappointing	(7)
Friendly	(7)	Rude	(6)
Nice	(3)	Indifferent	(3)
Efficient	(2)	Quite poor	(3)
Polite	(2)	Uncaring	(3)
Professional	(1)	"Get rid of me"	(2)
"Go the extra mile"	(1)	Appalling	(2)
Worked very hard	(1)	Not useful	(1)
Caring	(1)	Not interested	(1)
Courteous	(1)	Not courteous	(1)
Wonderful	(1)	Not cordial	(1)
Pleasant	(1)	Abrupt	(1)
		Dreadful	(1)
		Bewildered	(1)
		Hostile	(1)
		Unpleasant	(1)
		"Half-assed"	(1)

closure" by which staff members end a reference transaction without satisfying the information needs of the user[13]. Ross and Dewdney contended that a key goal for library reference staff is processing users through the system in as expeditious fashion as possible. "Increasingly harried as fewer people do more work and face longer line-ups of users," librarians "win" the reference game "when the transaction is completed and [they] can move on to the next question." While such strategies of "negative closure" allow staff to deal with more information requests, users are frustrated at the quality of service they have received.

The 10 strategies in question are: (1) unmonitored referral, defined as "a situation in which the reference librarian gives the patron a call number or refers the patron to a source within the library but makes no effort to check that the sources is ever found, or, when found, actually answers the question; (2) reference personnel "immediately refer the user somewhere else . . . to another floor within the library or to another agency altogether"; (3) the librarian "implies that the user should have something else first before asking for reference help"; (4) staff members try "to get the user to accept more easily found information instead of the information actually needed"; (5) the librarian "warns the user to expect defeat because the topic is too hard, obscure, large, elusive, or otherwise unpromising"; (6) staff members "encourage the user to abort the transaction voluntarily"; (7) librarians signal "nonverbally that the transaction is over by tone of voice, turning away, or starting another activity"; (8) staff state "explicitly that the search has reached a dead end"; (9) the librarian "claims that the information is not in the library or else doesn't exist at all"; and (10) the librarian "goes off to track down a document but then never returns"[14].

As shown below, government documents reference personnel also employed all of these negative strategies, originally identified when patrons were not asking government documents reference questions.

4.1. Negative impressions of reference service quality

4.1.1. The unmonitored referral in the electronic age

Many proxies commented on the minimal level of help they received after initial contact with a staff member. Typically, the patron was given a Web site address, and nothing more. In effect, this action amounts to the librarian "point[ing] in the direction of the shelves, but . . . giv[ing] no indication of where the user should look" [15]. To be sure, proxies were sometimes pointed in the right direction, but they were subsequently left on their own. Accordingly, the "unmonitored referral" is alive and well in the electronic age. Instead of sending users to bookshelves, staff now vaguely send them to the Web. One proxy wrote that

> For many of the questions I was le[]d to the Federal Government Web page but there was little to no help after they found my initial starting point. In almost every case the librarian did not actually find my answer. He/she would lead me to where they thought I should look and then leave me. Off they would go to help another patron. If I was having difficulty the librarian would not have known because they never, not once, came to see if I found what I was looking for. I had to wave at them to come over to my terminal, or go back to the desk if I was having problems. On one occasion the librarians were just sitting at the desk chatting while I and other patrons were trying to find the answers to our questions. If my mother were asking these questions she probably would not have been so persistent and she probably would not have been able to work on her own.

Particularly troubling in this report is the picture of librarians "sitting at the desk chatting" while patrons unsuccessfully search for relevant information. The attitude of the reference staff in this example not only displays a marked disregard for patrons, but also a disquieting lack of professionalism. The body language of the staff members here is tantamount to telling patrons that, first, the minimal amount of help that was initially provided should be sufficient and, second, if the information still cannot be located, then the problem lies with the patron and not with the initial set of instructions. Chatting among co-workers here takes precedence over proactive helping behaviors that may alleviate patron stress and confusion; roving reference service, for example, is not offered. Patrons are left to fend for themselves as best they can. Some may find what it is they are searching for, others will no doubt spend long periods of time exploring unfruitful avenues, and still others will become frustrated and give up.

Staff assume that the mere act of providing a single gateway Web address constitutes good service. However, electronic sources of information are no less complex than print sources, and not all patrons, especially older adults such as the proxy's mother mentioned in this example, may be adept at navigating Web pages, let alone understanding the structure and authority of Web documentation. Two other proxies had similar experiences with staff who assumed that their job was done the moment a single Web address was given.

> A number of times the librarian would provide me with a Web site address rather than a printed source. That was fine except that often it seemed like they were trying to get rid of me by supplying a piece of an answer with little evidence that the response would ac-

tually be there—and there would be no follow-up if the response was not found on the Web site and no alternatives were supplied.

In this instance, it would appear that a Web site address is being used as a shortcut response intended to "get rid of" a patron, with no follow-up and no suggested alternatives should the original Web address fail to meet an information need. Noteworthy, too, is the proxy's feeling that staff is unsure of whether a response really exists in the source to which they direct patrons. Nonetheless, in this example, the patron was at least provided with a starting point. Other patrons were not so fortunate.

> On several occasions, I was directed to the Web with no direction or actual URL to go by. I feel that the average patron would be at a disadvantage in this case, because often the [required] information was buried and required some internet skills to retrieve.

Again, the Web seems to be functioning as a "one-size-fits-all" source. There is no indication, in the above three quotations, that library staff are aware of the problems that patrons may encounter in finding information on the Web. Moreover, there is little indication that staff are prepared to aid patrons in finding their way in the electronic realm. Staff treat the Web as a potentially rich mass of material that, because of its vast extent and unfamiliarity, is likely to contain the sought-after information. But what is the difference between telling a patron that her answer could be found in any one of thousands of books physically housed in the library, and telling that same individual that her answer is probably located on the Web? Library staff seem to be missing an opportunity to establish themselves as indispensable guides to, and teachers of, the intricacies and organizational structure of Web-based documents.

Reference personnel may argue that the relatively recent introduction of Web tools, as well as their constant evolution, makes it more difficult to provide detailed and knowledgeable reference service using electronic sources than using traditional sources. Yet, the same lack of concern shown to patrons directed towards the Web in search of an answer to government documents reference question was also in evidence when library staff did not suggest using the Web as an information source. "I was often pointed towards a stack of shelves and told to 'Check there' with little or no direction as to which texts may be of help," wrote one proxy. Another lamented that "we were merely pointed towards what [staff members] thought might contain the answers and left to our own devices. In one case [my boyfriend] asked a question at the public library and the reference person told him that they didn't have that information and never even looked at him." Still another proxy states that the library staff "pretty much put a very small effort into looking the subject up on the library computer, which listed the library's stocks, and then they said, well you can check there if you like, I doubt if you'll find what you need. . . . There was a bit of an attitude that I should be able to find what I needed myself."

In sum, the unmonitored referral occurs both with traditional print sources and electronic sources. From one perspective, it is even easier to invoke the seemingly "magical" names of the Web and the internet as a solution to all problems than it is to jot down, on a slip of paper, a series of call numbers for books or reports that the patron is to browse in the hopes of locating a piece of necessary information. The Web is imbued with a mystique of omnipotence,

and the mere mention of it may induce, in some patrons, a feeling that immediate help is moments away. But, as one proxy states, this tactic may be a sign of a more fundamental problem, namely, reference personnel who are attempting to hide their lack of skills. She relates how, "[o]n some occasions I was met with hostility and rudeness. This, I believe had less to do with me than it had to do with the librarian realizing their own ignorance and inability to deal with the situation. . . . On two occasions at the public library, I was told that I might want to check the internet for myself."

4.1.2. Physically and psychologically getting rid of the user

Referring a user "somewhere else, preferably far away" was another common tactic employed by reference staff answering government documents reference questions. One proxy asking about parliamentary procedure wrote:

> The reference gentleman told me that he thought there were some books on the rules governing the House of Commons but these were on the first floor. No attempt was made to leave his post or explain further where I was to look; he did offer to call a friend of his who worked at the provincial legislature who might have a more ready source.

A number of other proxies were told that questions of this type were best answered at the local university. When they went to the university, they found that government documents reference service was provided only during very limited hours. Another proxy wrote that, even when she persisted, she was given only the vaguest of referrals.

> For a full depository with a well staffed government documents reference desk, I was disappointed in the service. For all of the questions asked, the librarians couldn't care less if I found the correct answer or not. It seemed as if their main drive was to give me something and do it quickly. When I asked about the aerial photographs, the lady looked at me and said, "I have no idea." The funny part was that she intended to leave me with this answer but when I didn't go away, she realized that maybe she should give me something. If I recall correctly, she gave me a phone number that I later discovered was out of service.

Staff also tried to suggest to users that they should have done something else prior to asking their question, as illustrated in the following statement.

> I felt that several of the librarians were not interested in helping me, and in fact resented the fact that I had so little information on each question. Many of the librarians expected me to know more about my questions than I would expect of the average user: i.e. they expected me to know the Act or Bill numbers and claimed that without said numbers they were unable to produce an answer.

Another proxy, when asking a question about the price farmers in Canada receive for barley, was asked to distinguish between prices, payments, and subsidies. The type of additional technical information requested in these two instances by library staff fudges the issue. Many users do not come to the library prepared with a wealth of details. Indeed, they often arrive with only the vaguest of notions of what they want. Thus, when they are told that they must do additional work before anything can be found at the depository library, users may become discouraged.

Staff also tried to induce users "to accept more easily found information instead of the information actually needed"[16]. One proxy wrote as follows about a request for pricing and ordering information about a government publication.

> A somewhat odd experience occurred at one of the Academic Full Depositories. I have, or think I do, a very direct and clear way of speaking. I had mentioned to the . . . staff [member] that I wanted this specific ordering information about this one book by this author, first name, last name. Despite a few more attempts on my part to underscore what I was asking (Jill Wherrett, Aboriginal Self-Government), the [library worker] instead seemed not to focus on what was asked but just what their collection actually held [and] gave [me] all the information on two completely different books.

Unfortunately, this was not an isolated occurrence. Another individual lamented that, "for the question about aerial photography . . . the librarian didn't even consider a government publication. She pulled out a pamphlet of a photography studio from her desk." The question about aerial photography proved especially vexing. Another proxy was less than pleased with a librarian who, after consulting "travel and photography books," suggested that existing aerial photographs of the general region, instead of the specific lake, would suffice. And, while the question concerning a marine radio station on the Magdalen Islands specifically asked whether the station had been mentioned in House of Commons debates, one library staff person handed a proxy "five or six Transport Canada annual reports." These examples reveal that library staff often do what is most convenient for them, not what is most useful for users. The tendency to do the most convenient thing may be an indication that the staff member lacks in-depth knowledge about the government documents, or it may reveal an unwillingness to listen carefully to the patron's question.

Another common tactic involved telling the patron that the question was so difficult that an answer might never be found to it. Concerning the question about which piece of federal legislation dealt with the percentage of crown corporation motor vehicles having to use environment-friendly fuels, one proxy recalled that the librarian "proceeded to tell me that I may not be able to find the information in the library at all because knowing how many cars they (the government) own is like knowing how many pencils they buy a year. She had never heard of such an Act." Regarding the question about what percentage of Canadian-content sound recordings have French lyrics, another proxy was told that this question "would take a week of research" because "government documents were not indexed at all. He added that my question was not easy, especially since it was a 'statistical' question." In these two cases, the user is met not only with discouragement, but barely concealed exasperation on the part of staff that may cause him or her to feel that his or her question is ill conceived or a time-waster. Surely this is not the proper attitude for reference staff to adopt. Instead, all questions should be treated in as respectful a manner as possible, keeping in mind that a user generally does not pose a question unless he or she has a genuine desire to locate an answer.

4.1.3. The unapproachable library staff member

The proxies participating in the present study also reported the final five strategies itemized by Ross and Dewdney[17]. Under the category of encouraging the user to abort the transaction voluntarily, one proxy reports how he "had to gather courage for these questions" be-

cause "some of [the reference staff] would roll their eyes and go (even if it's none of their bizzness [sic]) 'why do you care about that?'" Having experienced this reaction, he muses about "how is the general public supposed to feel about approaching these 'experts' in search of information they have a RIGHT to [capitalized in original]?" His concluding thoughts, although syntactically awkward, reveal a genuine concern for members of the public who may feel intimidated by dismissive reference staff.

> I like to think I know better, that 1) they don't intend to intimidate or 2) if so they're crappy librarians—but does this console anyone else of reasonable intelligence and guts when approaching a gatekeeper? One who may not even be able to help them, or may mislead them further?

If the librarian is a real gatekeeper, this proxy believes, she or he should not be intimidating, should start from the premise that the public has the right to government information, and should firmly believe that librarians have a duty to help patrons to find that information by being as knowledgeable as possible about all aspects of government services. In other words, librarians should do all in their power to avoid a situation whereby they "may not even be able to help" patrons or where they "may mislead" patrons.

Library staff also used non-verbal gestures signifying the end of the reference interview. One librarian "didn't look up at me once and continued rifling through date due slips. He retrieved the . . . report. I told him I was looking for something specific, he handed me the report and told me that [since] I was the one doing the research, I'd have to find it myself—never making eye contact!" This was not an isolated instance. Another proxy reports how, after an initial attempt at locating sources, staff went back to reading at the reference desk.

> More specifically, no one spent more than five or ten minutes working on the question before telling me that the library was in fact not a full depository library and that I might have a better chance if I went to a full depository. It seemed pretty much a cop-out. It wasn't even that the libraries were busy or anything. They [the library staff] just went back to reading or doing whatever (i.e., not necessarily helping other patrons that were waiting in line behind me). I wonder about the level of service I would have received had it been busy when I posed the question.

Still another proxy was not even accorded the courtesy of prompt service. In this case, the reference interview does not begin auspiciously.

> The interesting thing was that some other . . . worker had gone to tell her that someone was at the reference desk waiting but I still ended up waiting and even when she came back from break she did not directly approach her desk . . . where I was waiting. She kept chatting. She really didn't seem that concern[ed] that a patron was waiting for service.

Patron frustration may ensue in a case such as this. The patron is left to wonder about the priorities of reference staff. And even though the proxy in this specific example did not walk away and patiently waited, some patrons may feel insulted that the library staff place a relatively low value on their time and information needs.

Much like the patron faced with the librarian checking due date slips, these patrons are made to feel as if they have intruded upon a more important activity. Staff give precedence to

reading, chatting, or some other activity not directly related to helping patrons. Clearly, the reference desk is not serving its primary purpose. Will these patrons become regular and enthusiastic customers of the library? Or will the negative impression left by their initial encounter cause them to devalue the services potentially available at the library? After all, the reference desk at libraries is meant primarily to be a service environment designed to meet, as fully as possible, the needs of users when users are, in fact, present.

Under the category of giving up too easily or reaching an abrupt dead end without trying another possibly more fruitful approach, one proxy relates the following experience.

> While attempting to answer one of my questions (checking on current legislation), the librarian took a duotang [clasp binder] from behind the reference desk. She seemed to think that it would have the answer that I needed. It looked like something official that the staff had put together. When she opened it, there were 8 lines of text. She casually said something to the effect that it's not here. Pretty useless source if you ask me.

In a variation of this tactic, proxies also reported that staff claimed that the sought-after information is not to be found in a depository library, or does not even exist. While in the example about the eight lines of text in a duotang binder, staff made at least a cursory attempt to locate the necessary data, in the following two cases no effort at all is made.

> With the airphoto question, the librarian refused to believe I was looking in the right place and sent me away quickly. Same with the investments in Africa question—a gov[ernment]-doc[ument]s librarian at a[n] academic full deposit[ory] refused to believe that our government had ever published anything on this. "Talk to an embassy" was the response.

From one perspective, the librarians here were being abruptly honest with the patron. To be sure, they were wrong about the fact that the Canadian federal government had never published anything about investment opportunities in Africa or did not have a department that provided aerial photographs, but they stood their ground and gave a direct answer. This was not the case in the following reference encounter—another example of Durrance's "disappearing librarian"[18] and the final strategy itemized by Ross and Dewdney[19].

> On another occasion I asked a question and the librarian said she'd be right back. I watched her walk into the office behind the reference desk. She never returned. I waited about 10 minutes and decided to leave. I checked the office before I left but she had disappeared.

Hernon and Altman argue that libraries, in assessing the quality of the services they provide, should pay close attention to so-called "lost customers" and "never-gained customers"[20]. From the point of view of reference service, lost customers can be defined as those who, as a result of being treated rudely, dismissively, or abruptly by reference personnel, have become frustrated and discouraged in their information quest. The bad experiences recounted here have the possibility of turning potential steady patrons into lost patrons for the depository library.

4.2. Positive experiences

When proxies talked about the good service they received, their comments centered on ways in which the behavior of reference staff contributed to finding the required answer.

Taken together, these helpful behaviors can constitute a model for other government documents reference staff to follow. Dewdney and Ross provide a list of "staff behavior that helped" during reference proxies in the present study[21] also mentioned interviews, and many of the points they list. The most useful actions undertaken by library workers were: displaying interest in the question; showing the patron the exact area where to search rather than just pointing in the general direction with vague instructions; refusing to become discouraged and showing willingness to investigate further; telling the patron to return if suitable information was not found; and following-up to see whether the patron succeeded in the search. A strategy not mentioned by Dewdney and Ross that proxies in the present study commented upon repeatedly was collaborating with other staff members.

4.2.1. Real interest about user needs

Genuine interest about the question on the part of staff was an essential precondition of successful reference interviews. One proxy wrote that "the people at [Library A] were extremely helpful and seemed to be very interested in helping us find the information. The librarians went to the point of finding the book and even the page that contained the information that we were after." Another proxy stated that the "staff at the public library were always eager to help, which made me feel more comfortable. . . . They were usually able to give me more information than I had asked for." In these two cases, interest or eagerness on the part of staff translates into service that could be characterized as above average. Here, proxies were led to specific sources ("the page that contained the information") or were offered a wealth of information (more "than I had asked for") instead of being given vague directions to browse an area of books or told that the question was particularly onerous. Expressing interest about a patron's question may be thought of as a sign of intellectual curiosity and willingness to be challenged to find a suitable answer. It may also be a sign of a willingness to learn new things, since finding the answer will likely entail a complex search strategy in both print and electronic sources. Finally, expressing interest may create a bond of empathy between staff person and patron, allowing the former to enter into the world of the latter, and thus making the search for information a joint enterprise.

Library staff who did not merely point them toward a general area or give directions also impressed proxies. One proxy commented on a librarian "who even took my friend downstairs to show him where the call number was and how to use the books." This type of service is in marked contrast to the proxy who felt that he had wasted his time going back and forth between different floors of the library.

> The [reference] desk was closed, but I stood around with a few other people before someone in plain sight told us to go downstairs a floor for help. They then sent me upstairs again on my lonesome with a citation and a fuzzy idea of where the document was in the stacks.

Staff should recognize that neither the physical layout of the library nor the arrangement of books and reports is necessarily understood by patrons. Patrons may find it daunting to traverse the intricacies of classification schemes without at least some initial guidance.

4.2.2. Use of multiple sources

Proxies also appreciated staff members who were inventive, used multiple sources in an attempt to find answers, and followed-up to see whether the patron was satisfied with the infor-

mation. One proxy praised a librarian who, when "he couldn't find what I was looking for . . . would give me what related documents he had and suggest other research options." The level of knowledge displayed by staff struck a proxy who visited a library during the weekend when reference service was being provided by paraprofessionals.

> The non-professional librarian (she told me she was not a professional "expert" but had been trained to answer certain questions) helped me find the answer I was looking for but questioned whether I had all that I needed [about this question]. I did appreciate the fact that she mentioned that if I wanted more, I could come back during the week.

In this instance, the paraprofessional provided high-quality service from three different perspectives. First, she gave as much help as she was able, she asked whether the found information was really sufficient to meet the user's requirements, and she suggested that further help could be received during the week when a professional government documents specialist would be on duty.

Another proxy had kind words to say about a staff person who used personal sources of information to track down an answer.

> Even when the staff had not been able to find the requested information in documents, they tried to find any other way to find out what I had asked for. When I asked for information about aerial photos, the staff person wasn't able to get prices. She then remembered that her husband had bought some aerial photos. She called him and asked him for a phone number for the prices.

> Still another proxy lauded the librarian who phoned me last week (for the 3rd time, and more than a week after I had first made my request by phone) with new information. She was in liaison with another government institution and was wondering if it was alright if she gave them my name and number so that they could contact me directly if they found the desired information.

In this last example, the librarian made it a special point to remember a particular question and to make subsidiary inquiries and searches even when the patron had left the library. Staff at this library seemed to take reference questions very seriously, showing an uncommon interest in satisfying a patron's information need. A similar concern is evident in the following example.

> There are closed stacks for some materials . . . but the librarian expressed that it was not a problem for her to go and get as many of the books that I needed. I remember that for the first load I had waited awhile, but it was because she had looked in every book and noted where the section was that I wanted. She was really the only one that did a follow-up to see if I had enough information.

In this example, it would have been quite easy for the librarian just to get the required items, and to leave the details to the patron. However, the librarian seemed to understand that finding material within government documents and reports was not a self-evident proposition. She therefore not only used her professional knowledge to assist the patron by finding specific sections and paragraphs, but also made a special effort to make subsequent inquiries about the usefulness of the found information.

4.2.3. Collaboration with other staff

A very useful helping behavior encountered by proxies was the willingness of a reference worker to collaborate with other library staff. One proxy recounted how "the one staff who I assumed was the head reference librarian enlisted the help of two other assistants, [and they spent] over 20 minutes [on my question]." Sometimes staff made an initial attempt on their own to locate the answer before calling upon other library workers.

> Only one [staff member] tried to look in more than one medium. The librarian took out a file folder of pamphlets, etc. of really dated stuff and had me look through it. Meanwhile, she went on the internet to do a search of some government sites. She also tried looking at some pink sheets or booklet that listed government publications. Ultimately, she was not able to find the answer, although to her credit she did take down my name and number so that she could call me, and she wanted to talk to one of her colleagues about this one.

Here, at least three sources of information were used in an attempt to assist the patron. To her credit, the staff member did not give up after consulting one source. She could have easily dismissed the proxy after this search, but she persisted by making use of the accumulated knowledge of her colleagues, and promised to get in touch with the proxy at a later date.

On other occasions, staff made an immediate determination that a colleague in another part of the library was more knowledgeable about a particular query. For example, the proxy who had received a referral to an out-of-service telephone number when asking about aerial photographs decided to ask the same question at another library. Unlike her first attempt, she was highly impressed because "the librarian called a colleague in the map library who proceeded to find the appropriate Web address and relay the costs over the phone." Another proxy provided a more detailed account of a number of collaborative efforts that resulted in complete answers.

> I was impressed with the way they collaborated at [Library B]. The staff at [Library C] did the same thing. In one case, the librarian that I asked the question to turned and said to a colleague, I think you'll able to handle this one better. The both stayed with me while I got my answer. The same sort of thing happened at another library. It seemed as if the librarians wanted to learn from each other.

Here, the librarian was not only willing to admit that he or she did not have specialized expertise in a particular area, but she or he was also aware of the subject expertise of colleagues. Pooling knowledge was accepted as a positive development for the common good of the patron. In addition, this library succeeded in creating an environment where learning was encouraged, where colleagues respected each other's knowledge and strengths. The end result is better service for future patrons, when a librarian who has learned from her colleague is able to apply that knowledge to solve a question on her own. Jones stresses that collegiality, often overlooked as a determinant of successful reference work, is a learned behavior that can be fostered by creating a management environment where staff "pull together to provide the best possible service" by not only being "aware of one another's strengths to capitalize on them," but also by trusting one another, learning from each other, and treating each other with respect and courtesy[22].

In sum, reference workers who treat each patron request as vitally important seem to be the key to quality reference service. This respect may assume many forms, from consulting

multiple sources, to asking other colleagues about the question, to suggesting other avenues of approach, to keeping an unresolved query in mind for weeks at a time, and to following-up with a patron in order to determine whether success has been achieved. In other words, a strong sense of caring is required—caring that each and every patron who comes to the library with a request, no matter how trivial or complicated, be accorded the same amount of respect and time. The following account can stand as a symbol of such a service philosophy.

> The librarian at [Library D] was quite impressive. In front of me in the line of people to see her were two small children; she gave them the necessary attention before helping me. I mention it simply because I respect the gesture. She then instructed me how to use the CD-ROM system.

According to the proxy, "necessary attention" was paid. Each reference question, of course, demands a different amount of "necessary attention," but the important point here is that attention must be paid. Just as the reference worker in the above scenario did not cavalierly dismiss the two small children, reference staff, when faced with adult patrons asking complex questions, should not dismiss their queries with the type of careless, shoddy, and haphazard service described in the previous sections: unmonitored referrals, telling patrons that the required information does not exist, and chatting with co-workers while patrons struggle to find information on their own. For library workers answering government documents reference questions, paying "necessary attention" means displaying the characteristics described in this subsection: persistence; consultation with others; and initial, as well as continued, interest in the patron's information need.

4.3. Lack of subject knowledge

In addition to comments about the positive and negative aspects of the way they were treated at government documents reference desks at depository libraries, another central theme emerging from the accounts submitted by proxies was the particular difficulty that library staff had in orienting themselves within the universe of Canadian government documents. One proxy wrote "the librarians seemed completely shocked by the type of questions. Silence and gasps. . . . The public librarians seemed most distressed at the questions they received." In general, this proxy believed that, when confronted with requests for government information, "the look on the faces of the librarians were as vast [empty] and bleak as the harsh prairie that surrounded the city." This characterization is confirmed by the following evocative account.

> I think the thing that sticks in my mind about meeting various reference librarians is how they (majority) seemed so pleased to hear my question but then as soon as they learned that it involved government documents, physically, I saw their shoulders sink as if I put a ton of books on their back! Seriously, I heard a lot of "I am not very familiar with government documents" or "I really don't know that much about government documents. . . . I remember one librarian . . . seemed really uncomfortable with the question about the firearms and more uncomfortable that I followed her to whatever section she went to. I think that she would have preferred if I had waited at the desk. Her final response was just to look through piles and piles of debate reports.

To say the least, questions dealing with government documents are met with a fair degree of trepidation. The perception may be that such questions are very complex and may involve a sig-

nificant investment of time. In addition, library staff may believe that they do not have the requisite knowledge about government information to direct patrons in the proper direction. Either they do not consider themselves to be specialists in the field, or they did not take specific government documents courses during their university training, or their library has not had training courses devoted to government information. Whatever the reason, staff feel their shoulders sag as if under a great weight, and their only recourse is to make the excuse that they are not familiar with government documents and hope that the patron is satisfied with such an acknowledgment.

Basic knowledge of government services may have avoided a number of situations in which government documents reference staff provided, in the eyes of proxies, woeful service. The question about aerial photography in particular revealed that library staff did not have a great deal of knowledge about the programs and service offered by the federal government. Most staff suggested that patrons call or visit a local photography studio instead of directing them to the specific federal agency dealing with aerial photography and mapping. Similarly, staff did not know that the Canadian government publishes material about investment opportunities in Africa. Too, proxies commented more than once about the difficulty library workers had in finding statistical information about barley prices and federal job opportunities. However, if staff were aware which government departments or agencies were responsible for these types of information, they likely would have a head start on locating the desired information. At the very least, they would not be making broad omnibus searches, but would, based on their knowledge of who does what in the federal government, be able to target more specifically the publications or Web site of the appropriate department or agency.

4.4. Overall impressions

Many proxies were scathing in their final assessments of the quality of service received when asking government documents reference questions. "I found that the staff at [Library E] were disappointingly dismal," wrote one proxy. Not only was she disappointed with the reference service, but also a friend who accompanied her on one expedition bluntly stated that getting staff to provide any type of answer was "like kicking over an ant hill." This proxy concluded that, "almost invariably my questions were met with sighs, looks of panic, or rudeness clearly borne of stress."

It is interesting to note the emphasis on stress, especially in light of the comment by another proxy, who wrote that, "due to budget cuts, there have been significant reductions at [Library F] over the past few years. In spite of this, the librarians always find time to assist the public and do so in a professional manner with a friendly smile." Financial constraints at public and academic libraries in Canada have resulted in staff reductions, the replacement of professional librarians by paraprofessionals, and a concomitant increase in the workload of remaining workers. At the reference desk, where, in the past, there may have typically been two staff members present to assist the public, now only one is assigned. Alternatively, instead of the reference desk being open for eight hours per day, it may now be open only for four hours. In this scenario, if the number of reference questions asked per day remains constant, the rate of reference questions per hour doubles. Stress levels would naturally rise, and staff would be hard-pressed to provide an acceptable level of service. Still, many reference workers do indeed serve the public "in a professional manner with a friendly smile." In light of the often-difficult economic circumstances in which libraries find themselves, this high

level of service when faced with government documents reference questions speaks volumes about the commitment and care with which some library workers approach their daily tasks.

In general, however, proxies viewed government documents reference service at depository libraries as nothing less than abysmal. Whether low service levels are due to budget cutbacks or not, overall estimates of the help received at libraries are not flattering for library professionals and paraprofessionals. Consider the following appraisal.

> At first I was frankly appalled by the low or non-existent level of appropriate or adequate replies to the questions from the survey. I had feared that this might be some reflection on the Atlantic region in general; perhaps lower budgets and standards could be the cause behind such below average performance. No one knew, or at best very infrequently, just exactly where a fact, text, [or] law was to be found. I was surprised at how often I was told to go elsewhere, ask at another library, or write away to an agency for the answers. If the staff had been overwhelmed or engaged in a myriad of tasks, it would have been more reasonable to be given such replies. Yet often, I was the only person around and the staff often reacted, if they had any reaction at all, to my presence as a gross inconvenience. I had thought that they would find my queries a challenge of some sort but obviously, they were not. It appears in talking to my fellow students that these dismal reactions are regrettably the rule and not the exception across the country. I hope I am not painting too negative a picture, the library personnel did not hiss as I walked toward them, they just were not, shall we say, overly welcoming on many occasions.

What is striking in this account is the proxy's belief that he has been made to feel as if he were a "gross inconvenience." Library staff were lethargic and complacent, in his view, and did not wish to be challenged. They took the "easy way out" by sending him to other locations, but they themselves did not seem to be engaged in "a myriad of tasks." The picture that one gets of these depository libraries is troubling.

Perhaps a proxy who took her mother along on her trips to depository libraries gives the most eloquent statement about how poor library service translates into an attitude of barely concealed disdain toward the profession of librarianship.

> I can say that I was really disappointed and a bit embarrassed about the level of service that both my mother and I received while participating as proxies for the study. Very little in the level of customer service on the part of the librarians. . . . [In some libraries] I was completely lost in there. Very little help. I can tell you that if I, a library student, was lost, someone like my mother would be COMPLETELY lost [original emphasis]. I think that my mother would have been turned off of libraries for life if I had given the questions to her to pose. . . . This experience, particularly involving my mother, made me feel bad and depressed about the profession. My mother can't quite understand why I decided to go to library school. After all, I will probably be making less money and will presumably give up my secure job for a life of contract work and no pension. I started this thing excited about introducing my mom to "my new world" and chosen profession. After getting very few complete answers to my questions and after receiving poor and indifferent service from librarians, my mother is still confused and not impressed with the profession. This experience has definitely not renewed her faith in my

chosen profession. It's like if you brought your parents to a new restaurant that you had invested in as a partner or something. You brought them there so that they could be proud of you and see what you are getting involved in. Instead of beaming and being a really great experience for you and them, all three of you get treated rudely, maybe ignored, by the people working there, or maybe your other partners.

The proxy here saw herself through the eyes of her mother, and it was not a picture she enjoyed. Initially enthused about showing her mother her "new world," this proxy ended up embarrassed and on the verge of bitterness. She wanted to be "proud" of her new profession and impress her mother with all the skills she was in the process of learning. Instead, she had to explain to her perplexed mother why exactly she made a choice to enter a profession where the norm is to ignore patrons or treat them rudely. The restaurant analogy is telling. Both libraries and restaurants depend on the good will of members of the public. Restaurants that provide poor service immediately feel the consequences on their bottom line. While the impact of poor service on the local library is less immediate, it can nonetheless be real since it is financed indirectly by tax dollars and, in the United States, directly by bond issues, or both. Taxpayers, through elected officials and single-issue referenda, have fundamental choices with respect to how their taxes are spent, and accumulated frustration about the utility of library service may impact detrimentally on library funding. A vicious circle may be one outcome. As funding declines, stress and workload increase, resulting in unhappy patrons, who opt to spend their tax dollars elsewhere or who elect politicians who are not concerned about the well being of the library system.

4.5. Recommendations made by proxies

Proxies did not just criticize or commend the service they received. They also had a number of useful recommendations to improve government documents reference service. One proxy was concerned that reference desks were not staffed by subject specialists, but by clerks who may or may not have adequate expertise about specific topics.

> The woman went into the office part and happened upon the Gov Docs librarian who had an appropriate newsletter on her desk (and which wasn't even processed yet!) so that was good. . . . I just wish the Gov Docs librarian would work the desk sometimes!

The fact that the government documents specialist at this library was not providing reference service may indicate that she or he had been placed in an administrative role. Often, the best reference librarians are promoted to managerial positions, and their expertise is lost as less experienced staff replace them at the reference desk. The realm of government documents is sufficiently complex that libraries may wish to have subject specialists available at all times to help patrons. Absent the availability of qualified staff at certain times of the day and on certain days of the week, another idea is to have "a clearly-indicated notepad upon which one can write down a gov[ernment] doc[ument]s reference question, as well as the time/day when you require a response by." One proxy found this system to be particularly innovative and efficient, because "the reference staff promptly call you at home when they come on duty with an answer and leave the materials tagged at the reference desk for you when you can next make it to the library!"

Two other proxies commented upon the missed opportunities of intra-library cooperation, especially between selective depositories and full depositories. Such cooperation can take at least two forms. At its simplest level, it involves referring to another nearby full depository library.

> Another disappointing part of the study was the lack of co-operation between the libraries. I realize that each have priorities over whom they serve, however, to under-utilize the resources that are available is almost criminal. I would have preferred that the public librarians, if unable to answer the question or direct to a source, would be able to suggest the academic library.

On a more sophisticated level, cooperation might entail forging relationships that, on a regional basis, would involve "developing some sort of union catalogue to show selectives—and their patrons—what the (hopefully) nearby full depository has before sending them out the door without a clue." The advent of Web-based catalogues may facilitate the creation of such integrated holdings information. In addition, patrons would get a clear sense of the availability (or lack thereof) of material at other locations. Informed decisions about the next step in the search process could then be made.

A final set of recommendations concerned the role of the federal government in making information accessible to depository libraries. One proxy had blunt words of advice.

> In my humble estimation, if the government means to have libraries work as access nodes to info, they're going to have to 1) cut back on useless or superfluous deposit items for selective libraries (such as Hansards without indexes!); 2) take what is saved to help improve their internet access and knowledge of online government resources; 3) improve access hours and product knowledge in full depositories.

The central theme in this comment is that the federal government has a responsibility to improve knowledge about government documents within the depository system. Government information, whether we like it or not, is a "product," and depository libraries who are responsible for disseminating this product should be as knowledgeable about it as retail establishments intent on selling their products. As the main supplier of information to depository distribution points, the Canadian federal government, through the Depository Services Program (DSP), has a vital role to play in educating library workers about government information. For instance, regularly scheduled training sessions could be conducted about various aspects of government services and publications, either in-person or through remote electronic access. Such training would allow library staff to constantly update, broaden, and deepen their knowledge about government structures and functions, and processes. The ability of library staff to answer government documents questions completely and accurately could only improve.

5. Conclusion

Analysis of proxy comments reveals a rather dismal picture of government documents reference service at Canadian depository libraries. This study allows an insight into the feelings of library users not provided by the unobtrusive approach of McClure and Hernon[23] and Dilevko and Dolan[24], nor by the questionnaire methodology of the Wisconsin-Ohio Reference

Evaluation program[25] and Parker[26]. Any positive assessment, such as Parker's, of the state of government documents reference service based on user comments should therefore be tempered by the results of the present study.

McClure and Hernon[27] concluded that there is a strong likelihood that "the individual staff member is the *single most significant factor* affecting the quality of reference service for government documents," and suggested that "concentrating on the skills and competencies of individual staff members may well upgrade the quality of reference service" (original emphasis). They called for an increased knowledge of basic and advanced government documents reference sources and "a *program* of education for the documents depository staff, as well as a program that develops learning opportunities for other library staff members" (original emphasis). Specifically, they recommended formal programs of study in political science and history, and internships in federal agencies.

More than 15 years later, a similar recommendation can be made. To make use of Canadian government Web resources effectively, it is vital that library staff members are fully aware of the structures, functions, and evolution of both the legislative and executive branches of government. Staff members need to know what programs are available and who is responsible for which program in the federal government. It is also important for staff to know the history of departments and changes in ministerial responsibilities. In Canada, various programs and administrative entities may migrate from department to department, depending on political circumstances. In short, library staff should be knowledgeable about who does what and how things work within the many departments, agencies, and other administrative entities of the federal government. Even better service might be provided if library personnel possessed substantial knowledge about what services are offered by which level of government; that is, in the Canadian context, either federal, provincial, or local (municipal and regional), or in the American context, federal, state, and local. Once staff members can readily identify a potential question as falling within a particular governmental realm through their knowledge of "who does what," it may become much easier to identify the electronic site where the desired information may be found. Within the Canadian context, the Depository Services Program (DSP) may be the logical agent to institute such a formal training program.

Hernon, Nitecki, and Altman[28] endorsed the general practice of comparative benchmarking, suggesting, for example, that interlibrary loan departments attempt to match statewide "best practices" or "even commercial delivery services such as United Parcel Service (UPS)." Just as depository libraries should be encouraged to meet performance standards, they should also be open to guaranteeing such standards as part of their service commitment to patrons. The findings of the present study lend support to McClure and Hernon's[29] call for a "certification process whereby [depository] libraries must show evidence of meeting specific criteria" and where the individual in charge of the government documents collection must also meet "specific *performance-related* criteria to direct the collection" (original emphasis). It may even be worthwhile to extend the certification process to all staff who regularly provide government documents reference service. Vavrek[30] suggests that all libraries, whether government depository libraries or not, should be accredited. Accreditation could be performed on a regular five-to-six year cycle so as to ensure a "uniform quality of library service" nationwide. He recognizes that national standards would have to be developed, and proposes that, were a library to be found wanting in its service delivery, "its state aid should be held in jeopardy until observed deficiencies are corrected."

Faced with the kind of dispirited service at depository libraries described here, some patrons may resolve never again to make use of depository libraries for government information. One proxy concludes that "[a]s for going back to the libraries to ask questions, we agree that both of us will never use the main branch of the public library for finding reference material." A second proxy states that, while on two occasions she had good experiences at libraries because staff members were "helpful and nice," "the other times the librarians really did not want to deal with me and had the attitude that I should be able to find the information I was looking for on my own, or else I shouldn't be asking the question." Summarizing her experiences, she asserts that "it wasn't particularly enjoyable and I think that under normal circumstances, as in if I was really doing my own research, I would be hesitant to go back to that library and try to find other ways of getting information that I needed rather than asking the librarians for help." Still another proxy writes that "my overall impression of the service that I received at the libraries was not very useful" and that the staff "was not very interested in helping me actually find the stuff." At two libraries, members of the reference staff "didn't seem to care and actually looked at me like I was from outer space." As a result, the proxy vows that "[i]n the future, I think I could handle finding information myself whether it be on the internet or the computer system at the library itself."

For all intents and purposes, these three individuals are what Hernon and Altman describe as "lost customers" of the library[31]. Having experienced desultory service when attempting to locate government information, they now judge their own skills to be superior to those of trained reference personnel. The amount of foregone goodwill for the library in the community is immeasurable, since these patrons no doubt have friends, family, and work colleagues to whom they will relate her negative library experiences. In light of these comments, the proposals made by McClure and Hernon, as well as Vavrek, about the need for accrediting libraries may be appropriate in order to burnish the reputation of depository libraries and the staff who answer government documents reference questions. As Web access from home and work becomes an accepted part of everyday life, individuals who have had bad experiences at libraries, or who may have heard about poor service at libraries from friends, may be tempted to bypass these institutions in favor of searching the Internet themselves for needed information. After all, if the service level at libraries consists of staff simply telling patrons to use the Web or pointing patrons vaguely towards book stacks, an individual may very well be forgiven for thinking that his or her skills are the equal of, if not superior to, library reference personnel. If members of the general public begin to perceive library staff as unable to deal competently and courteously with reference questions, important implications for librarianship as a profession arise. Librarians have constantly struggled to define themselves as highly skilled practitioners striving to provide prompt, accurate information service. Erosion, on the part of the general public, in the faith of librarians to continue to provide such service may be a precursor of a decline in the respect afforded to library workers and a concomitant decline in the willingness of administrators to view library staff as worthy of professional designation.

More specifically, members of the public may begin to question the role of depository libraries in providing adequate access to government information. If depository libraries do not submit to some type of accreditation process, members of the public may begin to look elsewhere for needed government information. Beamish[32] reports that many government departments in the

United States have instituted programs whereby government officials accept questions, and provide answers, through e-mail. For instance, the Environmental Protection Agency has "two dozen librarians fielding as many as 1,500 such E-mail questions each month, with a typical response time of fewer than five days." Many other departments have electronic messaging departments staffed with specially trained individuals who provide "precise information, complete with citations and details" in e-mail messages that are "as chipper as a happy-face sticker."

One proxy got to the crux of the matter by writing that her participation in this study "made me realize how ill-equipped librarians are to handle such questions. It will be even more interesting to see how information access is affected with the advent of the paraprofessional at the reference desk." Support for her fear that paraprofessionals will be less well-equipped to answer government documents reference questions is provided by Murfin and Bunge, who note a decline from 60.4 percent in success rates when patrons are helped by a professional librarian to 50.5 percent when helped by a paraprofessional[33].

Reference service levels at depository libraries may therefore decline in the future, unless significant action is taken. This action could take the form of extensive and periodic training programs stressing the vast array of government programs and services available to the general public. Depository libraries should no longer be content to act as warehouses of documents. Indeed, their warehouse function is fast becoming obsolete as the electronic data storage capabilities of the Web increase almost on a daily basis. Instead, depository libraries and their staff should strive to become as conversant as possible with the complex network of government information. However, becoming "conversant" does not mean having a "passing acquaintance with." Rather, it means having a sophisticated understanding of the intricacies and minutiae of government agencies, boards, departments, commissions, legislative entities, and executive branch bodies; it means knowing, in some detail, "who does what" in the federal apparatus. It means, for each reference staff member, always keeping one step ahead of the next reference question walking in the door. It means, when all is said and done, being confident that one's knowledge about government information is such that a patron will never become a "lost customer" for the depository library.

Appendix 1 Wording of Questions

1. Who is the Chair and other full-time members of the CRTC (Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission)? [executive branch]

2. I want to order a copy of *Aboriginal Self-Government* by Jill Wherrett, published in 1996. I'm sure it's a government document, and I specifically want to know how much it costs and any ordering instructions. [executive branch]

3. I'd like to know what the total payments were per bushel of barley for 1995–1996? Specifically, I'm interested in the category "select two-row" of designated barley. [executive branch]

4. I'd like to know how many new Canadian-content sound recordings (albums, tapes, CD's) released during 1990–1994 have French lyrics? [executive branch]

5. I'd like to get the text of the act that requires crown corporations to power their motor vehicles with fuels that do not harm the environment. How many of their vehicles have to use these non-conventional fuels? [legislative branch]

6. There was a parliamentary sub-committee on the draft regulations on firearms that submitted a report to the House of Commons in January or February of 1997. I'd like to see a copy of this report. [legislative branch]

7. I'd like to know if the Auditor-General said something in the 1992 annual report about forest management practices of natives, specifically about the good job done by the Stuart Trembleur Lake Band. [executive branch]

8. I'd like to see a bill that was introduced into the House of Commons this past fall. It has to do with the profits convicted criminals might make if they were to publish books about their crimes. [legislative branch]

9. I'm doing a class project about the Magdalen Islands, and there was talk about closing the marine radio station there. I'd like to know if anything was said in the House of Commons about this topic in the last year, and if anything has been decided about its fate. [legislative branch]

10. I'd like to know the complete set of rules that govern Question Period in the House of Commons. [legislative]

11. I want to know if there is any official document about the possibility of immigrating to Canada as a refugee because of persecution based on gender. [executive branch]

12. Someone I know is looking for work hauling garbage. Would there be any specific opportunities to put in bids for contracts in this field with the federal government? [executive branch]

13. My mother's birthday is coming soon, and I want to order a color enlargement of an aerial photograph of the lake where my parents have their summer cottage as her present. Could I have a price list for the enlargements, and information about what I need to order such a photograph? [executive branch]

14. Can you help me find any regulations or enabling statutes associated with the *Fisheries Prices Support Act*? [executive branch]

15. Does any government department put out any newsletters or bulletins about business opportunities in Africa? If so, I'd like a copy of the latest one. [executive branch]

Notes

1. Charles R. McClure and Peter Hernon, *Improving the Quality of Reference Service for Government Publications* (Chicago, IL: American Library Association, 1983), 35.

2. Marjorie Murfin and Gary Gugelchuk, "Development and Testing of a Reference Transaction Assessment Instrument," *College & Research Libraries* 48 (July 1987):314–338.

3. June D. Parker, "Evaluating Documents Reference Service and the Implications for Improvement," *Journal of Government Information* 23 (January 1996):49–70.

4. Juris Dilevko and Elizabeth Dolan, "Government Documents Reference Service in Canada: A Nationwide Unobtrusive Study of Public and Academic Depository Libraries," *Library & Information Science Research* 22 (Spring 2000).

5. Dilevko and Dolan, forthcoming. "Government Documents Reference Service in Canada."

6. McClure and Hernon, *Improving the Quality of Reference Service.*

7. Parker, "Evaluating Documents Reference Service."

8. Joan C. Durrance, "Factors that Influence Reference Success: What Makes Questioners Willing to Return?," *The Reference Librarian* 49/50 (1995):243–265.

9. Patricia Hults, "Reference Evaluation: An Overview," *The Reference Librarian* 38 (1992):141–150.

10. David Tyckoson, "Wrong Questions, Wrong Answers: Behavioral vs. Factual Evaluation of Reference Service," *The Reference Librarian* 38 (1992):151–173.

11. Parker, "Evaluating Documents Reference Service."

12. Dilevko and Dolan, "Government Documents Reference Service in Canada."

13. Catherine Sheldrick Ross and Patricia Dewdney, "Negative Closure: Strategies and Counter-Strategies in the Reference Transaction," *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 38 (Winter 1998):151–163.

14. Ross and Dewdney, 151–163.

15. Ross and Dewdney, 151–163.

16. Ross and Dewdney, 151–163.

17. Ross and Dewdney, 151–163.

18. Durrance, "Factors that Influence Reference Success."

19. Ross and Dewdney, "Negative Closure."

20. Peter Hernon and Ellen Altman, *Assessing Service Quality: Satisfying the Expectations of Library Customers* (Chicago, IL: American Library Association, 1998), 156.

21. Patricia Dewdney and Catherine Sheldrick Ross, "Flying a Light Aircraft: Reference Service Evaluation from a User's Viewpoint," *RQ* 34 (Winter 1994):217–230.

22. Dixie A. Jones, "Plays Well with Others, or the Importance of Collegiality within a Reference Unit," *The Reference Librarian* 59 (1997):163–175.

23. McClure and Hernon, *Improving the Quality of Reference Service.*

24. Dilevko and Dolan, "Government Documents Reference Service in Canada."

25. Murfin and Gugelchuk, "Development and Testing of a Reference Transaction Assessment Instrument."

26. Parker, "Evaluating Documents Reference Service."

27. McClure and Hernon, *Improving the Quality of Reference Service*, 111, 143.

28. Peter Hernon, Danuta Nitecki, and Ellen Altman, "Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction: An Assessment and Future Directions," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 25 (January 1999):9–17.

29. McClure and Hernon, *Improving the Quality of Reference Service*, 160.

30. Bernard Vavrek, "The Accreditation of Reference Services," *The Reference Librarian* 11 (Fall/Winter 1984):147–156.

31. Hernon and Altman, *Assessing Service Quality*, 78.

32. Rita Beamish, "Citizens' Electronic Inquiries Get Governments' Attention," *New York Times*, May 20, 1999, D8 [National].

33. Marjorie E. Murfin and Charles A. Bunge, "Paraprofessionals at the Reference Desk," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 14 (March 1988):10–14.