Information Abstract: Role of the Digital Reference Librarian

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What is the role of the digital reference librarian in mediating between users image requests and image descriptions on the web? How do reference librarians typically refer to and identify these images? In this paper, we propose that a serious gap exists in the image retrieval training required by reference service providers. This gap negatively affects their ability to share and express nonverbal information needs with library patrons. The objective of this study was to explore and examine how human expertise mediates between image needs and image descriptions in the digital reference environment.

METHODS

Data was taken from the Virtual Reference Desk (VRD) and from the Ask-Eric archives. Ask-Eric was a project of the Eric Clearinghouse on Information & technology supported by the Information Institute of Syracuse University and the US Department of Education’s National Library of Education. Data was analyzed from 7,527 digital image requests received from Ask-ERIC and VRD. These requests resulted in a set of 590 requests for visual material. As part of the study, the url’s and websites used for the reference answers were also examined. The presence or absence of image metadata, and the overlap in terms between user’s requests and reference answers was also examined.
RESULTS

Users employed a number of different terms to identify their visual media requests. Patrons were limited in their ability to identify and quantify their reference needs due to the textual limitations of the Q&A system. A total of 1,183 url’s were supplied to patrons as part of the reference response. At the time of this study, 104 url’s were found to be nonworking. There was considerable overlap of terms between individual’s questions and the answers received.

CONCLUSIONS

The results confirmed that a lack of training existed among reference librarians with regard to how they interpreted nonverbal information needs. This lack of training negatively affects their ability to identify digital and web reference sources for patron requests. Further study is needed of digital image mediation by reference librarians. In addition, a unified model of image seeking across disciplines is needed to facilitate a greater understanding of the challenges faced by reference service providers in both understanding nonverbal information needs, and translating these needs into appropriate terminology. Thus, further studies of digital image retrieval across disciplines are needed in order to develop a cohesive unified model of image seeking.
2. Indicative Abstract

In this paper, researchers describe the conclusions reached based on their analysis of research data obtained from 7,527 digital image requests. This data is based on digital image results received from both Ask-Eric as well as VRD reference queries. Subsequent analysis by researchers reduced the total number of requests, resulting in a set of 590 requests for visual material. The researcher’s analysis focused on the integrity of the url’s supplied in the visual image reference answers. The researchers sought to determine how human expertise mediated between image needs and image descriptions in the digital reference environment.