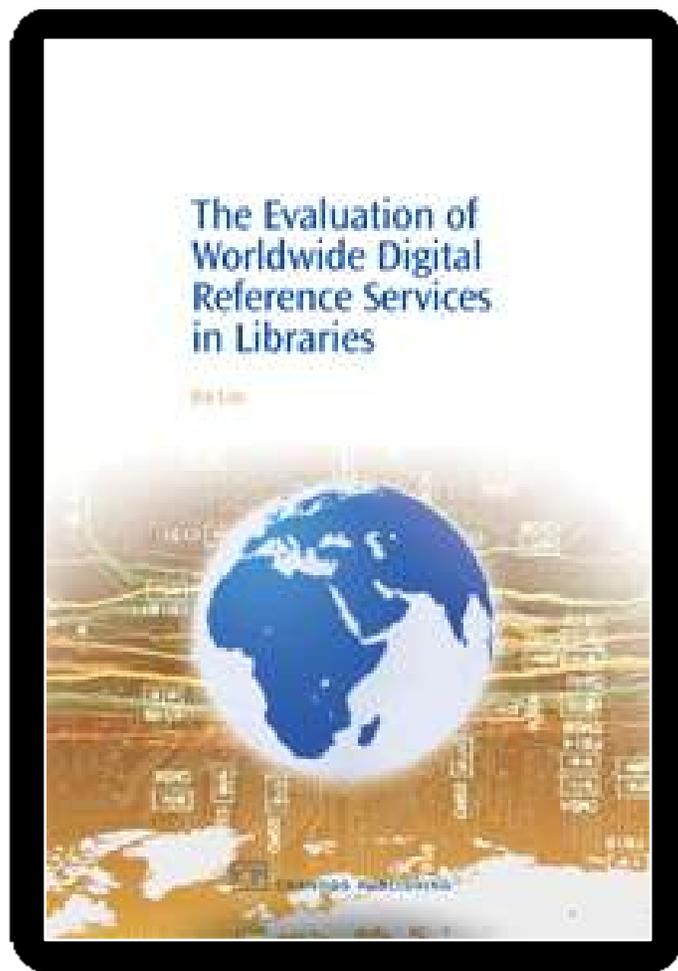


BOOK REVIEW



THE EVALUATION OF WORLDWIDE DIGITAL REFERENCE SERVICES IN LIBRARIES by Liu, Jia. Chandos Publishing, Oxford, 2007. xv;174p. Rs. 3300.00.

By

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In the so-called ‘sea of the information’, it is very easy for the user to get lost. The difficulty in finding the right information is rising in many cases. The average user needs help from the information professional – and the library is the place where information professionals as well as information resources accumulate. Digital reference services are a direct outcome of the dramatically rapid development of ICT in the context of library evolution.

Mr. Katz defined the digital reference service as, ‘an online reference interview which can run to less than a minute to “as long as it takes” to reach a satisfactory response’. In addition to material circulation, the reference service is one of the fundamental services provided by the library to its users. Through this evolving service, the library extends its services to the world beyond the building where it is physically located. This innovation demonstrates the library world’s ongoing endeavor to meet its users’ needs more efficiently by extending its services beyond its physical walls.

The book is based on a research project implemented by groups from one western and one eastern country. This international cooperative project was undertaken by groups from German and Chinese institutions, and evaluated email reference services conducted in nearly 150 libraries all over the world. After describing preliminary knowledge and evaluating existing digital reference services, the book intends to outline the status of digital reference services in libraries worldwide through comparing these two group’s results. It specially reports on the email reference services project.

Dr. Jia Liu is currently undertaking research in the Wuerzburg University Library. Before that, she was a visiting scholar of the Faculty of Information Studies, University of Toronto, Canada. The digital reference service has been the fundamental subject of all the research and teaching activities during the above mentioned period. She has also been associate professor of the Department of Information Management, Peking University in Beijing, China, where she got her Ph. D.

Evaluation is an effective way of providing formal evidence to establish the status of the library service. In reality, practical projects for evaluating such services are not as common as those for dealing with other library services. This could be one of the most important reasons for initiating a project to evaluate a library's digital reference services. The general aim of the project was to evaluate digital reference services, especially email reference services, in libraries worldwide. Online testing was used to provide an international insight into this field using realistic demonstrations. Scope of the libraries for testing purpose was extended to national libraries as national and university libraries normally represent the highest level of library in a given country. Based on this, the results should represent the top level of the digital reference service in the countries or areas examined. The Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) guidelines were chosen as the basic evaluation criteria in this project, which covers areas like approachability, interest, listening/inquiring, searching and follow up. In addition to these guidelines, certain standards and criteria have been developed from projects to define a successful digital session. The international libraries were evaluated through online tests.

This book is divided into 6 chapters followed by appendices and index. The first chapter follows the introduction.

Chapter 2 provides fundamental knowledge in the field of digital reference services in the library. Here the two primary types of digital reference service (email and chat reference service) in addition to frequently asked questions (FAQ's) are introduced. Links on the web page to external resources can help the users to find information themselves, rather than taking time to use the digital reference service. This also works as a type of elementary education in the field of information literacy.

Chapter 3 focuses on describing the efforts on evaluating the digital reference services in the library. As Wasik declares, without proper assessment and evaluation, it is virtually impossible to identify whether the service is actually meeting its goals, and whether the service is making the best use of its available resources. Common methods for evaluating the digital references

service in are outlined, namely, survey and questionnaire, observation, interview and case study. Author states that the USA was one of the first countries to develop online reference services successfully.

Chapter 4 and 5 are actually parallel. After a brief overview of the subprojects implemented by the German and Chinese group, group division and work distribution, timetable, workflow and flow of each group are reported step by step. The so called evaluation guide in this project is actually a questionnaire. Comparisons of the evaluation results from both sides are the main topic of the final chapter. Then, experiences and lessons learned from the project are outlined, serving as good reminders for future project members. Although the content and goal of both the subprojects were the same, results differed between study arms due to different nationalities of the project members.

This research project is certainly not the first to evaluate digital reference services. However, it must be the first in the field to be co-operatively implemented by an international group. By reporting the results of the project, the author aims to provide the reader with an understanding of email reference services in libraries worldwide.

The book is primarily intended for professionals and practitioners in the field of digital reference service. In the meantime, it could be a very good reference book for the teachers and students in the higher education institutions who have interest in this field.

There are a variety of ongoing approaches in digital reference service provision. No matter what the approach may be, it is developing towards serving users more efficiently. The patron is the god in the field of reference service. Serving the patron in the most effective way is always the goal of the library.