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The Good, the Bad, but Mostly the Ugly: Adherence to RUSA Guidelines During Encounters with Inappropriate Behavior Online

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Abstract

Using a scoring rubric based on RUSA's *Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers,* librarians' performance in 106 chat reference transcripts in which a patron was determined to be acting inappropriately were compared to 90 randomly chosen transcripts from the same time period in which no inappropriate behavior was identified. Librarians serving appropriately behaving patrons scored significantly better on two of five major dimensions of the RUSA Guidelines. Recommendations for librarians serving inappropriately behaving patrons and for improving the three of the five major dimensions are given.

Introduction

It is possible that library patrons have always misbehaved. From disruptions to damaged property, librarians have for decades sought to cope with the occasional patron who becomes rude, abusive, destructive, or irrational. As library collections and services have changed, in format and availability, patron misbehavior has changed. From the tearing of pages to the systematic downloading of journal issues, from loud conversations to "prank" virtual reference calls, new behaviors necessitate new standards for professional conduct.

While most professional standards are not directed solely at preventing or mitigating inappropriate behavior, it is certainly incumbent upon librarians to follow guidelines of professional conduct in such situations. One of the most cited is the Reference and User Services Association's (RUSA) *Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers* (RUSA Guidelines), originally published in 1996 and revised to be applicable to remote forms of reference, such as email and "chat" services, in 2004.[1] These guidelines continue to be widely accepted and referenced in professional literature. While adherence to these guidelines certainly cannot prevent or mitigate all encounters with inappropriately behaving patrons (nor was it explicitly intended to), it can perhaps achieve success in some cases. The RUSA Guidelines themselves recognize that "the positive or negative behavior of the reference staff member (as observed by the patron) becomes a significant factor in perceived success or failure." Librarians providing chat reference would

best serve their patrons by being aware of and practicing the RUSA Guidelines as much as possible.

This study examines librarians' adherence to the RUSA Guidelines when dealing with patrons behaving appropriately as compared with librarians serving patrons displaying some level of inappropriate behavior, as determined in a previous study.[2] The study seeks to determine if adherence to RUSA Guidelines definitions of "positive behavior" helps mitigate rude or inappropriate patron behavior in chat reference, or if other recommendations are necessary. The intent is to help shape librarians' concept of what "positive behavior" is in online reference environments, particularly chat reference.

Literature Review

This literature review focuses on providing an overview of recent assessment of virtual reference services. Virtual reference assessment literature tends to gravitate towards one of the following camps: (1) description of individual institution's innovative applications of virtual reference assessment; (2) identification of patron and service demographics; (3) comparison with regular reference; or (4) virtual reference transcript analysis. Examples of recent literature describing applications of virtual reference assessment include descriptions of the use of virtual reference assessment data as part of the budget cycle,[3] descriptions of virtual reference assessment at an integrated academic and public library,[4] or specific training strategies developed after as a result of identified training gaps.[5]

A recent notable examples of patron and service demographics analysis in the library literature is Houlson, McCready, and Pfahl's work at the University of Minnesota – Twin City campus.[6] Such analysis could also focus on specific populations, such as Walter and Mediavilla's description of the differences between teen and adult communication skills,[7] or Shachaf and Snyder's analysis of differing user needs for racially diverse population.[8] Fennewald's analysis of the different types of questions asked by virtual and in-person users,[9] and Moyo's analysis of the rate and nature of instruction in virtual and in-person transactions,[10] are examples of literature that compares virtual reference with regular reference. Examples of transcript analysis include Pomerantz, Luo, and McClure's description of evaluating North Carolina's *NCKnows* transcripts,[11] and Lee's comparison of Australian email and chat reference transcripts.[12]

Recent transcript analysis literature includes a few articles which specifically used RUSA guidelines as part of the analysis. Ward's account describes use of the "searching" section of RUSA guidelines to develop criteria that was used in evaluating the completeness of 72 University of Illinois reference transactions.[13] Zhuo, Love, Norwood, and Massia describe the use of modified RUSA Guidelines to assess 100 instant message transactions at Central Missouri State University.[14] Ronan, Reakes, and Ochoa report on using RUSA guidelines to evaluate the reference interview of 50 reference transactions from a random sample of virtual reference services across the United States.[15] Perhaps most pertinent to this study are the work conducted by Kwon and Gregory, as well as that by Shachaf and Horowitz, that correlate various dimensions in the RUSA Guidelines to patron satisfaction.[16]

None of the literature, however, specifically applies adherence to RUSA Guidelines to situations where patrons behave inappropriately.

AskColorado and Inappropriate Use

All transcripts evaluated in this study were provided by AskColorado, a state-wide virtual reference service, that at the time of the study was maintained by service from 39 public library systems, 12 college and university libraries, 11 school districts, and 6 specialized libraries.[17] The service averaged 4,000 questions per month in 2007, more than doubling the per month averages since its inception from September 2003.[18] Approximately 350 librarians staffed the service, usually between two and eight simultaneously.[19]

Evaluating the quality of AskColorado's virtual reference service has been a concern from the very beginning. It was recognized at inception that reference librarians encounter extra challenges during a chat reference transaction that may not be as apparent in face-to-face reference. Many times in a solely text based environment, absence of body language and gestures make it harder to understand the information need of a patron. Marie Radford, a preeminent scholar in virtual reference communication, indicates that more research needs to be completed to understand, improve, and evaluate quality of a virtual reference quality.[20]

In order to evaluate service, AskColorado's Quality Assurance and Evaluation subcommittee (QA&E) was convened. This subcommittee reviews AskColorado chat transcripts on a monthly basis and recommends best practices to improve the quality of the service. While evaluating the chat transcripts, the subcommittee focuses on two major components: 1) quality of response and 2) quality of interaction.[21] The authors of this article were members of QA&E and involved in evaluating chat transcripts for several years.

At the request of AskColorado's coordinator, QA&E undertook a study in 2006 to identify the prevalence of inappropriate use of the service. The study identified 89 transcripts from 2003 and 2004 that contained offensive, rude, or irrational patron behavior. These transcripts comprised 8.7% and 5.3% of the samplings from each year, respectively, leading the committee to conclude that inappropriate use was minimal and perhaps decreasing.[22]

An unpublished follow-up study of 2005 transcripts identified another 75 inappropriate transcripts, 10.2% of the sampling. This possible increase in the prevalence of inappropriate behavior lead the committee to desire further study, specifically an analysis of librarian behavior in these transactions, the purpose being to identify ways in which the inappropriate behavior of patrons might be prevented or mitigated by the behavior of the librarians.

RUSA Guidelines

RUSA Guidelines were chosen as the instrument by which librarians' performance could be measured in this study. They are comprised of five broad dimensions of guidelines divided by subordinate measures. Each category includes three subcategories specific to librarian-patron interaction settings: general, in-person, and remote. The remote subcategory focuses on reference encounters by chat, e-mail or telephone.

A brief summary of the RUSA Guidelines and how they were applied to this study follows. Appendix A provides our adaptation of the RUSA Guidelines to create an instrument to use in evaluation of transcripts.

    1.0 *Approachability* "In order to have a successful reference transaction, patrons must be able to identify that a reference librarian is available to provide assistance and also must feel comfortable in going to that person for help."

    Approachability in this study was determined by the time elapsed between a patron's log-in to AskColorado and a librarian's response, and by the tone of the librarian's greeting, a function of RUSA Guidelines 1.2 and 1.5.

    2.0 *Interest* "A successful librarian must demonstrate a high degree of interest in the reference transaction."

    Interest in this study was determined by both quantitative measures of "word contact" (how frequently librarians sent messages) and qualitatively (how explicitly librarians indicated interest in working with the patron). RUSA Guideline 2.6 was evaluated with these two approaches and aggregated to determine a score for Interest.

    3.0 *Listening/Inquiring* "Strong listening and questioning skills are necessary for a positive interaction."

    This area was one of the largest included in this study, incorporating primarily ordinal scales for 3.1, 3.3, 3.4, 3.5, 3.6, 3.7, 3.8, 3.9, and 3.10.

    4.0 *Searching* "The search process is the portion of the transaction in which behavior and accuracy intersect."

    Searching was another significant area applied to this study, using a combination of two-point and ordinal scales for most of the 4.0 subordinate areas.

    5.0 *Follow-up* "The librarian is responsible for determining if the patrons are satisfied with the results of the search."

    Follow-up was determined in this study as an aggregate score of two-point scales for 5.1, 5.2, 5.4, 5.5, 5.7, 5.8, 5.9, and 5.9 (remote).

Though not all RUSA Guidelines could be applied to this study, the authors felt a majority of them were applied in a sufficiently complex way to analyze librarians' performance in each of the five broad areas.

Methodology

Since no standard instrument by which behavior can be evaluated against RUSA Guidelines exists, the authors developed one (see Appendix A). Only RUSA Guidelines that were reasonably observable in chat transcripts were used, and each of the five major categories functioned as an aggregate score of all its subordinate measures. This method was used so that a macro-level analysis would be possible.

Models for using the RUSA Guidelines to evaluate transcripts have since been designed, but at the time of the genesis of the study there was only one.[23] Most of the rubrics developed for this purpose employ chiefly two-point scales, where the coder simply assessed whether or not a guideline was observed, and the analysis centers on the prevalence of behaviors observed in the transcripts. The instrument in this study employed both two-point and ordinal scales, where the coders decided to what extent the behavior was observed on a 0-5 point scale in all mesures that lend themselves to the method, and yes/no scales in those that did not. The authors believed this would result in a finer instrument, perhaps measuring the librarians' performance more thoroughly.

But a finer instrument may also be a more complicated one. The scale underwent three major revisions before the three coders tested it using three randomly selected transcripts. The results found that the three coders disagreed on 16 of the 32 measures, and on six of them disagreed quite starkly. The authors felt the instrument needed to be refined and that inter-rater reliability statistics should be used to test it. Two additional revisions to the instrument were made, focusing on the six measures wherein there was most disagreement. In addition to many changes in language and definition, one of the measures, 3.2, was changed from a two-point scale to a nominal scale measure. After these changes were made, the original three transcripts and an additional three were used to test the instrument again, so more than 5% of the sampling would undergo inter-rater reliability testing.

The results of these six transcripts achieved what Fliess termed a "fair" level of agreement between two pairs of coders (Cohen's kappa = 0.49 in both pairs) and "good" agreement in one (kappa = 0.65).[24] There is no consensus on a minimal level of agreement in most, if not all disciplines, but these numbers do fall below the kappa score of 0.787 in the Shachaf and Horowitz study. Due in part to this nontrivial level of disagreement among the coders, the normality of the distribution in the data cannot be assumed, and the data are treated as ordinal rather than ratio-level. The statistical analysis used to compare the data sets was then a nonparametric Kolmogorov-Smirnov test for two unrelated samples.[25]

Once the instrument was finalized, 106 transcripts from the previous studies were identified as having significant enough conversation and length to be appropriate for in-depth analysis of behavior, and another 90 transcripts from the same time-period were chosen as a control group. Each coder was assigned approximately one-third of both the test and control groups, and the transcripts were scored independently using the instrument. Analysis enabled comparison on all 32 measures, as well as the five larger dimensions that included subordinate levels.

Results

As has been demonstrated in other studies[26], these data show a relatively low level of adherence to RUSA Guidelines. Of the five major aggregate categories, librarians serving both appropriately and inappropriately behaving librarians scored in the average range (between 3 and 4) on four, and librarians serving inappropriately behaving patrons scored below average on the "searching" dimension (4.0).

Comparing grouped median scores for those dimensions for which an ordinal scale was used, as well as the five broad areas, which are aggregates of all subordinate categories, shows that of these thirteen areas, librarians serving appropriately behaving patrons scored better on nine. The four in which librarians serving inappropriately behaving patrons scored better were 2.0, 2.6 (qualitative and quantitative), and 4.9.

The differences between these medians for most dimensions, using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, were not significant (see Table 1).

Table 1: Statistical comparison of appropriate and inappropriate data sets														
RUSA Guideline		*1.0*	*1.2*	*1.5*	*2.0*	*2.6 (quan)*	*2.6 (qual)*	*3.0*	*3.1*	*4.0*	*4.2*	*4.5*	*4.9*	*5.0*
Inappropriate	*n=**	107	107	107	107	107	105	107	107	107	48	16	91	33
	Grouped Median	3.51	4.44	3.20	3.17	4.56	2.38	3.26	3.18	2.39	3.03	2.25	4.61	4.52
	Range	4	4	4	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	3	4	4
Appropriate	*n=**	81	81	81	81	81	81	81	81	81	69	36	67	53
	Grouped Median	3.68	4.53	3.49	3.11	4.54	2.36	3.63	3.42	3.11	3.53	2.93	3.81	4.84
	Range	3	4	3	4	3	4	3	3	4	4	3	3	4
	Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z	.717	.646	1.343	.606	.297	.541	1.525	1.462	2.212	1.277	1.364	1.812	.959
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.683	.798	.054	.857	1.000	.931	*0.019***	*0.028***	*0.000***	.077	*0.049***	*0.003***	.316
* *n* varies because scorings of n/a are excluded from the analysis														
**Significant at a 95% confidence interval*														

Of those that did show significant differences (3.0, 3.1, 4.0, 4.5, and 4.9), librarians serving appropriately behaving patrons scored better in listening (3.0), cordiality (3.1), searching (4.0), and explaining how to use sources (4.5). Interestingly, librarians serving inappropriately behaving patrons scored better on 4.9, offering pointers to patrons.

Discussion

Although adherence to RUSA Guidelines was only average for both groups of librarians, the fact that scores for librarians serving appropriately behaving patrons were significantly better than those serving inappropriately behaving patrons in "listening/inquiring" (3.0) and "searching" (4.0) is somewhat encouraging. This result could be interpreted as meaning that adherence to RUSA Guidelines related to listening and searching yields an effective virtual reference transaction. However, it could also mean that the librarian serving the appropriately behaving patron is simply more likely to have an opportunity to conduct a successful reference interview and embark on a satisfactory search strategy.   In Sample Transcript A (below), the only communication that the librarian shares with the patron is canned message from the service and the forwarding of two webpages. It should be emphasized that while the overall 3.0 category is entitled "listening/inquiring," a large part of the category is communication skills. Not surprisingly, this impersonal transcript devolved into an inappropriate transcript. However, this transcript is complicated by the fact that the patron does not appear in the transcript until four minutes have passed for the patron. It is possible that the librarian felt rushed and thought that the best strategy for dealing with the patron was to merely send information as quickly as possible, rather than taking time for personal interaction. If the librarian had the opportunity to enter the interaction earlier, perhaps there would have been more positive communication from the librarian.

Sample Transcript A
[Note: transcript has been modified to protect the privacy of the patron and librarian]

Time Stamp	Patron/Librarian	Text of comment
11:08:32	Patron	Why do they call a baby llama a cria?
11:09:28	Patron	hello
11:10:36	Patron	?
11:11:42	Patron	Hello?
11:12:44	Librarian	Welcome to AskColorado. I'm looking at your question now; it will be just a moment. You will have access to a transcript at the end of this session.
11:13:00	Librarian	(Item sent: Ask Jeeves)
11:13:27	Librarian	(Item sent: Ask Jeeves frame)

In Sample Transcript B (below), the librarian is more effective at communicating with the patron. However, no information is ever shared with the patron. It is difficult to tell from a mere examination of the transcript whether this is because the librarian lacks knowledge of sources for this information or whether it is merely a fact that he/she has not had enough time to conduct a search. This study does not attempt to suggest a causal relationship between effective communication and searching by the librarian and appropriate behavior by the patron. However, the significant difference for listening (3.0), cordiality (3.1), searching (4.0), and explaining how to use sources (4.5) shows that there may be some type of connection between appropriate behavior and librarian application of these RUSA guidelines.

Sample Transcript B
[Note: transcript has been modified to protect the privacy of the patron and librarian]

Time Stamp	Patron/Librarian	Text of comment
10:42:47	Patron	What is the average temperature in Bolivia?
10:43:22	Patron	Are you still there
10:43:57	Librarian	Yes.
10:44:15	Librarian	Still looking…
10:44:33	Librarian	Sorry. Forgot to let you know I was working on it.
10:44:51	Patron	OK
10:45:45	Patron	Sometime today would be nice
10:55:50	Patron	Sorry I have anger problems
10:56:45	Patron	Hurry up
10:57:05	Patron	Please answer it.

Conversely, it appears that this study found adherence to RUSA Guidelines on "approachability" (1.0), expressing "interest" (2.0), and "follow-up" (5.0) is inconsequential with respect to serving inappropriately behaving patrons. This result, to some extent, corroborates other findings. Kwon and Gregory, for instance, found that adherence to guidelines on "welcoming," "interest," and "inquiring" were not correlated to patron satisfaction.[27] But Kwon and Gregory did find that using a patron's name is related to satisfaction, whereas this study did not specifically consider the use of a patron's name. Kwon and Gregory also separated "listening" from "inquiring" and found that "listening" was in fact correlated to satisfaction.[28] Since adherence to RUSA's professional guidelines is only partially helpful in satisfying patrons, and serving them even when they misbehave, perhaps speaks to the ineffectiveness of the guidelines in virtual settings. Indeed, Shachaf and Horowitz found that overall adherence to both RUSA and the International Federation of Library Association's (IFLA) corresponding reference guidelines was not significantly correlated to patron satisfaction.[29]

Perhaps these initial studies, then, suggest two major implications for librarians practicing virtual reference and bodies that provide behavioral guidelines on that practice: 1) overall adherence to guidelines needs to be improved in virtual settings, especially with respect to conducting reference interviews and successful search strategies, and 2) the guidelines themselves are not well defined in some places and should be improved. If following guidelines does not seem to

assist librarians in either satisfying patrons or in mitigating, or at least coping with, inappropriate behavior online, perhaps the guidelines need improvement.

The guidelines that may need the most improvement lie in the outset of the interaction ("approachability" [1.0] in this study and "welcoming" in the Kwon and Gregory study), and in expressing "interest" (2.0). RUSA Guidelines provide very detailed instructions on expressing interest in face-to-face settings (maintaining and re-establishing eye-contact during the transaction), and though they also provide corollaries for virtual reference services (maintaining and re-establishing "word contact" with the patron), it could be that more specificity is necessary in this emerging form of service. Questions that may arise from this example, and possible future research, would include: How often should word contact be initiated? What sort of language is most effective? How can a librarian compensate for the lack of non-verbal queues in virtual environments? Research is emerging that could inform such specificity, such as Radford's promising work on interpersonal communication in chat reference.[30] Understanding greeting and closing rituals, relational facilitators, non-verbal communication in verbal environments, and other factors, is critical to both providing good service online and to writing guidelines for it.

Conclusion

In addition to the communication strategies mentioned above, other additional research could also be done to improve our online interactions with patrons. Though librarians have a fair amount of training in what a reference interview is and how to locate information for patrons, we also still need to learn how to do a better job of translating those skills to the online environment. Research should continue in this venue as well. Perhaps there are strategies that we can modify from the corporate world, and perhaps the advent of affordable newer technologies will make these transactions easier or more effective. Indeed, perhaps there are even differences between effective practices for different types of virtual reference transactions. The best practice for a chat reference transaction may not be the same as the best practice for an instant message or email reference transaction, and research to identify the nuances between these types of interactions would be valuable.

This study provides no causal understanding of how librarians' adherence relates to inappropriate patron behavior: there is nothing definitive in these data to understand if the librarian's action, or inaction, leads to frustration on the part of the patron, or if the behavior of the patron causes the librarian to disengage from the interaction. But this study does show that there are areas of professional behavior that are either not well followed by librarians in these transactions, or are poorly defined in professional guidelines. Regardless of the behavior of the patron, the librarian is expected to uphold the standards of the profession. Whether or not those standards have been adequately adapted to virtual environments is a matter for further research and discussion.

As Lee suggests, virtual librarians easily run the risk of "sounding like we are playing '20 questions'" when they conduct reference interviews.[31] And when patron behavior becomes trying, librarians face even greater challenges in achieving meaningful communication and in creating successful reference transactions. This study, especially when compared to studies on satisfaction in virtual reference, suggests that in order to assist virtual librarians in achieving

meaningful communication, RUSA's Management of Reference Services Committee (MARS) should consider modifying the RUSA Guidelines to provide additional guidance for librarians in "remote" reference contexts. The areas needing more specificity, perhaps, lie in the dimensions of being "approachable," (1.0), expressing "interest" (2.0), and to a lesser extent how to "follow-up" (5.0).

As the MARS Digital Reference Guidelines Ad-Hoc Committee attests in its *Guidelines for Implementing and Maintaining Virtual Reference Services*, "[t]he absence of a physically present patron and the different modes of communication may call for additional skills, effort, or training to provide quality service on par with face-to-face reference services."[32] This document, however, references the RUSA Guidelines as the behavioral standard to meet in virtual reference, a standard that is centered primarily on face-to-face reference with virtual reference included in brief addenda. The proliferation and importance of virtual reference services may have reached a point where these addenda no longer suffice, and specific behavioral guidelines for virtual reference may be necessary.

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