Why the I-900 Plan to Consolidate Multiple Reading Rooms
Should Not be Implemented
In Light of
Best Practices for Reference Service
At the Library of Congress

A Series of Papers

Paper #2
Best Practices in Reference Service at the Library of Congress

Paper #2

Best Practices in Reference Service at the Library of Congress

If not "one stop" transdisciplinary shopping, what *are* actual "best practices" in providing reference service specifically at the Library of Congress?

Since transdisciplinary elimination of subject "silos" is frequently assumed, mistakenly, to constitute "best practices" in reference service (see **Papers #1** and **#6**), let us consider carefully three examples of what is actually involved—practices that may not be apparent to those who do not actually do reference work, or who have no actual contact with real researchers. (This includes many academics in the library field who are nonetheless prolific authors.)

Example of best practices at LC: Humor in the New Testament

First example: I recently helped a Ph.D. researcher who came to the reference desk to ask about "humor in the New Testament." She said she'd already done "a lot of keyword searching" but she wanted to make sure she wasn't "missing something important"—her exact words on both points. (She said she was turning her dissertation into a book.) I understood her reference to "keyword searching" to mean, in all probability, "nothing but computer searching"—whether on the Internet alone or (I hoped) also in some of the relevant subscription databases available through her university library. (It turns out, however, that no librarian at her home university had introduced her to the best of the relevant "silo" databases, the *ATLA Religion Index*. She had never heard of it.)

I showed her six English-language specialized encyclopedias right in the Main Reading Room that had articles on humor in either the New Testament specifically or in the Bible or Religion more generally—she had previously seen only one of them—and a French set that had an additional article, and a German set that didn't. (She could read multiple languages.) One of the sources, the 15-volume *Encyclopedia of Religion,* has a *30-page* article on "Humor and Religion" in multiple parts including "An Overview"— with each part having a bibliography that is *annotated and evaluative*. From each set I pulled the relevant volume myself and put it on the alcove table in front of her; and I indicated the specific Alcove class-number areas for further browsing (which have French and Italian sets beyond what I touched myself).

I saw her later making two trips to the photocopiers, carrying every volume I pulled—maybe even a few more. These were important in answering her question not just because they contained relevant overview articles—*precisely the kind that would tell her quickly if she were indeed overlooking some important ideas*—but *also* because every one of them offered a concise bibliography identifying exactly the *literature sources* that the authors of the articles believed to *be* the most important ones.

My point is that this was not simply a matter of "exceeding" the researcher's

expectations; rather, I was *changing* her expectations of research methods to begin with by pointing out something she had not previously used: *a good reference collection* with multiple relevant printed sources, *all immediately available and physically nearby each other in subject clusters to facilitate easy recognition*—recognition, that is, once the reference librarian (me) had *introduced her* to the clusters. None of the multiple relevant sources on the shelves were digitized for the "keyword searching" she had been doing.

The very function of a good reference collection is to provide easy access to the tertiary literature that identifies, digests, summarizes, abstracts, annotates, and evaluates the overwhelming mass of primary and secondary literature in the stacks. (It must also point the way efficiently to good resources elsewhere, too.) A good reference collection gives us *intellectual control* over the rest of the collection in ways that none of our other resources do—including our 630 subscription databases.

Example of best practices at LC: Islam and Human Rights

A second example: one of our recent Kluge Fellows was working on "Human Rights in Islam." In the Main Reading Room (MRR) reference collection alone I could quickly bring to bear multiple relevant sources:

- The 5-volume 2009 *Encyclopedia of Human Rights* (with a 13-page article on "Islam")
- The 6-volume *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World* (2009; 9-page article on "Human Rights")
- The 2-volume *Encyclopedia of Islam in the United States* (4-page article on "Human Rights)
- The 2-volume 2004 *Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World* (2-page article on "Human Rights"), and
- The 3-volume 2001 *Human Rights Encyclopedia* (2-page article on "Cairo Declaration of Human Rights in Islam")

Further:

- The bibliographies of *all five* of these articles overlap in recommending *one* particular book, A. E. Myer's *Islam and Human Rights* [2006]).
- The bibliographies of three of them overlap in recommending a second book (An-Na'im, *Toward an Islamic Reformation*)
- The bibliographies of three of them overlap in recommending a third book (Baderin, *International Human Rights and Islamic Law*)
- The bibliographies of two of them overlap in recommending a fourth book (Abou El Fadl, *Islam and the Challenge of Democracy*)
- The bibliographies of two of them overlap in recommending a fifth book (Abou El Fadl, *Speaking in God's Name: Islamic Law, Authority, and Women*)
- The bibliographies of two of them overlap in recommending a sixth book (Ebadi, *Iran Awakening: A Memoir of Revolution and Hope*)

- The bibliographies of two of them overlap in recommending a seventh book (Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*)
- The bibliographies of two of them overlap in recommending an eighth source (Waltz, "Universal Human Rights: The Contribution of Muslim States," *Human Rights Quarterly*, 26, 4 [2004], 799-844).[1]

Why is this *overlap* of recommendations so important? Here's why: a search of LC's OPAC combining **Islam?** AND **Human rights** as LCSH subject terms produces *over 450* hits. Even a Kluge scholar with a full-year residency could not read so many hundreds of sources.

It is therefore extremely helpful to researchers not only to get multiple "takes" on "the facts" of same subject—the "something important" ideas that should not be overlooked—but also to be able to determine *which few "best" sources to start with* in moving to the next level of research.

Our capacity to digest and filter huge numbers of information sources is *particularly important at LC* because of the sheer size of our collections. In other words, the definition of "best practices" here will have to take into account how different we are from all other libraries; smaller facilities will not have comparable problems of initial sorting and filtering, and so what they regard as "best practices" may be very different from what we need to do here (**Paper #6**).

Example of best practices at LC: Montague grammar

A third example: A reader said he needed to research "Montague grammar."[2] I had never even heard of this, and the reader himself knew little more than the name and the fact that it has something to do with linguistics. Through *Reference Universe*—a subscription database that indexes the individual articles in ca. 50,000 specialized reference sources (with particularly strong coverage of subject encyclopedias) I could immediately identify a two-page article on the topic in the *International Encyclopedia of Linguistics* (4 vols., Oxford U. Press, 2003), which was readily available in the MRR reference collection.

More to the point, the 14-volume *Encyclopedia of Language & Linguistics* (2nd ed., Elsevier, 2006), not covered by *Reference Universe*, was shelved right nearby; and this set provided a 12-page article on the topic, plus a 3-page article on Richard Montague himself. A third source shelved in the same area—also not covered by *Reference Universe*—the 2-volume *Encyclopedia of Linguistics* (Fitzroy-Dearborn, 2005), provided another 2-page article. (*Wikipedia*'s very short articles on the grammar and the grammarian are embarrassingly superficial in comparison.)

---

[1] Needless to say, it takes much longer to write up such reference work than to simply *do* it. All of these sources could be assembled from MRR within only a few minutes.
[2] Actually I've had this question from two different readers; I refer here to the first time.

LC has more than two dozen books in multiple languages under the subject heading **Montague grammar**; but referring him to the OPAC would have done him a disservice. He wanted only an overview perspective on the basic facts of this particular subject, not either in-depth knowledge from 300-page books *or* transdisciplinary connections to anything else.

In other words, high quality service is best provided by leading researchers through *stages* in a research process. It is accomplished by *first* showing them *overview* sources relevant to their topic, and giving them mechanisms for discerning the *best* sources *on the subject of interest* if they *then* wish to proceed to the next stage.

Best practices: proceeding *initially in stages and within disciplines* rather than trying to get everything and make all possible connections at once

"Transdisciplinary" considerations are not appropriate at this preliminary and necessary early stage. We provide the best service precisely by *not* catering to "readers' expectations" of finding "everything" via any "one stop" mechanism, computer or other. It was the confusing computer searches themselves that left the first reader with the gut-feeling—and quite justified—suspicion that she might be "missing something important."

A philosophy of "best practices" that provides service *in stages* and *within disciplines* works much better in practice, with real questions at ground level, than an ethereal philosophy of "one stop shopping" that provides transdisciplinary access to "the full portfolio of the Library's resources."

Small libraries might be able to get away with that because their "full portfolios" don't contain much to begin with.

The first stage at LC, however, very often requires *excellent reference collections* because *they alone* provide ready access to the initial overviews and filters that are needed to provide overviews of otherwise overwhelming sources—and the contents of our reference collections are almost entirely not available in online counterparts. (Nor are the sources that are online as *perceptible* online as when their print counterparts are arranged *on our reference shelves* for easy recognition, without prior specification, in subject-classed "silos.")

The *next* level of searching often involves identifying the best LCSH subject headings in the OPAC—a procedure that is greatly facilitated by examining the subject tracings on the best books identified at the previous stage, in the overlapping encyclopedia's bibliographies. The first level, then, provides *feedback* on what to look for at next level—and, equally important, *on what not to bother with* that might otherwise seem attractive or simply crowd out, by sheer volume, the better sources (e.g., 450+ books on Islam and human rights). This is a very important consideration in "ground level" reference work that is routinely overlooked in library literature flying at "the 30,000 foot level" that conspicuously fails to provide any concrete examples of best practices with real reference questions in a *very* large library.

This next level also entails identifying the best discipline-specific databases relevant to the topic, for more extensive and deeper levels of searching—especially through referral to the subject-specific "silo" databases (such as *ATLA Religion Index*) that minimize the problem of retrieving thousands of irrelevancies outside the core subject area, irrelevancies that contain the same keywords in unwanted contexts. But these levels are beyond the scope of this paper.[3] Here my concern is with the necessity of having good *reference collections* to provide the *first* level of service: overview provision and filtering.

Actual "best practices" being overlooked by I-900

My point regarding best practices in reference work is that there are *technicalities* to providing good service, especially at a library of the size of LC, and that the I-900 proposal shows no awareness of them at all. Moreover, its facile emphasis on making "transdisciplinary" connections minimizes precisely the greatest strength of our reference collections—i.e., the first thing to be done in the best reference service is, in most cases, to give readers an *overview* of the range of resources relevant to their inquiry, on two levels:

> a) in identifying the most important *concepts* relevant to the subject—i.e., "the basic facts"—or the "what's important" ideas whose absence might be fatal to a paper that overlooks them; and

> b) in filtering the huge mass of available material to identify *core literature* on the subject, segregated from indiscriminate printouts or computer retrievals of hundreds or thousands of hits.[4]

In order to provide such overviews, and to do so in ways that far exceed what *Wikipedia* is capable of doing, we need *specialized reference collections* having *multiple sources that overlap in their coverage of the same subjects*—as in the above examples.

What LC can offer researchers is a *range* of *overview perspectives on the same subject* that can be quickly *compared to each other* at this initial level of service, and a *range* of concise bibliographies composed selectively of "most recommended" sources that can also be *compared for overlaps*, as above. *Wikipedia*—the main source that students "expect" to provide them with an overview—cannot do either.[5]

---

[3] The current 3rd edition of my *Oxford Guide to Library Research* (Oxford U. Press, 2005), covering these further complexities, is 293 pages long. The manuscript of the 4th edition is considerably longer. A shorter demonstration of what are really "best practices" in reference work can be found in the open-source paper "The Peloponnesian War and the Future or Reference, Cataloging, and Scholarship in Research Libraries."
[4] Published subject bibliographies, especially if annotated, are also excellent sources in reference collections that serve this purpose.
[5] There are still other *technicalities* to overview-provision that are solved by specialized reference collections that cannot be matched by *Wikipedia*, and that will also be effectively lost if those collections are not rich in sources providing overlapping coverage of the same subjects. Hundreds of specialized encyclopedias now include entire separate volumes of *primary sources* on their topics—a type of material

Dumbing down LC's greatest reference-service strengths

No other library on earth can match LC's ability to provide such an immense range of initial overview perspectives *and* filtering capabilities in all subject areas in its specialized reference collections.

But this range of necessary initial and overlapping reference sources cannot provide the quick comparative perspectives that are needed to "exceed readers' expectations" if they are not readily available to begin with in our open reference collections. (They are printed, copyrighted sources that are very seldom online; and even if available online cannot readily be *found* through federated searches.)

This is one of the greatest dangers of the I-900 proposal, at least as it has been currently put forward: it seems to be based on a very naïve assumption that "one stop shopping" that provides *something* in *all* subject areas at a single "Center of Knowledge"—no matter how superficially—is more important than having specialized reference collections with multiple overlapping sources *within each* discipline, all of which reference sources are:

- immediately available (without having to be requested from the stacks) and
- subject-clustered on the shelves (in the "silos" created by the LC classification system) for ready recognition of whole groups of sources when individual titles cannot be specified in advance (as with the foreign language encyclopedias covering humor in religion).

I-900 is an exercise in putting a third- or fourth-stage level of reference service (transdisciplinary connections) ahead of the necessary initial stages—and doing so at the cost of undercutting the first stage. That stage itself is dependent on *subject expertise* that is effectively embodied by the very overlap of multiple sources within each subject "silo" in our specialized reference collections (See **Paper #3**). (I-900 would also undercut the ready availability of *subject experts* to begin with; see **Paper #6**.)

Our first fear is this[6]: that consolidation of multiple reading rooms will force them to occupy essentially the same linear footage of shelf space currently available in the Main Reading Room (MRR). If we do not have all of the shelf space provided by deck areas adjacent to MRR (Decks 33 [behind a consolidated card catalog], 16, and 46) in order to accommodate the *full* reference collections from the several affected reading rooms, then the quality of our reference service will be greatly diminished rather than

---

very frequently requested by students at the start of their projects. A specialized encyclopedia also provides a readily-browsable *list of entries*—i.e., a roster of the encyclopedia's article titles, either alphabetically or in subject clusters; these lists can readily alert users to scores of search terms, or aspects of their subject, that would not otherwise occur to them, and which can then be of further use in searching our 630 subscription databases.

[6] There are other fears: **Paper #3** and **#6.**

improved.

It is likely that there will be a significant dumbing down of the MRR reference collection in any event under I-900: specifically, what will happen to the existing transdisciplinary coverage of MRR regarding the several subject areas of Law, Music, and Geography? Will our large reference sets in *these* subjects be weeded to make room for sources in Science, Business, et al.? *We are likely to lose much of the multi-disciplinarity we already have* (**Paper #5**).

The extreme danger of regarding the very muscle of our reference collections as fat to be trimmed

More to the specific point of this paper: without significant additional shelf space in MRR any consolidation of multiple different disciplinary reference collections will necessarily regard multiple specialized encyclopedias (or other reference formats) on the same subject as *fat to be trimmed* in order to squeeze more subjects (Science, Business, Genealogy, Heraldry, Government Documents, Newspapers) into a much smaller "unified" reference collection.

From having been at LC for three decades I can easily predict the guidelines that will come down from higher up: "MRR doesn't need *three* multi-volume linguistics encyclopedias when space is at a premium." Nor does it need *two* on human rights or *three* on Islam—or the *ten* on terrorism that I haven't mentioned. Surely this will be regarded as "fat to be trimmed," especially when shelf space has to be created for the 32-volume *Encyclopedia of Life Sciences,* the 25-volume *Wiley Encyclopedia of Electrical and Electronics Engineering,* the 16-volume *Encyclopedia of Cell Biology and Molecular Medicine,* and the 13-volume *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Management*—among *more than a thousand* other encyclopedias now in Science RR.

But it is precisely the *overlap of reference sources on the same subject* that gives us the *muscle* that we need to provide service that extends way beyond what *Wikipedia* can offer in giving initial *overview and filtering perspectives* of both the ideas and the literature of all subjects. We cannot do this with online federated searching (See also **Paper #1**). LC offers more muscle, in this regard, than any other library in the world.

Our specialized reference collections *because of their extensive coverage within each discipline* in fact provide our reference service with some of our very greatest strengths. But the optimum use of those collections themselves depends not on their being in the same room but rather in having subject-specialist librarians both to assemble the collections initially and then to use them maximally (**Papers #3, #6**). I'm wondering, for instance, how much *more* on "Humor in the New Testament" our Religion specialist would have found had she been present while the reader was there. The relationships of extensive reference collections and staff subject expertise are highly intertwined in ways that I-900 is simply overlooking.

I-900's lack of understanding, and disregard, of how reference work is actually done

The philosophy of the I-900 proposal is focused entirely on providing *something* on all subjects in one place—one-stop shopping at a single "Center of Knowledge"— because transdisciplinary connections are naïvely expected to result more from a unified *reference collection* of printed sources whose primary functioning and even capability has little to do with transdisciplinarity.

The very arrangement of any reference collection is such that cross-disciplinary connections cannot be perceived in it to begin with because the sources are arranged by LC classification (LCC) numbers—e.g., anyone in the "B" class areas will not be able to simultaneously take in the "H", "L", "R", or "T" areas—regardless of whether the latter are in the same room or across the street. The LCC system by its very nature segregates different subjects into different "silo" classes that cannot be readily seen as physically next to each other simply because *no* classification scheme can show transdisciplinary connections.

The "silo-ness" of the reference sources' classified arrangement will not be overcome by putting more of them into one room. Indeed, the strengths of the silos themselves will be undercut when their own boundaries are no longer recognizable—e.g., consolidation of MRR and LH&G would greatly dilute the "E" substantive American history reference sources with *thousands* of "E" volumes from Genealogy covering much-too-particular rosters of casualties, pensions, and payrolls. Consolidation of our separate MRR Biography collection into a 'unified' A through Z shelving sequence with all other reference sources would similarly ruin its effectiveness (**Paper #4**).

Transdisciplinarity is primarily and necessarily brought about by *databases* that are already immediately available in all of our existing reading rooms (**Paper #6**), not by consolidated *reference collections* which have very different purposes of their own. This is yet another *technicality* of providing reference service that is being utterly overlooked by the I-900 proposal.

One thing that *will* be "accomplished"—if that's the word—by the I-900 consolidation, however, is a marked decline in overall delivery service due to the closure of the Adams Building reading room. Since two-thirds of the Library's onsite general collections are shelved in Adams, this would mean that delivery time (to MRR) will be doubled from 40 minutes to an hour and a half for most of our books! For the sake of providing more facile access to, possibly, 50,000 extra reference books in one room— *assuming* decks adjacent to MRR can be used for reference—the I-900 plan would double the delivery time for 12 million! By no stretch of the imagination can this be regarded as anything other than disastrous.[7]

---

[7] If it is asserted that more CALM staff will be hired to bring the books from Adams to Jefferson, the obvious question arises: in a time of extraordinary fiscal cutbacks, why should LC hire more staff in this area when it can—and already does—make do very well with existing staff servicing the two reading rooms in both buildings, each having short delivery time? (The same point applies for delivery of newspapers, current periodicals, and government documents from the Madison Building—why not keep

Note that in the above examples it would have been a waste of time to *start out* by looking for any transdisciplinary connections to "Humor in the New Testament" or "Human rights in Islam" or "Montague grammar" in Business, Science, Genealogy, or Government Documents reference sources. That's not what *reference collections* are for; again, the goal of promoting transdisciplinary is much better achieved by use of online sources whose ready availability requires no consolidation of reading rooms (**Paper #6**).

The naïveté of thinking transdisciplinarity is promoted by simply having specialists sit next to each other—and fewer specialists at that

Nor will transdisciplinarity be achieved simply by having subject specialists from all areas work from the same reference desk, because at no time will there be room for specialists from all areas to simultaneously *fit* at either the Central Desk or in the current Reference Assistance Room (RAR). The latter will likely have to accommodate a secure area of tables for readers using the SpecMat (special materials) items, the folio volumes from N (Art) classes, and those from the Newspaper collections. Appointments will have to be made to see the specialists on business statistics, technical reports, technical standards, heraldry, philosophy, and art history, *most* of whom will no longer be immediately present, in violation of best practices required by the Least Effort principle (**Paper #6**).

This very practical reality of "ground level" service is being entirely ignored by I-900: no specialist from Business or Science or Government Documents or Genealogy can "jump in" to an overheard Humanities question, and suggest a transdisciplinary connection to their own area*, if specialists from all of the disciplines are not simultaneously present to begin with.* Nor do actual (rather than naïvely theorized) reference librarians have the luxury of handling even most questions "as a team"—we are frequently at work simultaneously with entirely different readers. The transdisciplinary connections envisioned by I-900's seating arrangement does not promote specialists "working together" if they are not all simultaneously present and each specialist *hears* every question addressed to every other librarian to begin with; and most service has to be provided immediately at the point of contact. (Is it expected that everyone should pay attention to questions on "Humor in the New Testament," "Human right in Islam," or "Montague grammar"? On the other side of the coin, how would Science or Government Documents librarians ever hear about the range of unexpected biographical sources available in Genealogy if a genealogist is not present with them every moment at the points that they receive such questions?—especially if most specialist have to be "on call" at their separate desks because they cannot fit simultaneously at either the Central Desk or the RAR room?)

We are *already* creating cross-disciplinary connections for readers much more effectively simply by our longstanding practice of calling each other up on the phone, letting readers talk directly to experts who are always *at* their specialized desks no matter when we call, and by referring readers to experts who have immediate access to the

existing staff levels and existing reading rooms to maintain an arrangement that already works very well?)

specialized reference collections on which they rely for much of their own expertise (see the "acid rain" example **in Paper #3**).

Nor will transdisciplinary be achieved if the *ready-reference* collections required by the subject specialists themselves are severely truncated (**Paper #4**).

In short, excellent reference service to LC's researchers would be much better accomplished by maintaining our existing, separate, specialized reading rooms.

We are not "resistant to change" in saying this; we are resistant to bad planning that will only undercut the quality of service we can now provide. The planning behind I-900 shows no awareness of what actual best practices at LC are—and the superficial bibliography offered in support of its vague theorizing is simply not adequate to justify either a consolidation of reference collections or the inevitable loss of real subject expertise in the staff (**Papers #3** and **#6**).

Appendix

Ways to Improve Reference Collections

There is a way to dramatically improve reference service without the unnecessary and counterproductive expense and upheaval of I-900.

MRR currently has 2,349 encyclopedias[8]; Science has 1,030; Business has 238; Genealogy has 86; Newspaper & Current Periodical has 25. (These figures ignore the thousands of histories, dictionaries, almanacs, chronologies, atlases, catalogs, directories, handbooks, yearbooks, and other reference-source types that are also in these separate collections.) Weeding each existing reference collection would indeed be desirable. Even more desirable, however, would be to then increase the *specialized muscle of each separate room* by *adding to its peculiar research capabilities*. Since the year 2000 LC has received *over 8,100* specialized encyclopedias. All of our 20+ reading rooms combined have only 4,683 encyclopedias (all dates) on open shelves; MRR has 1,416 [published since 2000]; Science has 742 [since 2000]; Business has 151 [since 2000]; Local History, only 13; Serials, only 20.

The recommendation is to weed each collection and then add to it *more of the thousands of subject-specialized reference sources that are now buried in the stacks.* There is much more involved here, however, than just thousands of specialized encyclopedias. Business Ref may well want to add more *directories* and *statistical sources*; Local History may want to beef up its *biographical sources* and *heraldries*. Newspapers may wish to increase its *journalism history* collection. All of the reference collections would probably be improved by having more *subject bibliographies* brought

---

[8] Expert Search of "ksub encyclopedias or ktil encyclopedia" limited to Main Reading Room. Note that this does not include the subject term **Dictionaries** that often includes encyclopedia-length works such as the 10-volume *Dictionary of American History* or the 61-volume *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

out of the closed stacks—these, too, provide a great way to get an initial, selective overview of the important literature on an amazing variety of subjects.

In other words: let's play to our *strengths* and increase *them*—rather than undercut the best capabilities we have for providing high quality service in order to "exceed readers' [*mistaken*] expectations" that "the full portfolio" of LC's resources can be found via "one stop shopping" from *either* a single reference desk *or* a single reference collection—*or* a single federated computer search.