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 #4
The Need for Separate Ready-Reference Collections
And
Self-Service Collections

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Apart from I-900's disregard of the several technicalities of providing reference service already discussed in the previous papers, yet another important reality is being swept under the rug: librarians routinely have to deal with two different types of inquiries: 'reference' questions and 'research' questions.

The terminology of the literature is blurry here, but for this discussion I'll specify that 'reference' questions are those that have a definite right or wrong answer, or that are answered by some particular and limited fact(s)—e.g., "How tall is the Washington Monument?" "What is the phone number for a particular Congressional office?" "What was the population of Utah in 1940?" "Who was the Secretary of State in 1910?" Which colleges offer a major in Forensic Sciences?" "Somebody refers to a place called *Malchin*—where is that?"

'Research' questions, in contrast, are the opened-ended ones that don't have a definably limited "right" answer: "What do you have on humor in the New Testament?" What do you have on human rights in Islam?" "What do you have on European immigrants and their contributions to U.S. entrepreneurship?" "What do you have on popular perceptions of the canals of Mars in the decades prior to 1920?" "How do people behave when they visit zoos?" "What do you have on women serving on corporate boards or as CEOs?" "What do you have on Hugo Chavez's regard for Simon Bolivar?"

Research questions are the kind that are usually best handled in several stages—as in first getting an overview of the *range* of facts and resources that may be involved, and getting some indication of which sources *to start with* for more in-depth study in the next stage—followed by deeper searches in online sources.

Reference questions, in contrast, are usually best handled by good *ready reference collections*, immediately at hand, that are physically segregated from the general reference collections. These collections include such things as:

- lists of historic office holders;
- one-volume encyclopedic histories of government agencies;
- lists of nonprofit organizations (with contact information) categorized by subject, when the researchers don't know any particular organizations in advance;
- basic sources for both current and historical statistics worldwide;
- printed guides to microform collections, for known-item searches
- lists of awards and prizes and their winners
- fact-books on Congressional staff and contacts;
- current directories of college programs and majors;

- multiple foreign language dictionaries
- place-name gazetteers;
- chronologies, almanacs, dictionaries, atlases, etc.[1]

Such ready reference sources, grouped together in clusters and immediately at hand, help librarians enormously in being able to quickly answer a multitude of brief, "look it up" questions that we know from decades of experience will continue to be asked on a regular basis—and which cannot be readily answered if the same volumes are dispersed into and widely scattered among the much larger general reference collections. (Examples below)

Creating problems with ready-reference and self-serve collections: Microforms

For example: what is to become of the 150 linear feet of Microform reference sources now shelved in the ready reference collection in the RAR room?[2] The placement of this extensive collection is a problem that was solved decades ago by situating the Micro ready reference collection in LJ100, separate from the MRR Alcoves. It is not readily believable that so much material will fit in the new Machine Readable area at the back of the current Computer Catalog Center, given the amount of space that will be needed to accommodate reader-printers from both Micro and Newspaper reading rooms.

Creating problems with ready-reference and self-serve collections: Quotation books

Another particularly important problem immediately leaps to mind among those who do reference work: the MRR Ref Desk area (or RAR), apart from its Microform guides, also has a very large cluster of over 270 quotation books, with call numbers ranging from B through U, all shelved together in two separate bookcases for easy consultation. We put all of these sources together because we get a lot of "quotation" questions that cannot be answered by Internet resources—indeed, it is the superabundance of misattributed quotations on the Net that causes many of the problems to begin with. The loss, widespread dispersal, or severe weeding of this ready-reference collection alone will eliminate the best solution we've devised for dealing with a type of question that we know will continue to come up forever.

Creating problems with ready-reference and self-serve collections: Biography

An even bigger problem may well be created in the MRR area if our current

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[1] Those who wish to pursue the topic in greater depth might read 7,000 word article on "Reference and Informational Genres" that I was asked to write by the editor of the standard 7-volume *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Sciences*, 3rd ed. (CRC Press, 2010).

[2] Just this week I had to answer an email question from Germany from a doctoral student who needed a copy of a psychological test from 1980. He had already used *PsycINFO* and contacted the American Psychological Association with no luck. He had even personally contacted the three authors of the test, who could not help him either. I found the copy in one of our microfiche collections. Since he was already in contact with the authors of the test, and since he'd been through so much already, I assumed he had or could easily get copyright permission, so I just copied the instrument and sent it to him. That's what we can do here with a good reference collection immediately at hand: we can find things that even their own authors have lost track of.

Biography collection is no longer segregated in a separate A to Z call number sequence, immediately adjacent to the RAR reference desk. I remember that during the 1987-91 renovation we were particularly happy to be given the space to solve what had always been a big problem: our Biography collection, one of the most heavily used components of the whole reference area, had been set in the lower level of Alcove 2. Not only was this nowhere near the reference desk—we have to *show* people to "look in *this* area for Black biography" or "*here* for architects"—but the space containing it was too small for the resources we needed to add. We leapt at the necessary solution: move MRR Biog as close to the reference desk as possible and also double its space by putting it in Alcoves 5 and 6. I-900 is apparently seriously considering the outright dispersal of this ready-reference collection into a "unified" A to Z generalized sequence—the same sequence that would bury the quotation books and disperse the strength of the Genealogy collection.

Creating problems with ready-reference and self-serve collections: Genealogy

Which brings us to the *several* problems that I-900 will create for Genealogy reference: what is to become of the huge 504-drawer *Family Name Index* and *Analyzed Surname* card catalogs in LH&G? These catalogs are consulted by most of the visitors to that room, but there is no space in the Main Reading Room to accommodate them where their existence would be immediately obvious to family history researchers. We might well ask: Are I-900 proponents even aware themselves of the existence of these heavily-consulted card catalogs? Are they to be thrown out because their presence has been completely overlooked? Similarly, the LH&G set of the 226-volume *American Genealogical Biographical Index*, covering 6.25 million names, is shelved immediately next to a catalog tray listing the call numbers of each of the hundreds of volumes indexed, whose full texts are not online. Putting that set in MRR (if it would fit to begin with) *would greatly decrease its visibility and also separate it from the tray of call numbers*— and the table on which the tray may be consulted—thereby making that major resource both much less conspicuous and much less immediately useful. It gets used in LH&G because it is so *noticeable* near the reference desk; no one can simply recognize its existence in *Ancestry Library*, nor can that database provide the call numbers for hundreds of non-digitized volumes that are indexed. Relying on the online source increases the delays and hassles of using this major resource. (Not all advantages accrue to online sources in comparison to their printed counterparts—there are real trade-offs involved—another technicality of providing reference service obvious to those who *do* it. [**Paper #3**])

Creating problems with ready-reference and self-serve collections: Newspapers

Several similar problems arise with the Newspaper room's resources; at present it has several card catalogs behind its circulation desk:

- a list of U.S. newspaper microfilm holdings (updated as film is added)
- a list of foreign newspaper microfilm holdings (updated as film is added)
- another list of U.S. bound newspaper and portfolio holdings (updated when bound holdings are sent for filming or are replaced by commercial

film purchased)
- A set of bound volumes listing holdings of foreign bound newspapers and portfolios (updated when filmed or replaced).

Of course the huge self-serve collections of newspaper microfilms will also no longer be immediately accessible. Those copies contain extensive photo-journalism on major (and minor) stories that is frequently deleted from their online counterparts. We will be increasing the hassle of delivery time from "immediate" to "across the street"—an hour an a half, as with Adams holdings? Again, I-900 creates a serious new problem of service where none exists now.

Creating problems with ready-reference and self-serve collections: Science

A similar problem exists in Science reading room: the librarians there have segregated three shelves of specialized reference sources for finding technical reports— LC has the largest collection in the world—immediately at hand in their ready reference collection. They've also grouped over two dozen frequently-needed *Jane's Defense* annual volumes together in ready reference. (The call numbers of both the technical reports sources and the *Jane's* volumes would scatter them throughout the regular reference collection.)

Creating problems with ready-reference and self-serve collections: City directories and FBIS reports

A similar problem exists in the Machine Readable Room: we have twenty self-service filing cabinets of old city directories on microfilm and fiche, and three more cabinets of self-serve Foreign Broadcast Information Service transcripts. The city directories alone are one of our most heavily used microform collections—and there is no guarantee that all (or even most) are available via *Ancestry Library* online. Bulldozing this material (and the cabinets of Foreign Broadcasts) into closed stacks area with no self-serve access would be a major lessening of quality service.

Once again the problem is that the I-900 proposal shows no awareness of the *technicalities* of providing good service, or of the need for in-depth specialized ready-reference collections (including self-service collections). It lacks critical thinking and disregards hard-won solutions to reference problems that come up routinely—solution that are already in place right now.

The bottom line is that I-900 repeatedly ignores hard-won solutions that have been worked out over decades by the reference librarians who are closest to the patrons, who are most knowledgeable about their problems and questions, and who know best how to serve them with the least amount of hassle and delay. Time after time, I-900 simply ignores the realities "on the ground" for the sake of a grand 'vision' of unified, one-stop shopping that will inevitably lead to seriously diminished reference service.

The Principle of Least Effort in information seeking behavior

The Principle of Least Effort in information seeking behavior is discussed more fully in **Paper #6**, but it is relevant here as well: I-900 will change "the slope of the gameboard" (as in a pinball machine) in the relation of the reference librarians to their reference collections: it will make the ready-reference material—e.g., a whole wall of microform guides, two bookcases of quotation books, two Alcoves of Biography sources, specialized card catalogs, etc., etc.—less immediately accessible. It will simultaneously greatly diminish the amount of material that is now readily self-served by the researchers themselves, without the inconvenience of long delivery times.

It will also will make the larger reference collections (in the Alcoves) themselves less useful in two ways: by—very likely—dumbing down the necessary overlaps they now provide (**Paper** #2) and also by diffusing and dispersing many sections (especially Biography, American History, and Genealogy) that require the necessary focus provided by their own separate call number sequences.

I-900 "slopes" the system away from good reference service—it creates multiple problems that have already been solved (decades ago) by our current specialized rooms with their own specialized ready reference collections. And it does so mainly on the apparent allure of what is essentially an aesthetic vision of a one-stop "Center"—a vision that is not practically functional for the staff that must work with it or for the researchers we serve.

The Library's researchers will indeed suffer; it will likely be in silence because I-900 will make it much harder for them to realize how many connections to the collection, especially in discipline-specific reference materials, they no longer have direct access to, or are no longer being shown. The justification that "no one is complaining" will inevitably be trotted out after a few months[3]; but who among our readers can complain about not seeing connections that were never brought to their attention to begin with? Again, the naïve transdisciplinary focus of I-900 ignores the importance of deep subject specialization in reference collections—and in reference staff. A claim to the effect that 'everybody else is doing it' does not withstand scrutiny.[4] We need to do better *here*.

Over time, further, the retirement of the staff who are knowledgeable of what used to be in the ready reference collections will take with them that knowledge—it cannot be conveyed to begin with if the sources it depends on are themselves dispersed and scattered, especially if more of it has to wind up in closed stacks. Again, subject expertise of staff is much more dependent on the "silo clustering" of specialized reference collections themselves (**Paper #2**) than I-900 considers—or even notices.

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[3] The same thing happened in MRR when the readers' desks were covered with glass that reflected the glare of the reading lamps directly into their eyes, and also caused more books to slide off onto the floor. After a few months of complaining the readers realized they were being ignored. This was regarded as a solution to the problem.

[4] See **Paper #6** for an assessment of the relevance of the FRD bibliography on "New Librarianship."

Providing access to "the full portfolio" of the Library's resources will not be accomplished by merely having *something* available on all subjects at a single reference station; *the provision of excellent service would be severely undercut by the severe weeding of multiple specialized ready reference collections—by definition situated immediately near reference staff—that simply cannot fit at either the Central Desk or the RAR.* Service is similarly undercut rather than improved by elimination of multiple self-service collections that are also now readily at hand in ready-reference areas: the 23 microfilm cabinets of city directories and FBIS reports; the massive LH&G card catalogs and *American Genealogical Biographical Index*; the technical reports and Jane's reference volumes in Science; dozens of ready-ref shelves in Business including pamphlet boxes for current issues of important business journals; special card catalogs; quotation books and hundreds of guides to microfilm collections now in the RAR; et al.

Real world concerns vs. slogans

Real-world considerations such as these ought to figure into any assessment of what are *really* "best practices" in reference work *at LC*—even if they are not compatible with bumper-sticker slogans ("Silos to Synergy") and even if they are overlooked by much of current library literature, or by much smaller libraries that have neither our massive collections nor our peculiar responsibilities. (See **Paper #6** regarding the bibliography of current literature provided by FRD.) The librarians who do reference work at ground level know more about what is involved than theorists at the 30,000 foot level—plentifully represented in the FRD bibliography (**Paper #6**)—who hold up a fantasy vision of a single reference collection covering all subject areas that makes no adequate provision for either a ready-reference collection (physically segregated from the larger reference sequence of call numbers) or for large collections that decades of experience have shown to be best offered as self-service material.

The Library of Congress has an opportunity to lead in the area of providing excellent reference service, rather than just to naïvely jump on the popular bandwagon of belief in superficial unified/consolidated/federated/transdisciplinary/one-stop reference service. If I-900's understanding of the latter entails either the dispersal or the decimation of multiple specialized ready-reference collections into a single A-Z sequence, then reference service will be seriously undermined. I-900's implementation would make it much more difficult across the board for librarians to handle the thousands of 'reference' questions, in particular, that we know we will get every year—and that includes the thousands of email questions we get every year, whose answers require ready access to the very same reference collections we use with onsite readers (**Paper #7**).

All of the problems sketched above have already been consciously recognized and prudently solved through decades of experience; the solutions are embodied in our present configuration of reading rooms. The I-900 proposal, originating from aesthetic and ungrounded theoretical considerations, simply ignores or overlooks decades of the Library's own history (**Paper #5**). The whole direction and philosophy of I-900 is not an improvement over our current situation; it is the opposite. It will do much more harm than good.