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Keeping Up is Hard to Do*

Mary Whisner**

An article encouraging librarians to read newspapers to improve their reference service causes Ms. Whisner to think about the value of current awareness reading for law librarians. This leads to speculating about the proper use of the all-too-limited time available to today's busy librarian.

¶1 I recently had a few minutes to begin sorting the stacks of paper on my desk. When I saw a professional journal, I asked a basic triage question: can I cross my name off this routing list and move it along? (One of the most satisfying ways of dealing with a big pile of papers is to make part of the pile move onto someone else's pile.) Sometimes I cross my name off after only seeing the title of the periodical. In fact, I have asked not to have some journals routed to me at all because I so seldom have the time to look at them, and my efforts when I do seldom seem justified.

¶2 This time I looked closer. The cover of the journal bore a list of five articles in the issue. One of them appealed to me: "Reference Work and the Value of Reading Newspapers."¹ I was intrigued enough to flip to the first page of the article and skim the abstract. The piece seemed interesting. Still, my pile of papers loomed before me. If I read the article right then, I would never sort the pile—let alone find the leave slip I was missing. So I slapped a Post-it Note on the first page of the article and shoved the journal into a tote bag that was filling with professional reading I hoped to get to. (I was the last person on the routing list of this journal, so hoarding it would not deprive a colleague.)

¶3 According to the article's abstract, the authors suggest that reading newspapers is likely to improve the accuracy of reference service. Indeed, they recommend that libraries consider "policies that provide time for their reference staff to read newspapers and magazines."² As I went about my business in the next several days, I considered these points.

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1. Juris Dilevko & Elizabeth Dolan, *Reference Work and the Value of Reading Newspapers: An Unobtrusive Study of Telephone Reference Service*, 39 REFERENCE & USER SERVICES Q. 71 (1999).
2. *Id.* at 71.

¶4 First, is it true that reading the newspaper regularly could help answer—or anticipate—reference questions? Well, sure. Even though the study reported in the article was about reference service in large public libraries in Canadian cities,³ I think it is likely that reference service in United States law libraries would also benefit from librarians' familiarity with the contents of the newspaper. Many news stories are about legal developments—a law that is under consideration, a Supreme Court case that was just argued. Even articles that are not explicitly legal may still be of interest to lawyers and legal scholars. For instance, the *New York Times* recently reported that some large biotech firms are selling off their agricultural divisions to focus on their more lucrative pharmaceutical divisions.⁴ That should be of interest to the students in the biotechnology and the law seminar who are currently writing papers about the development of new products and are to cover business and scientific aspects as well as regulatory and legal issues. If the *New York Times* editorializes this month about "regroupment camps" in Burundi,⁵ it could be a paper topic for a student in the human rights seminar that will be offered next quarter.

¶5 Let us be clear. The reference librarian's role is not to absorb the newspaper in order to answer reference questions from her own personal store of knowledge. If a law student asks for information about human rights violations in Africa, the reference librarian should not be expected to recite information from *New York Times* articles (or any other source). The student instead needs someone to help find information. For instance, it could be a good boost if the librarian says, "I think this issue has received some press coverage lately. Why don't you try searching for news stories online? It seems to me I might have read that the U.S. State Department issued a statement on the situation, too. You might try searching the State Department's Web site."⁶ So what is helpful about reading the newspaper is not mastering its contents, but acquiring some sort of general familiarity with them, enough to be able to provide a patron with some good leads. If the librarian—not the patron—is the searcher, this general familiarity is still a big help, because with it the librarian has a better idea of databases to try and search terms to use.

¶6 Is reading a newspaper the only way to pick up knowledge about current events? Clearly not. I did not actually read a *New York Times* article about Burundi, I heard a story about it on National Public Radio.⁷ The same stories are

3. By now I have read past the abstract.

4. David J. Morrow, *Rise, and Fall, of "Life Sciences"; Drugmakers Scramble to Unload Agricultural Units*, N.Y. TIMES, Jan. 20, 2000, at C1.

5. *Turn for the Worse in Burundi*, N.Y. TIMES, Jan. 10, 2000, at A18.

6. Such a tip could lead the student to Office of the Spokesman, U.S. Dep't of State, *U.S. Urges End to Burundi Regroupment Program* (Dec. 16, 1999) <<http://secretary.state.gov/www/briefings/statements/1999/ps991216a.html>> (press statement by James B. Foley, deputy spokesman).

7. Mike Shuster, *Morning Edition: United Nations Security Council Meets with African Leaders to Determine Whether a Peacekeeping Force Will be Implemented on the Continent* (NPR broadcast, Jan. 25, 2000), available in LEXIS, News Library, NPR File.

typically covered—with varying degrees of depth and certain differences in perspective—in many different sources. To achieve the sort of familiarity that is helpful in reference, it usually does not matter whether the librarian learned about an event by reading the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post* over breakfast, flipping through *Newsweek* in the staff lounge, listening to “Morning Edition” in the car, or watching CNN’s “Headline News” at the gym.

¶7 The bigger the story, the greater the redundancy in the system. Suppose, for instance, that it was useful in November 1999 for a reference librarian in an academic law library in Seattle to know that the World Trade Organization was going to meet in Seattle and that environmental and labor groups were going to protest some WTO policies. That basic information was readily available from dozens of sources. There were stories in the national media—*New York Times*, NPR, etc. There were stories in the two local daily newspapers, the *Seattle Times* and the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, and on local television news programs. There was extensive coverage in *Real Change*, the newspaper sold on street corners by homeless people. There were stories in the campus newspaper. Speakers came to the law school and the university. Law students trained to be legal observers. Flyers were pasted to utility poles; announcements were made in churches. In the flood of publicity about the WTO meeting and its surrounding controversy, no reference librarian would likely be caught totally off guard and have to ask embarrassingly naïve questions in a reference interview (“WTO? Could you tell me what that stands for?”).⁸

¶8 Given the redundancy in coverage among news sources—and especially the greater redundancy associated with bigger stories—it seems unwise to prescribe that every reference librarian must read the same newspaper. Perhaps because I have never been a devoted newspaper reader myself but still consider myself competent, I am willing to believe that a reference librarian can keep abreast with current events through other media as well.

¶9 Is keeping up with current events necessary? Once we say that it can be useful for a reference librarian to be familiar with news stories, do we have to take the next step and say that all reference librarians *must* read the newspaper (or listen to NPR or subscribe to Slate or watch CNN)? I think it is enough to be familiar with the types of sources and what is likely to be covered. So, for example, if a law student asks about human rights violations in Burundi, the reference librarian should be able to do a reference interview to learn that the incidents are very recent. The librarian should be aware that newspapers would likely have covered such incidents and be able to help the student construct a search to find the stories. It is helpful if the librarian remembers seeing a story, but not essential.

8. Good reference service need not stop with basic familiarity. Anticipating that some of our patrons would want more information about the WTO, my colleague, Cheryl Nyberg, created a Web page with links to a variety of useful sources. *Seattle Hosts the World Trade Organization* (last modified Nov. 22, 1999) <<http://lib.law.washington.edu/ref/wto.html>>.

¶10 Of course, the best way to become familiar with the sort of coverage different media provide is to use them. If the librarian occasionally leafs through the *New York Times*, then she will know that Linda Greenhouse and other reporters cover the United States Supreme Court in depth. If she has to search for news stories, she might begin with the *New York Times*, rather than searching more broadly in all newspapers. We also become familiar with sources by paying attention to the fruits of our searches. I have never seen BNA's *Daily Report for Executives* in paper, but its articles so often have turned out to be helpful that I have learned to go to it for coverage of certain legal and regulatory developments. I learned this not only from my own experience but also from colleagues who told me how useful the source was.

¶11 Let us return to that abstract of a library science article. So far, I have agreed that reading the newspaper—or, more broadly, keeping up with current events through whatever media one prefers—can be useful in reference service, in law libraries as well as in public libraries. But I am cautious about saying that it is necessary to good reference work. Therefore, I question whether we should carve out time from the workday to read the newspaper on the job.

¶12 One problem is that none of us has an empty hour during our workday for this activity. If we take out an hour to read the *New York Times* at work, what will we give up? Attending a collection development meeting? Staffing the reference office? Revising a library guide? It is not that reading this impressive newspaper is not valuable—but is it *more* valuable than what we would have to give up?

¶13 Another problem is that so many information sources *could* prove useful to us. True, many stories in a general newspaper relate to law. But almost all of the stories in the *National Law Journal* do too, so it might make sense to allocate precious reading time to it instead. Or the *ABA Journal*. Or our state's bar journal. Or *United States Law Week*.

¶14 Here is one respect in which law libraries are different from public libraries. Reference librarians in a public library need much more of the generalist knowledge that can be picked up by reading the newspaper. Someone could ask them about a Broadway show, a new book about pandas, or the Stanley Cup. In law libraries, we hear all kinds of questions, to be sure, but they do tend to focus on legal topics. So when we read magazines and newspapers for current awareness, we should choose sources that will have a high concentration of legal developments. We might read more widely at home or on our lunch breaks, because we are bright, involved people who also like to know about modern art, astronomy, politics, and the rest. On work time, though, we should focus on what will have the greatest payoff for our work.

¶15 It is terribly frustrating that so very many publications could be worth reading regularly. Consider the irony implicit in the opening of this essay: *I could not make the time to read an article about the importance of reading newspapers and magazines*. I think I am not alone in feeling nostalgia for the days earlier in

my career when I read professional literature more regularly. When I started out as a reference librarian, I read *United States Law Week*, *National Law Journal*, *American Libraries*, *Library Journal*, *Law Library Journal*, and more.⁹ Now I still get plenty routed to me, but not the same publications. I hardly ever look at *United States Law Week*, and I only see *National Law Journal* if someone draws my attention to a particularly interesting article.

¶16 To some extent, e-mail discussion lists have taken the place of some professional reading. They help us to keep up with developments in law and librarianship. They also help us focus our other reading when someone posts the citation to an article that should not be missed. That is all to the good, yet we have lost something, too—reading hundreds of unedited short postings is not qualitatively the same as reading a few carefully drafted and edited published articles.

¶17 It is not just keeping up with e-mail that has made it hard to read professional journals. We reference librarians are expected to *produce* more. At the University of Washington, we are giving more guest lectures, researching more projects for faculty, and writing more than we were a decade ago, when a large part of our workday consisted of sitting at the reference desk and waiting for the next patron to walk in. When I face a pile of professional reading, I face choices not only about what to read—*Washington State Bar News* or *AALL Spectrum*—but also about how to fit the reading into my other duties. Am I speaking to a class tomorrow? Then I had better get my handout together. Is today the deadline for our weekly “Law Library News” column in the law school newsletter? Then I had better put together a couple of cheery short pieces. Does a professor need her bibliography by the end of the week? Then I should get to it. The professional reading is still useful, still stimulating, and still thought-provoking. But it cannot trump the deadlines.

¶18 We develop strategies for keeping up despite the flood of e-mail and the crush of deadlines. We choose not to have everything that is potentially useful routed to us. Sometimes we can share our exposure—someone reviews *National Law Journal*, someone else reads *Washington State Bar News*—and tell each other when something of particular interest appears. We learn to cross our names off routing lists when we are just too busy. We learn to skim—letting an occasional headline catch our eye, only rarely reading articles in detail. We stack up reading to take to the desk in hopes of a quiet shift. I also try to make the

9. I keep returning to Robert C. Berring, *How to Be a Great Reference Librarian*, LEGAL REFERENCE SERVICES Q., Spring 1984, at 17. I read this when I was in library school and took it to heart. Berring begins by encouraging reference librarians to read a number of scholarly books about legal bibliography. In his section on current awareness, he recommends *United States Law Week*, *National Law Journal*, *American Lawyer*, *ABA Journal*, one's state bar journal, law school alumni magazines, and, yes, *The New York Times*. *Id.* at 32–35. The list seems overwhelming now, partly because we now have e-mail discussion lists (e.g., law-lib), e-mail current awareness services (e.g., LII Bulletin, from Cornell's Legal Information Institute), and webzines (e.g., the timely and practical LLRX).

professional reading pay off on the other tasks—for example, by giving me something to put in the law school newsletter.

¶19 Keeping up is hard to do. We have many valuable sources streaming past us while we are performing many duties, often under pressing deadlines. We have to choose what sources to review, when, and how deeply. Because we do want to keep up, it is often painful to ignore entire issues or to breeze past worthwhile articles; but we have to do it to keep our in-boxes (paper and e-mail) manageable. We read what we can, knowing it does help in our pursuit of professional excellence, but we accept, however reluctantly, that the days when we had ample time to read and reflect are gone forever (if indeed they really ever did exist).