

## REFERENCE AS RELATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE

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**Abstract:** The traditional conceptualization of reference as a transactional service—defined by question-answer pairs, accuracy rates, and response times—has obscured the deeper relational work that constitutes reference's most significant contribution to library value. This article advances an alternative framework, proposing that reference functions as relational infrastructure, the embedded web of trust-based human connections that renders all other library resources meaningful and accessible, particularly for historically underserved communities. Drawing on sociological theories of infrastructure and empirical observations from practice, the article argues that the most consequential reference interactions are those that build durable relationships, anticipate needs before they are articulated, and connect users to broader networks of support. This reconceptualization demands fundamental changes to reference space design, staffing models, training priorities, and assessment practices, as well as a sustained institutional commitment to relational labor that defies traditional productivity metrics. The article examines the challenges of sustaining relational infrastructure amid fiscal constraints and technological disruption while identifying strategies for making relational work resilient and scalable. Ultimately, positioning reference as relational infrastructure reframes library value not in terms of information delivered but in terms of human connection forged, affirming libraries as democratic institutions that enable participation, belonging, and justice through the humble yet profound work of one person genuinely helping another.

**Keywords:** reference services, relational infrastructure, library assessment, community engagement, trust in libraries, social justice librarianship

For more than a century, the reference desk has stood as the symbolic heart of the library, a physical and conceptual anchor point where trained expertise meets human curiosity. Yet that desk, with its imposing counters and designated shifts, has always been as much a barrier as a gateway. It signals that help is available, but only on institutional terms, only during designated hours, only when the seeker crosses a threshold that can feel intimidating to the uninitiated. The pandemic-era shuttering of physical service points, followed by the uneven return to in-person operations, has forced a long-overdue reckoning with what reference actually accomplishes and for whom. What emerges from this reckoning is a powerful reconceptualization: reference is not a transaction, not a location, and not even primarily an information-delivery mechanism. Reference is relational infrastructure, the embedded, trust-based web of human connections that makes all other library investments meaningful and accessible, particularly for communities that have historically experienced libraries as places of exclusion rather than empowerment.

The conventional framing of reference as a service implies a one-way flow, a provider offering something to a recipient. This service model carries deep assumptions about need, deficiency, and expertise that subtly reproduce hierarchical relationships between librarians and users. The librarian possesses specialized knowledge and tools; the user arrives with a gap to be

filled. This framing, however benign in intention, positions the user as incomplete and the librarian as the completer. It also presumes that the user recognizes their own information need, can articulate it in terms legible to professional practice, and trusts the institution enough to make that need known. For many individuals, particularly those from communities with histories of marginalization, these presumptions fail spectacularly. The parent who does not speak English fluently, the returning citizen navigating reentry services, the young adult experiencing housing instability, the elder whose cognitive changes make digital navigation bewildering, all of these individuals may have profound information needs that never register in reference statistics because they never approach the desk. Relational infrastructure begins from a different premise: that library expertise is most valuable when it is embedded in ongoing relationships that anticipate needs, build trust over time, and meet people where they actually are rather than where the library wishes them to be.

Thinking of reference as infrastructure shifts the unit of analysis from individual interactions to durable systems of connection. Infrastructure, in the sociological sense, is the underlying foundation that enables other activities to occur. Roads and bridges are infrastructure because they make transportation possible; electrical grids are infrastructure because they power everything else. Similarly, relational infrastructure refers to the patterns of human trust, familiarity, and mutual recognition that make library resources usable and relevant. When a librarian knows a community health worker by name and understands the populations she serves, that relationship becomes infrastructure for delivering accurate health information to non-English speakers. When a librarian has spent months building rapport with staff at a local homeless shelter, that connection becomes infrastructure for ensuring that library card registration, technology access, and referral services reach individuals who would never otherwise cross the library threshold. These relationships are not incidental to reference work; they are the work itself, and they require sustained investment that defies the rapid-fire metrics of chat transcripts and question-answer pairs.

This infrastructural understanding of reference demands a profound rethinking of how librarianship measures its own effectiveness. Traditional reference assessment, focused on accuracy rates, response times, and user satisfaction surveys, captures only the most superficial layer of relational work. A quick answer to a factual query may be accurate and timely, yet leave no trace of relational depth. Conversely, a relationship-building conversation that never produces a documented question may be the most consequential reference interaction of the week, opening pathways for future engagement that will yield significant outcomes over months or years. The librarian who spends forty-five minutes helping a new immigrant navigate the citizenship application process is not merely answering a question but building trust in the library as a civic institution, teaching navigation skills that transfer to other government services, and providing emotional reassurance during a high-stakes life transition. None of this is captured by a satisfaction score or a transaction count, and the profession has been impoverished by its inability to articulate and account for these deeper contributions.

The physical and virtual spaces of reference must be redesigned to support this relational infrastructure rather than undermine it. The traditional reference desk, with its elevated position and physical barrier, subtly communicates that expertise resides behind a counter and must be requested through formal channels. Alternative models, such as roaming reference, embedded

librarianship, and scheduled consultations in comfortable seating areas, deliberately dissolve these barriers and enable the kind of organic conversation that builds relationship. Online reference platforms, similarly, can be designed for continuity rather than anonymity, allowing users to connect with the same librarian across multiple sessions and develop the familiarity that lowers anxiety and increases disclosure of genuine needs. Many libraries are experimenting with co-located service points where reference, technology help, and social services are offered in an integrated, welcoming environment, recognizing that users often do not distinguish between their various needs and that relationship is the thread that weaves them together. These spatial and platform choices are not superficial design decisions but expressions of an institutional commitment to accessibility and human connection.

The staffing and training of reference librarians must evolve to prioritize the capacities that underpin relational infrastructure. Traditional library education emphasizes search strategies, database structures, and reference interview techniques, all of which remain valuable but insufficient. Equally essential are the skills of cultural humility, trauma-informed communication, active listening, and community engagement, competencies that have historically been treated as soft or ancillary rather than core. The reference librarian as relational infrastructure is less a technical expert and more a community connector, someone who not only knows how to find information but knows whom to call, how to listen without judgment, and how to follow up in ways that demonstrate genuine care. This expanded role requires not only different training but different recruitment and retention practices, as libraries must actively seek candidates with lived experience in the communities they serve and create career pathways that reward relational labor rather than advancing only those who excel in technical functions. The professional culture of librarianship has long privileged the collection over the connection, the catalog over the conversation, and shifting that balance demands deliberate institutional courage.

The sustainability of relational infrastructure poses particular challenges in an environment of fiscal constraint and high staff turnover. Relationships take time to build and are easily fractured when a trusted librarian leaves or when service models are abruptly changed. Libraries must therefore invest in practices that make relational work resilient rather than dependent on specific individuals. Team-based approaches, where multiple librarians share knowledge about community partners and user relationships, reduce vulnerability to turnover. Systematic documentation of relational knowledge, handled with appropriate privacy safeguards, ensures that institutional memory persists beyond individual tenure. Regular community listening sessions and advisory boards create ongoing mechanisms for relationship maintenance that are not contingent on any single staff member. Perhaps most importantly, libraries must budget for the time and space required for relational work, acknowledging that the coffee conversation, the site visit to a community organization, and the follow-up phone call are not optional extras but essential infrastructural activities. These investments are difficult to justify in traditional cost-benefit terms, but their absence manifests in the slow erosion of trust and relevance that eventually makes all other library expenditures futile.

The digital transformation of reference services, accelerated by the pandemic, has introduced both opportunities and threats to relational infrastructure. Chat services, email reference, and asynchronous question platforms have extended library reach to users who cannot or will not visit physical locations, including many with disabilities, caregiving responsibilities, or

time constraints. Yet these same technologies can fragment relationships, reducing each interaction to an isolated event stripped of context and history. The challenge is to design digital reference that preserves relational continuity, using customer relationship management systems that track user preferences and past interactions, offering appointment-based virtual consultations that mirror the depth of in-person meetings, and training digital reference staff to weave relational warmth into text-based communication. Some libraries are experimenting with asynchronous video responses that convey human presence, while others are using AI-powered chatbots for routine queries specifically to free human staff for the more complex, emotionally charged interactions that require genuine relationship. The goal is not to resist technology but to deploy it strategically in service of relational ends, ensuring that automation augments rather than replaces the human connections at the heart of reference practice.

The ultimate justification for reference as relational infrastructure lies in its unique contribution to democratic participation and social justice. Libraries are among the few remaining public institutions that welcome everyone without precondition, and reference relationships are the mechanism through which this welcome becomes real. When a librarian helps a young person apply for their first job, an older adult access their pension benefits, a refugee understand their housing rights, or a parent find culturally appropriate childcare, they are doing more than answering questions. They are affirming that every person deserves accurate, actionable information; that institutional resources belong to everyone; that asking for help is not a sign of weakness but a practice of citizenship. These relational moments are micro-interventions in systems of inequality, and they accumulate into patterns of community resilience that no policy alone can achieve. Reference as relational infrastructure is therefore not a technical reformulation but an ethical commitment, a decision to locate the library's value not in its collections but in its connections, not in the knowledge it holds but in the human flourishing it enables through the humble, profound work of one person genuinely helping another.

In the end, the reference desk may fade, the chat window may close, and the question may be answered, but the relationship that made it all possible endures. That enduring connection is the true infrastructure upon which all library services rest, and it deserves not only our professional attention but our institutional investment, our intellectual energy, and our abiding commitment to the communities we have sworn to serve. When reference is understood as relational infrastructure, libraries are no longer places where people find information but places where people find their way, not only to answers but to belonging.

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