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The Myth of Half Right Reference (Lightning Talk)

Abstract or Résumé:
It has been said and re-said that reference librarians only answer roughly 50% of reference questions correctly. But while this statistic is passed around as fact - where does it come from? In this paper, I track down the elusive citation using backwards chaining, citation analysis, and historical tracing. And then, I will re-examine the study that appeared to start it all through a modern lens, ultimately suggesting that we abandon the idea of half right reference once and for all.

1. Tracing the history

While the study itself is important to analyze, it is also vital to know how to find the study. It was difficult for me to track it down even though many articles between the 1980s-1990s addressed it. I started my search using various keywords and led to Terry Weech's work, "Who is Giving All Those Wrong Answers?" from 1985. In this work he references discussing, "… research findings which indicate the user has not much more than a fifty-fifty chance of getting a correct and complete answer to a reference question" (Weech 1985, 100). However, the works he mentions in this statement are not cited.

From there, I continued to search and found a short mention of the study in May 1985 edition of American Libraries, and learned the study was conducted in Maryland. I had a new search term to add to my search! From here, I found articles addressing the 55% rule, but again my search for the original publication came up short (Peter Hernon and R. McClure 1986; Pete Hernon and McClure 1987). After reaching out to every Maryland adjacent library organization I could think to contact, I finally I was able to get a copy of *The Crab*, a newsletter for the Maryland Library Association. While it did not directly cite article or address the authors, I saw a chart of the results from the study. I was elated. However, everything ended here. I had met a dead end.

So, I pivoted, and started to look into other reference articles published around this time. These articles seemed to be inspired by the same study that I still struggled to find. I stumbled upon Terence Crowley's "Half-Right Reference: Is It True?" – this article provided an overview of many popular reference studies of the time and best of all it cited them (Crowley 1985). From these citations I was able to locate the 1985 article "Improving Reference Performance: Results of a Statewide Study" (Gers and Seward) and I thought this would be where my quest ended. I knew the citation and could give context to the statistic! But then I started to really look at the findings, which can be found in the next section, and learned that my journey looking into the 50% rule of reference was not over yet.

2. Results from the 1985 Maryland study

Level of Information Received	Level	Number	Percent
Correct answer and source	*1*	*918*	*38.2*
Correct answer but no source	*2*	*399*	*16.7*
Source where answer can be found	3	242	10.1
Partial answer and source	4	46	1.9
Partial answer but no source	5	37	1.5
Internal directions, lead to correct answer	6	202	8.4
Internal directions, do not lead to correct answer	7	125	5.2
No answers, external directions	8	175	7.3
Incorrect answer	9	136	5.7
No answer, no directions	10	120	5.0
Total		**2400**	**100.0**

The study was conducted during the summer and fall of 1983 and asked the same 40 questions to 60 outlets in 22 public library systems statewide in Maryland, although 2 libraries chose not to participate (Gers and Seward 1985).

When Gers and Seward interpreted the above results the only answers that counted as correct where answers that fell in the first two boxes that are italicized above. All other answers, referrals, and partial answers were considered incorrect by the authors, creating the 55% rule, since only 55% of answers were considered correct. However, due to the universality of this fact, this study needs to be re-examined, especially within a modern reference context.

3. **Challenging the results from the 1985 Maryland Study**
I want to recognize the work that Ger and Seward created, and the impact of study for researchers going forward, while also challenging the conclusion of this study. While the original authors claim that only 55% of reference questions were answered correctly, I would argue that only 15.9% of questions were explicitly incorrect (No answer no directions, incorrect answer, and internal directions did not lead to correct answer). But the rest of the data beyond the binary of totally correct or totally incorrect. This study fails to see the nuance in the variety of types of answers to questions, which I will walk through below.

The rest of these answers need to be re-evaluated. For example, giving someone the source where the answer can be found is considered incorrect in this study. But, in today's reference landscape where librarians are taught and encouraged teach people how to find answers, and to help increase information literacy, giving someone a source where they can find an answer should contribute to the statistic of correct answers. Additionally, providing internal directions

allows someone to search where they may find the answer themselves, and is not an incorrect answer. Finally, librarians do not always have the answers but one of the professions greatest assets is that it refers you others who may hold the answer, so referrals should be reconsidered. There is no one right way to help a patron or to answer a question, people and libraries are too complex for that thinking.

My proposed interpretation of the Maryland study results:

Level of Information Received	Number	Percent
Correct		*TOTAL: 80.7%*
Correct answer and source	918	38.2
Correct answer but no source	399	16.7
Source where answer can be found	242	10.1
Internal directions, lead to correct answer	202	8.4
No answers, external directions	175	7.3
Partial Answers		*TOTAL: 3.4%*
Partial answer and source	46	1.9
Partial answer but no source	37	1.5
Incorrect Answer		*TOTAL: 15.9%*
Internal directions, do not lead to correct answer	125	5.2
Incorrect answer	136	5.7
No answer, no directions	120	5.0
Total	**2400**	**100.0**

With my new interpretation 80.7% of references questions are answered correctly (although in different ways and to varying degrees), and only 15.9% of answers blatantly false, all that is left to be accounted for are partial answers with 3.4%. Through my analysis and by shifting the focus to incorrect answers, librarians should release idea that we are always half wrong and celebrate all the ways we are right – through direct answers, referrals, and teaching resources to patrons and the myth of half right reference should be left behind.

References

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