Chapter XV

The Growing Support Crisis in Federal STI

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Federal agencies in the United States federal government that provide Scientific and Technical Information (STI) face a growing support crisis brought on by the Internet. As these organizations use the Internet to provide increased access to databases and automated resources they are finding more users from the general public are asking more questions. These organizations need to be prepared to support an increasingly diverse user group via the Internet. Projects of the National Library of Education (AskERIC and Virtual Reference Desk) are reviewed and used to raise and discuss issues in supporting STI applications in a government setting. Finally a set of recommendations is presented to help plan digital reference services in this context.

INTRODUCTION

Federal Scientific and Technical Information (STI) providers such as the National Library of Medicine, National Library of Education, National Agricultural Library and the Defense Technical Information Center face new challenges as use of the Internet grows. Organizations that specialize in the production of databases and collections of materials (including images and texts) now find themselves in an unfamiliar support territory. Collections once meant for small specialized audiences are now being used by increasingly naïve and diverse
audiences. Where once STI agencies could assume a level of sophistication and self-support by their intended audiences, they now find themselves overwhelmed with questions from the general public.

Only recently have STI agencies begun to realize the impacts of the Internet, which was originally seen as a cost effective dissemination alternative to print. Alternate formats, new media capabilities and new means of inter-agency linkages are now possible and their impacts increasingly understood. Evaluation of Web sites and product design in a client/server environment are rapidly developing in sophistication and use. In addition agencies have realized larger audiences and claimed this increased user access as a sign of success in information dissemination. However, as shown in Figure 1, increased user access comes not only from reaching more of an agency’s core audience, but crossing into new audiences and users. Now those accessing the product include:

- **Core** - users who are familiar with a specific STI product,
- **Secondary** - audiences with great knowledge of an agency’s scope, but are unfamiliar with a given product,
- **Topical** - those familiar with an agency’s topic on a broad scale,
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