

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 #5**  
**I-900's Disregard of LC's Own History**

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## Paper #5

### I-900's Disregard of LC's Own History

#### Moving reference librarians away from the Central Desk

According to the 1944 *Annual Report of the Librarian of Congress*, “Two actions taken in the course of the last year *have contributed to the improvement of the quality of our service* to readers in the Main Reading Room. The first was taken in September 1943, when the reference staff was withdrawn from the Central Desk . . . and was assigned quarters in the alcoves which flank the Public Catalog” (p. 89, emphasis added)—this, in order to put them into Alcoves 5a and 5b. The *Report* continues, “The result was a marked increase in the proportion of readers receiving personal attention. Advice on the catalog can now be given, searches for books or information can be extended over wider areas, and problems can be thoroughly studied.” (It was probably at this time, too, that Alcove 6—another of “the alcoves which flank the Public Catalog”—was glassed in specifically to eliminate the noise of the Telephone Answering section that was situated there.)

#### Moving reference librarians into a separate Reference Assistance Room

Another improvement took place in 1991, when the Main Reading Room re-opened after nearly three years of renovation work: we moved the reference staff out of Alcoves 5A, 5B and 6. We abandoned Alcoves 5a and 5b as the reference station at that time because 5A and 5B had never been glassed in (like 6)—but up until 1991 they did not have to be *because the noise of that reference area was substantially buffered from the readers' desks by the presence of the massive card catalog cases that were always in front of it until the renovation*. With the removal of those catalog cases and their replacement by more readers' desks we *had* to move into LJ-100 (the current Reference Assistance Room [RAR]) in order to continue eliminating the noise of the reference interviews from the reading room. This consideration alone should eliminate the Central Desk as the hub of any “Center of Knowledge.”

Although this potential problem has been grudgingly avoided by I-900 proponents in—apparently—agreeing to use the RAR rather than the Central Desk as the hub of the “Center of Knowledge,” the fact that the Central Desk was so avidly advocated, shows, right from the start, how naïve the I-900 thinking has been. For the sake of an aesthetic “Center,” the original thinking was to put reference librarians back into our pre-1944 station at the Central Desk; and it was actually asserted that the increased noise of the reference transactions there would not really disturb any readers simply to the sound-dampening properties of the MRR carpet alone. Here again, the Library's own history and experience was being ignored. Note that even when carpeting was introduced into the *Adams* Building reading room, its centrally-located desk (by the stack elevators, facing the readers' desks) continued to be shunned as a reference station by all of the librarians who are responsible for actually providing service. The Science and Business librarians chose without question to be stationed in side alcoves, and for good reasons:

their “side room” stations prevent the noise of reference consultations from disturbing researchers in the reading room itself; and the sides rooms also provide much more space than the central desk for accommodating the ready-reference collections that are required by both Science and Business librarians.

### **Creation of a much improved ready-reference collection for Humanities and Social Sciences**

The move from Alcove 5 to RAR in the Jefferson Building gave us the opportunity to solve the same two problems: the RAR not only solved the noise problem; it also gave us a new opportunity to provide ourselves with a *much* better ready-reference collection. Note that the latter also solved the problem of where to shelve of the 150 linear feet of Microform guides that needed to be immediately near reference librarians. They had previously been kept in their own Microforms reading room at a time when full-time reference librarians worked in it. (After the renovation the much smaller Microforms room no longer had shelf space for its own reference collection.) The ready-reference quotation books collection, equally useful in solving another problem that previously had no solution, was created at the same time.

Until 1991, in other words, we never had the physical space to solve the problem of our inadequate ready-reference collection in 5A and 5B. We jumped on the opportunity to use the LJ100 RAR space as soon as the renovation removed the card catalogs from in front of Alcove 5—rendering that Alcove unusable—and created a new, larger, and better space for the ready reference collection, including the huge set of guides to microform collections and a special arrangement of quotation books (**Paper #4**).

This arrangement *itself* embodies “new ways of problem-solving, innovation, and creativity” when compared to all prior configurations of the Main Reading Room. This was not important in the original I-900 proposal, and it came as an unwelcome shock when the reference staff overwhelmingly rejected the proposed use of the Central Desk—minus any ready-reference or specially-segregated self-service collections at all—as the new locus of service.

### **Emphasizing a separate focus on Science and Business**

Another part of Library history is *still* being cavalierly ignored by the consolidation proposal; this from 1992 *Annual Report of the Librarian* in reference to the reorganization of the former General Reading Rooms Division:

This reorganization [into subject teams] supports librarians more fully in the role as recommending officers and subject specialists, and the renaming of the Adams Building reading room as Business Reference Services *responded to the demand for improved reference services in business information by separating business and economics from other social sciences.*

[p. 61, emphasis added]

The recognized need, then as now, was not for transdisciplinary consolidation but for increased subject specialization, with reading rooms supportive of that specialization.

A further improvement in service took place in 1998. In the words of the Librarian's *Annual Report* for that year, "Plans were under way to establish the Science, Technology and Business Division by the merger of the Science and Technology Division and the Business Reference Section of the Humanities and Social Sciences Division, *bringing together subject areas that are increasingly linked in the national economy*" (p. 65, emphasis added).

Question: Have Science and Business become *less* important to the nation's economy since 1998? Answer: They are more important now than ever before. Equally important is the ability of LC to respond to Congress in these areas—a function that will not be facilitated by dumbing down our own ability to provide subject expertise in these areas for *both* reference *and* research questions.

### **Book delivery solutions embodied in the very architecture of the Adams Building**

Yet another major historical improvement in service is also being ignored by I-900: the obvious fact that the shelving of two-thirds of the Library's general collection in the Adams Building starting in 1939 required a major reading room in that same building to provide efficient access to it. It was not accidental that reading rooms are architecturally integral to the very design of that historic building; but I-900 has to regard both our history and LC's very architecture through horse-blinders that prevent the very perception of anything but an impractical "one stop" utopia of "unified" service.

Again, setting up a "Center of Knowledge" that provides faster access to more reference books in one location—if indeed it *will* provide access to more rather than many thousands fewer—is no improvement in service when it *also entails doubling the delivery time for most of the books in the Library's general collection (Paper #2)*.

This problem, too, was solved decades ago; I-900 would needlessly re-introduce it.

The proposed trade-off (faster access to a few thousand reference books in one place, slower access to 12 million) is not worth it: not only is delivery time better under our current configuration, but reference service itself is better provided by our current distribution of specialized reading rooms (with specialized ready reference collections, staffed at all hours of opening by subject specialists).

Again, we reference librarians rely on each other *not* for our transdisciplinary-creation capabilities but for our *subject specializations (Paper #3)*. And is it really adequate to reply that we *may* hire more CALM staff to make more frequent deliveries from *both* Adams and Madison to the Jefferson Building? In our current financial straits do we have funds for *more* staff to do this?

A further consideration: The John Adams building is the only monument to this Founder in all of Washington. Downgrading that monument from a vibrant, functioning library to a warehouse is essentially a slap in the face to Adams' memory. He will no longer be on a par with Jefferson or Madison; and he deserves to be.

### **A Department Store analogy**

Perhaps an analogy would be useful: Would customers at Macy's department store be better served if its management decided to centralize all sales staff at a single desk on the ground floor? Would it be an improvement in service if the shoe salesmen were required to give advice on cosmetics? Would it be an improvement if the cosmeticians were required to advise shoppers about cookware? Would the furniture sales staff provide good service regarding men's clothes or women's fashions? Indeed, would all of the various specialists even be present simultaneously at the one desk? Or would special calls or appointments have to be made just to get them in contact with the customers who used to see them *immediately and directly* in their separate departments? Further: would "cross-training" classes make the shoe salesmen into good cosmeticians, or the furniture sales staff into fashion experts? . . . or would Macy's find that its customers started going elsewhere to avoid the increased hassles and decreased specialized service?

Indeed, would patrons who want to buy shoes be best served from a central sales desk on the ground floor when *delivery* of every pair of shoes they want to try on would have to be delayed by transport from the third floor storage area—or from a building across the street? Wouldn't they be much better served if departments with specialized staff existed that were also physically adjacent to the merchandize the customers came to see?

Or would all of these very real problems simply vanish by management's designation of the new, unified sales desk as The Center of Merchandise?

And would the customers' complaints over the loss of specialized service be voiced only to the sales staff squeezed into the new Center? Or would the loss of specialized service reflect so badly on the overall management of the store that outside media would want to hear a justification of the new system from the President of the company himself, personally—it's happening on his watch—and not from some layer of lower management? The President would be hard-put to appeal for any justification from a layer of management that conspicuously lacks any experience itself at the sales desk. Indeed, that same officer might find himself having to answer pointed questions from a Board of Directors with oversight responsibilities, whose own shopping efficiency has been seriously compromised.

### **Inconsistencies and contradictions within I-900's own philosophy**

Speaking of a "Center," we have to point out some serious problems with the very idea envisioned by I-900 proponents themselves.

If MRR is truly to be such a Center for “the full portfolio” of our knowledge resources, why are Law and Music and Geography reading room exempt from consolidation in the same area? Are Business and Science and Genealogy and Newspapers/Government Documents *less* specialized than they are? The only people who could make such an assertion are those who have never worked in any of these specialized areas themselves, and have no appropriate reference experience. If folio volumes of newspapers are to be delivered across the street—and served in the current RAR space?—why cannot maps and large atlases be delivered into MRR as well? If “transdisciplinary” service is supposed to trump subject and format specialization, why are *these* subjects and formats excluded from the grand consolidation when they are just as much a part of “Knowledge”? (N.B.: we do *not* mean to be planting any ideas to consolidate these rooms, too.)

On the other hand, if Law, Music, and Geography are best served—and they very much are—by their own separate reading rooms, how are they different in that regard from Humanities and Social Sciences, Science, Business, Genealogy, and Newspapers/Government Documents? These reading rooms were all created in the first place to solve real problems that require *specialized* spaces, staff, and reference collections.

Why is the proposed Center of Knowledge, right from the start, so unbalanced, skewed, exclusionary, and *off-center* in arbitrarily excluding so many other disciplinary specialties at LC? Why are *their* silos to be kept intact? What is the rationale? Where is the “unified” thinking?

Indeed we may well lose much of the multi-disciplinary reference capability that MRR is currently able to provide. The Main Reading Room has always tried to contain at least basic reference materials (e.g., subject encyclopedias, dictionaries, biographical sources, directories) covering all subject areas. And not just Science and Business but Law, Music, Motion pictures, Manuscript, and Geography reference sources as well. We’ve regarded it as particularly useful to researchers to have full sets of several Law sources—*Statues at Large*, *Treaties of the U.S.*, *Foreign Relations of the U.S.*, *Congressional Record*, *American State Papers*—as well as large printed sets corresponding to Manuscript holdings (e.g., *Collected Papers* sets for Washington, Jefferson, Adams, Madison, Lincoln, etc.) available in MRR. The reason is that, of course these subjects do impinge on many others, and many of our readers (and book authors) are working on histories or public policy issues. These sets are not available to them during the evening hours that the Law Library and Manuscript Room are closed—which hours are sometimes the only convenient times for these researchers to come in.

And yet we are now hearing that quite possibly these sets will have to be weeded from MRR in order to fit in the tens of thousands of volumes coming in from the several other reading rooms. Suddenly our ability to make at least superficial cross-disciplinary connections in these areas is no longer important because these sets are already ‘available’ in Law and Manuscripts, across the street. . . . a turn of thinking that renders

hollow the entire philosophy of I-900. By that same logic, the Business, Science, Genealogy, and Newspaper sources are also equally available right now, across the street—*more* available than Law or Manuscripts, in fact, because their reading rooms have the same extended evening hours as MRR. Moreover, there are more of the Science, Business, Genealogy, and Newspaper resources and self-service sets available in those rooms right now than can possibly fit in a consolidate Center of Knowledge.

### **A transdisciplinary analogy**

In speaking of a “center” one is reminded that the perfectly circular, aesthetically pleasing planetary orbits of Copernican theory did not actually work in practical calculations. Kepler’s analysis of the empirical data supplied by Brahe’s observations established that the real solar system is significantly different: the planets’ orbits are actually elliptical. They didn’t *work* with the postulation of *one* center. One might similarly notice that the whole history of reference service at LC has been a series of movements away from any one physical “center” to multiple *foci*. As the collections became overwhelming in size, increasing segmentation became necessary because “unified” service from one location did not *work* in practice. While it is indeed sometimes prudent to promote searching across “silos”—which can already be done *much* more efficiently by (online) mechanisms other than reading room consolidation (**Paper #6**)—it is foolish to try to *eliminate* the silos altogether. Or, going back to astronomy, we note that the many diverse planets have separate, non-circular orbits of their own, and also that many have separate moons and satellites whose own orbits cannot be calculated by assuming the sun as their center.

The solar system exhibits a functionality that is non-symmetric, and attempts to force it into more aesthetically unified and simpler models proved to be unworkable.

Just so, we need an understanding of the peculiar and diverse orbits of our separate reading rooms, and their self-service satellite collections, more than ever before. Their motions, too, cannot be forced into any theoretically-pleasing circular motion.

### **Interim summary**

In summary of several points made so far, closing our specialized reading rooms and consolidating service for very different specialties at one station (either the Central Desk *or* the RAR) would negate the many very practical solutions to real problems that were worked out decades ago, throughout the Library’s history, in each case by the librarians who were most acquainted with the difficulties.

The I-900 plan would undo a host of hard-won solutions devised over the last 70 years and essentially *restore the original problems*:

- It would double the delivery time for two-thirds of the onsite general collections by closing the Adams Building’s own reading room, which was created to begin with to solve this problem.

- It would undercut rather than support the necessary subject expertise needed not only in Science and Business but in Humanities, Genealogy and Local History (and Heraldry), Newspapers, and Government Documents. These are not “one size fits all” reference stations; their subjects truly require extensive specialization, and they were created to begin with to solve these problems.
- If—and we don’t know what is planned here—the consolidation would require fitting the resultant “one stop” reference collection into existing MRR shelf space, the necessary weeding would severely undercut the very features that give our separate reference collections their greatest *strengths*: the presence of multiple *overlapping* reference sources *within* their specialized subject areas.
  - Any such weeding would further seriously undercut the subject knowledge of the reference librarians themselves, who are heavily dependent on immediate access to highly specialized reference collections to support their own expertise.
  - Any such weeding would probably undercut the multi-disciplinarity of the reference collection we already have in MRR in its coverage of Law, Music, Geography, and Motion Pictures subject areas.
- It would undercut not only the needed scope of the specialized reference collections—and the expertise they support—but would decimate all of the separate *ready reference* collections that are particularly important to have immediately near the librarians, *separated* from their larger reference collections.
  - It would thereby ignore the distinction between reference questions and research questions, and the different tools needed for each.
  - It would further result in a marked lessening of access to and use of the many self-service collections now in the several ready-reference areas (LH&G card catalogs, MRR quotation books, MRR Biog collection, microform guides, Newspaper microfilms, etc.)—all of which were created to begin with to solve real and persistent problems.
- It beggars credibility to believe that specialists in all subject areas—Humanities, Social Sciences, Sciences, Business, Genealogy, Newspapers and Government Documents—will be stationed simultaneously at the new “one stop” reference desk.
  - Appointments will have to be made for readers to contact the specialists they need—because the experts will no longer reliably be immediately available *at the point of need*. Inevitably there will be a drop-off in contacts with the appropriate staff. (See **Paper #6**.)

Restoring, then, the full portfolio of so many serious problems that were solved decades ago can hardly be regarded as itself providing “new ways of problem-solving, innovation, and creativity”<sup>1</sup> What is being described as “new” and “innovative” is in fact a

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<sup>1</sup> *Minding Matters*, December 20, 2012.

restoration of the “old” and “proven-unworkable.”

Our readers and our subject specialists themselves would be much better served by maintaining our existing separate reading rooms. They were established as separate rooms for definite reasons that are just substantial today as they ever were—and that continue to be just as valid for Business, Science, Genealogy, and Newspapers as for Law, Geography, Music, and our other specialized rooms.