



IFLA
2005
OSLO

World Library and Information Congress: 71th IFLA General Conference and Council

"Libraries - A voyage of discovery"

August 14th - 18th 2005, Oslo, Norway

Conference Programme:

<http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla71/Programme.htm>

July 13, 2005

Code Number:

030-E

Meeting:

75 Reference and Information Services

A Question about Switzerland ? : SwissInfoDesk

Jean-Philippe Accart

Bibliothèque nationale suisse -
Schweizerische Landesbibliothek
Centre d'information (IZ) Helvetica
Hallwylstrasse 15
3003 Berne - SUISSE
Tel. : ++41/ (0)313 235 848
Fax : ++41/ (0)313 228 408
Email : Jean-Philippe.Accart@slb.admin.ch
Site Web : <http://www.snl.ch/>
SwissInfoDesk : <http://www.swissinfodesk.ch>

Towards virtual reference

« The ultimate goal of libraries is always to provide the document or the information required to the user... »

Translated from the annual report of the Swiss National Library, 28 (1928), p. 7

« The Swiss National Library is the primary documentary resource in the world for knowing about and understanding Switzerland and its inhabitants. Its priority is to make its collections available to everyone in Switzerland and abroad. »

Jean-Frédéric Jauslin and Marie-Christine Doffey, *The strategy of the Swiss National Library, 2003-2006*, in 89th annual report 2002, p. 21.

In order to make the best use of their publications and to fulfil their mission of informing the public, libraries set up information services for the public at an early stage of their existence. These services have varied in name and in structure (reading rooms, information desks) and are today most commonly indicated by the term « Reference Service » or « Reference Work », providing in general bibliographic information. With the advent of the internet these services offer ‘virtual information desks’ and reply to users’ questions via an online form. Reference services are thus available on and off site and provide a service that is generally well appreciated by the public. Reference librarians must fulfil special conditions to ensure that they inform, guide and ensure their role as information seekers.

This evolution also results from a process of reorganisation and innovation founded in the Law on the National Library passed in 1992 : among other elements, this law aimed to better integrate the library in the world of scientific research, in education and economics, taking into account new media and new communication techniques.

This paper will present the work of the Helvetica research service which is the extension of the information office set up at the same time as the Swiss Union Catalogue in 1928.

The Helvetica research service

Users’ requirements in the field of research on Switzerland are multiple and stem from both Swiss citizens living in Switzerland or others outside the country¹. Unlike most national libraries, the Swiss National Library is open not only to researchers and scholars but also to the general public. Reference specialists have been selected to provide the quality services, information and documents in as short a turn around time as possible (between 24 and 36 hours depending on the difficulty of the questions). Depending on the time required a fee may be charged,² with the option also to « Lend a Librarian ». However, 95% of the 700 searches carried out in 2004 were free of charge³.

Within the very wide framework of ‘Switzerland’ as a topic, the main areas of specialisation are history, geography, politics, culture and celebrities.

The resources available to the reference service are composed of the Swiss National Library’s collections⁴, those of the Swiss Literary Archives⁵ and those of the Prints and Drawings Department⁶.

¹ 60% of requests come from Switzerland, 20% from Europe and 20% outside Europe (statistics from 2004).

² The first thirty minutes are free of charge, then the tariff is 20 CH francs per 15 minutes or 10 CHF for students.

³ Figures taken from the statistics for user services, Swiss National Library, December 2004.

⁴ That is to say (statistics from December 2004) :

- 2,651,261 monographs ;
- 9,742 current serials ;
- 358,627 graphic sheets, photographs, posters, maps;
- 57,376 musical scores ;
- 11,970 microforms et CD-ROMs ;
- 13,141 audiovisual documents

⁵ The Swiss Literary Archives (SLA) were set up in 1989, following a legacy from the writer and artist Friedrich Dürrenmatt. They were integrated into the Swiss National Library in 1991. The SLA hold collections covering the literary output of the four linguistic regions of Switzerland (French, German, Italian and Rumantsch) with a special emphasis on literature of the 20th century. Among the 120 archival fonds are those of Corinna Bille, Blaise Cendrars, Jacques Chessex, Albert Einstein, Herman Hesse, Patricia Highsmith or Anne-Marie Schwarzenbach...

In order to extend research options, a virtual reference desk⁷, SwissInfoDesk, was set up in 2003.

A question about Switzerland? : SwissInfoDesk⁸

As with many other library lists (whether national, university or public libraries), SwissInfoDesk is both an information portal integrated in the Swiss National Library's site⁹ with a list of bookmarks, and a virtual link enabling anyone to ask a question about Switzerland via the online form.

An information portal : structure and organisation

In order to simplify searching, twelve topics have been defined, corresponding to the questions most often asked in the following areas:

- geography;
- history ;
- economics ;
- politics ;
- law ;
- culture and languages;
- education and research,
- the media ;
- sport.

There are other, more general, categories:

- portals ;
- photos ;
- address lists and calendars.

Each category is subdivided (for example, the category 'Politics' contains 10 sub-topics including the Swiss political system and the Swiss Confederation). Each sub-topic contains the most pertinent links on the subject. Information specialists in charge of selecting the links make their choice according to a series of criteria :

- structural criteria:
 - o author identification: contact details, specialist in the field, reputation;
 - o the site's objectives: official, amateur, commercial (official sites are preferred) ;
 - o target audience clearly identified;

⁶ The Prints and Drawings Department of the Swiss National Library contains a large collection of [prints](#) from the 18th through to the 20th Century, a collection of [photographs](#) ranging from daguerreotypes from the middle of the 19th century to agency photographs from today, a collection of [post cards](#) and a collection of [posters](#)

⁷ What is a virtual reference desk ? : Based on Web technology and thus accessible to all users anywhere and at any time, a virtual reference desk generally comprises a set of links acting a starting point for the user, plus a request form when a more in-depth search is required. The user normally gets a reply to the request via email from the library or service in charge of the reference desk. Whether the answer comes from a totally different library – when this one is the specialist in the field concerned – is of no interest to the user, since for him or her the important thing is to receive a reply to the question.

⁸ URL SwissInfoDesk : <http://www.snl.admin.ch/swissinfodesk/>

⁹ URL of the Swiss National Library: <http://www.snl.ch>

- easy and rapid navigation with the site menu always visible.
- quality criteria:
 - amount of information available;
 - document accessibility : summary/abstract, full text;
 - information quality : content adapted to topic ;
 - proven, impartial information;
 - information checked and validated by an expert or a group of experts ; by clearly indicated sources of information ; by a complete, precise and up-to-date bibliography;
 - links to other valid and pertinent resources;
 - interactivity : the user can contact the author via a discussion list, a forum or by email.

Following selection, SNL staff draw up a brief commentary on the site selected in order to help the user in his/her search and selection. This commentary has the same structure for all sites.

Example : sites listed under the topic « Politics », sub-topic « Swiss political system »

Swiss statistics : Politics

An official site by the Swiss Federal Statistical Office
www.ch.ch

This site is a gateway guiding you to Swiss administrative bodies at all levels. It is provided by the Swiss Confederation, the cantons and local authorities.

Confoederatio Helvetica : Swiss political structure

This section of the Swiss federal authorities' site covers the country's political structure. It explains the three levels of the Swiss political system : federal, cantonal and local and provide a selection of links.

Political rights at a federal level

Few countries enable citizens to take such an active part in the State as in Switzerland. This official site explains how Swiss citizens are ultimately responsible for Swiss legislation. In addition, it contains all results of federal voting since 1848.

List of official internet sites in the Swiss public sector

Whether you are looking for an address of a school, a company or an official office at a federal, state or local level, you will find it here. It is managed by the Swiss Graduate School of Public Administration in Lausanne.

Switzerland

This is the official site of the Swiss Embassy in Paris (in French). It provides in eight chapters a portrait of Switzerland as well as practical information for visiting Switzerland.

swisspolitics.org

swisspolitics.org is a gateway to news, databases and groups covering Swiss politics. It is provided by swissinfo/Swiss Suisse International (SRI), an enterprise de SRG SSR idée suisse.

The links are checked frequently using an automated link-checker and topics are updated continuously.

A SwissInfoDesk speciality : the multilingual aspect

Switzerland is a multilingual country with three official languages : German (63,7 % of the population), French (20,4%) and Italian (6,5 %). Rumantsch (0,5 %) is a national but not an official language¹⁰.

In order to facilitate searching for all, the site is available in three languages (German, French and English). The homepage has been translated into Italian but then redirects to the other language versions. It is difficult to maintain SwissInfoDesk in three languages and to keep the sites equivalent especially as there are few Italian Swiss sites. Each specialist works in all three of the main languages in order to enrich the site in parallel.

The multilingual character of SwissInfoDesk is important as it extends the possibilities for research on Switzerland and opens up access to other German, French and English speaking countries.

In addition, the user may contact the library's information service directly by email or using the online form which aims to help the user pre-define the search criteria required.

Fields in the online form

1. Elements needed for the search request.

Your question (mandatory)

Search aims

Keywords

1.4 Geographical area

1.5 Time period (by year of publication)

1.6 Languages : all ; French, German, Italian, Spanish, English,. others

1.7 Type of information required : bibliography, biography, addresses, photocopies..

1.8 [Type of service required](#) : free search, express, paid..

1.9 Amount prepared to pay (in CHF)

1.10 Deadline (e.g. May 15 2005)

1.11 Send by : telephone, fax, email, post

1.12 Comments

2. Personal data

The user may ask questions in the three official languages of the country plus English and Spanish. The reply will be in the same language as the question asked.

On-line searches

The questions are very varied and often complex¹¹. They mostly require searches in the library's collections, in the SwissInfoDesk itself, or more widely in Internet. Sometimes

¹⁰ Data from 2000 published by the Swiss Federal Statistical Office : <http://www.bfs.admin.ch>

¹¹ This is usually the case for all virtual reference desks : the user has exhausted other on-line avenues of information before turning to the virtual desk.

specialist areas of the library, the Swiss Literary Archives or the Prints and Drawings department are involved.

The care and exactitude sought in the replies reflect the overall striving for quality that is a hallmark of the library's general policy.

Some examples of requests to the SwissInfoDesk virtual reference service :

- Is there a French translation of „Reise in die Schweiz” by Goethe ? Is it available in a library in French-speaking Switzerland?
- Does the Swiss National Library have any documents and illustrations on Swiss clothing in the Middle Ages ?
- How do I search the Federal Court of Justice's rulings on responsibility in ski accidents ?

Marketing SwissInfoDesk

The Communication and marketing section of the library launched a marketing campaign in the beginning the start of 2005 with a press release ¹², informing users about the service of SwissInfoDesk. The campaign was aimed at both the general (Swiss daily newspapers in French and German) and specialised press (in IT, in documentation). It was sent to professional discussion lists, universities, Swiss embassies and consulates abroad and foreign embassies in Switzerland.

Internal marketing was not neglected : the library staff were given a presentation of the service and its goals.

Marketing will continue at the Geneva Book Fair and at events and exhibitions.

¹² Translation of the press release : SwissInfoDesk :

Questions about Switzerland ? : SwissInfoDesk

SwissInfoDesk is a service offered by the Swiss National Library. It helps searching relevant information about Switzerland on the Internet. It is made up of a thematic list of links in three languages.

Information specialists of the Swiss National Library worked out a list of commented links about Switzerland, organised by topics. Search is facilitated thank to the selected links. Links are classified according to various topics : geography, economics, culture, languages, sport... and each site is briefly commented.

Launched in 2003 in English, SwissInfoDesk is now available in German and French.

In addition, the Information Centre Helvetica of the Swiss National Library replies online to any question about Switzerland. The electronic request form is on the same page as SwissInfoDesk. Requests are dealt with within 48 hours.

SwissInfoDesk : <http://www.snl.admin.ch/swissinfodesk/>

What is the future for SwissInfoDesk ? : Cooperation et partnerships

While the Swiss National Library has a unique collection of resources about Switzerland, it is clear that the future of SwissInfoDesk depends on cooperation and partnerships in Switzerland¹³ and abroad. Expected benefits are library related, economic and political:

- in the library sphere:

- The service contributes to continuing education for librarians;
- It allows reference services to be compared (benchmarking) and stimulates competition between them ;

- at an economic level:

- Information resources are optimised;
- The questions asked allow libraries to be more aware of users' needs and interests, facilitating a better balance in collections and better financial management ;

- at a political level:

- It brings together heterogeneous information sources on a topic, via a single interface;
- It enables libraries to share effort more efficiently ;
- It helps libraries to promote each other among themselves and to make their resources better known ;
- The user benefits from a wider range of information;
- It promotes the idea of an information network.

We are also investigating international networks. The Swiss National Library has been one of the first to take part in OCLC's virtual reference service (Online Computer Library Center¹⁴), QuestionPoint¹⁵, which brings together around 100 institutions and national libraries in all continents. This partnership is currently being evaluated.

As a general conclusion we should note that the Swiss National Library is constantly adapting its services to both its library partners (in the first place by setting up the Swiss Union Catalogue) and to its end-users (with SwissInfoDesk among others), with the overall goal of providing quality information: locating documents for inter-library loan; steering clients to other information sources about Switzerland, bibliographic research, and the virtual reference desk.

Thus, the search for information, which was at first primarily for library-related data, has been extended and developed to meet end-users' needs, assisted in this by new technologies. There is no doubt that libraries and librarians are the best placed to meet the challenges of new technologies in the field of information searching across networks.

¹³ There are about 6000 libraries of all types in Switzerland (university, public, special...)

¹⁴ <http://www.oclc.org>

¹⁵ <http://www.oclc.org/questionpoint/>