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Human search engine, that's QandANJ.org

Sunday, June 22, 2003

Reference librarians are accustomed to unusual questions.

But the queries they receive online at QandANJ.org sometimes rival those they hear at the reference desk. "We have been asked, 'Are you a person?'" says Leslie Kahn, supervising librarian at the Newark Public Library. "That's an interesting one to contemplate."



ALLAN HOFFMAN
Netscan

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"Not only am I a person," Kahn adds, "I'm a librarian."

No matter when you visit QandANJ.org, even if it is 3 o'clock in the morning, your question will be fielded, typically within minutes, by a reference librarian -- an individual trained at information retrieval.

The free service operates 24 hours a day, weekends included, with librarians answering -- or trying to answer -- questions of every sort. The answers appear as part of a live chat session with a librarian.

I have used popular search engine Google to come up with thousands

of answers, all on my own. But after giving QandANJ.org a try, I began to understand the limits of my information-searching abilities, not to mention the limits of the Web as a storehouse.

I received lots of answers from QandANJ.org, but even when I didn't, I got thoughtful advice on how to proceed with my research, sometimes by avoiding the Internet entirely.

To use the service, simply visit QandANJ.org and enter your question. A librarian begins to chat with you on one side of your screen; the librarian's research, in the form of Web pages, magazine articles, and other information, appears on the other side of your screen. If you enter your e-mail address, you will receive a transcript of the session after disconnecting.

I tried out the service by delving into one of my interests -- the resurgence of New Jersey's bear population. I wanted to find magazine articles, for instance, discussing other states with controversies about black bears.

Is this a New Jersey phenomenon? Or is it happening elsewhere, too?

Within a few minutes, I had several articles, from publications such as Sports Afield, detailing bear encounters in Arizona, Louisiana and Maryland.

Another question posed more of a challenge. How about articles from the 1970s or 1980s about bear incidents in New Jersey? The search turned up a few articles, but not as many as I expected. The librarian suggested other tactics to try.

QandANJ.org turns online searching into something of a cooperative, educational effort. You are likely to find answers from a visit, but you are also likely to come away from the experience with an appreciation for the information-tracking abilities of librarians and the number of databases, many of them specialized, available to librarians (and library patrons), yet not always accessible on the Web.

The service is staffed by librarians from 34 libraries around the state, from Atlantic City to Wayne, according to Karen Hyman, executive director of the South Jersey Regional Library Cooperative, which administers the service. The service typically receives from five to 30 queries per hour. Two to five librarians staff the service at any time. A Maryland company, LSSI, provides librarians to answer questions from 11 p.m. to 9 a.m. and some weekend hours.

Federal dollars, from the Library Services and Technology Act, fund the project.

Internet junkies sometimes fall into the trap of thinking we can find anything and everything online. We know that isn't really the case, but we don't always remember it when Googling ourselves into a stupor.

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