Acknowledgements

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Background to the analysis

The Searchers project examines the strategic challenges for major public libraries presented by the online information environment. The project has three components: research on current information-seeking and the role of public libraries in online information provision, analysis of wider developments in online environments and search models, and evaluation of the policy and strategic implications for public libraries highlighted by the research. The project will provide guidance for the State Library of Victoria (SLV or State Library) in developing appropriate models of information provision and contribute new thinking on the role and position of major libraries in the digital age.

This paper contributes to the series of Working Papers produced as part of the Searchers project. Other titles in the series are:

Searchers Working Paper 3: Virtual Visitors to the website of the State Library of Victoria, August 2008
Searchers Working Paper 4: Accessing the State Library of Victoria through iTunes University (beyond the campus), December 2008
Searchers Working Paper 6: Online visits to large public libraries in Australia - a comparison, December 2008
Searchers Working Paper 8: Pathways to the SLV collection, September 2009

This report contributes to the research on current information-seeking, analysing the subject of extended reference queries. Extended reference queries are those queries received in writing and via email as well as AskNow, telephone and in person queries which can not be answered there and then. Most email inquiries are lodged via a web form on the SLV website. Other extended reference queries are entered into the query tracking system and forwarded to the appropriate team within SLV to complete.

Since September 2007, the SLV has operated SLVChat, a real-time, web-based chat service combining specialist Victorian knowledge with general reference expertise. Those queries to SLVchat which cannot be answered immediately are also entered into the extended reference data management system.

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1 AskNow is a virtual reference service staffed by librarians in Australia and New Zealand.
2 The queries analysed in this paper were entered into RIMr. In July 2008, RIMr was replaced with RefTracker.
Methodology

Data sources
All the data contained in this analysis were drawn from the RIM-r (Research Information Manager) database of extended reference queries. All queries for the month of May 2008 were extracted from the database, formatted in Excel and then exported into SPSS for analysis.

Figure 1 shows a sample online query form used by members of the public to send a query via email.

Figure 1: A sample online query form

There were 300 queries in the sample. For all queries, data were available on the date of the query and the type of inquiry, as well as the text of the query itself. For 74% of queries there were also data on the reason for the inquiry.

Subject classification
For the purposes of this analysis, each of the search queries was manually examined and coded using one of the 34 codes already created to analyse the search terms that took people to the SLV website (see Searchers Working Paper No 3). No additional codes were necessary. Queries relating to specific books or items were coded to the

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3 This was not a mandatory code in RIMr, although it is now a mandatory code in RefTracker.
subject of the book or item being requested. The 34 codes were aggregated to one of thirteen broader codes (as reported in Searchers Working Paper No 3).

The coding inevitably involves some subjective decisions about the appropriate category in which to place a particular term. Although the contribution of each query to the whole is small, there is a margin of imprecision to the classifications. In interpreting the data, one should focus on the overall pattern, rather than the precise size of each category.

Each query entered into RIMr had already been allocated one of 30 subject codes (Search Classification) by the librarian answering the query. These codes could not easily be matched to the individual queries extracted for analysis. Hence, they are reported on in aggregate for the period 2003-2008 to provide an indication of the type of queries over this entire period for which RIMr data is available.

**Gender**

In this analysis, the name/title of the inquirer was used to code the gender of the inquirer (excluding those inquiries referred to the SLV by another public library). Coding the gender of the inquirer was possible for 93% of queries.

![Figure 2: Number of extended reference queries July 2007-June 2008](image)

Figure 2 shows the numbers of extended reference queries per month between July 2007 and June 2008. As might be expected, the number of queries dropped markedly in December. It can be seen that May had more queries than other months in that year.

It should be noted that RIMr was not a user-friendly system by today’s standards.
Anecdotal evidence suggests that it was regarded by some staff as difficult to use and so was not always used to log telephone and in-person queries. It should be borne in mind that this report may underreport the true number of extended reference queries for the period under analysis.

**Findings**

![Figure 3: Date of query](image)

**Figure 3: Date of query**

The sample contained all queries entered into RIMr between 1st-31st May 2008. As Figure 3 shows, queries were lowest on the weekends. Only 6% (19) queries were on the weekend. Thirteen of these queries were email-deferred, three were personal inquiries and three were telephone. There were never more than four queries on a Saturday or Sunday and generally only one or two queries. In contrast, there were usually at least ten queries on a week day, with at least twenty queries on three occasions.

![Figure 4: Type of inquiry, May 2008](image)

**Figure 4: Type of inquiry, May 2008**

Figure 4 shows the prevalence of each type of inquiry:
• Most inquiries were email-deferred (67%), 20% were telephone inquiries, 7% were in person inquiries, 5% were written and 1% were referred from AskNow. All email inquiries entered via the web form automatically went into RIMr. As has already been mentioned, it is possible that not all of the personal or telephone queries were entered into RIMr.

• There were no fax or ‘email-answered immediately’ queries in the sample.

Figure 5: Assigned reason for inquiry, May 2008

As shown in Figure 1, the web form used to lodge an email inquiry included a dropdown box for the inquirer to denote the purpose of the question. Librarians assigned reasons for the telephone, mail and in-person inquiries, either through asking the patron or using the substance of the query to inform their selection. Information on the reason for the inquiry was available for 74% of inquiries.

Figure 5 shows that inquiries most commonly related to family history (30%). Next most common were general interest (22%), while 13% related to school or university study, 7% were business-related and less than 3% related to writing a book or article or making a film.
Subject of inquiry

As Figure 6 shows, the most common subject of inquiry was history (22%). More than half of these history queries were queries about Victorian history and one quarter of them were queries about other Australian history.

15% of queries were about newspapers with most of these (13% of total queries) about Victorian newspapers.

14% of queries were coded as Person- Not Elsewhere classified. Most of these were family history queries.

The subject of 10% of queries was book-related. These queries were requests for particular poems or works of fiction or queries relating to books that did not fit into any of the other subject codes. Not all book-related queries were for a book title or specific item. For example, there was a query about whether the SLV has books bound in human skin.

9% of queries were directly related to genealogy. Inquiries were coded as having the subject ‘genealogy’ if the inquirer stated that they were doing a family history or wanted information about databases relating to births, marriages and deaths, electoral rolls, baptism or passenger lists. The reason for all of these inquiries (except for one that was uncoded) was ‘family history’. In addition to the queries directly related to genealogy, most of the
queries coded as history, newspaper and person – not elsewhere classified were given the reason ‘family history’.

• The code ‘SLV’ was used for questions about the State Library that could not be coded in any of the other subject categories. This included questions that were about the SLV (for example, about the number of SLV staff) and those that were purely about SLV processes (for example, how to use the Reader’s Card).

• Just under one third (30%) of the ‘general interest’ inquiries were about history, 13% were about newspapers and another 12% were book-related.

• There was no obvious difference between queries lodged during the week and those lodged on the weekend. The queries lodged on the weekends were on a range of subjects and for a range of reasons.

**SLV specific queries**

In addition to receiving a code to identify the subject of the query, queries received an additional code to identify whether they related to the SLV collection or an SLV process.

**SLV Collection**

Queries received an additional code to identify whether they related to a book title or a specific item (for example, a photo or recording).

• Just over one third (35%) of queries related to a book title or a specific item which the inquirer wanted or wanted information on. For example, some inquirers wanted a photo from a newspaper, or publishing details of a book, or wanted to arrange access to a manuscript item.

• Some queries were directed at the SLV because the inquirer already knew, or was fairly sure, that the SLV held the specific book or item they were after.

• It seemed that in many cases the inquirer was wanting a specific item but did not have many details; the inquirer, may for example, know the name of a newspaper or journal and have an idea of the decade in which the article they were interested in was written. From the text of the queries, it seemed that inquiries about articles in newspapers, buildings or places and people were often to do with researching family history.

**SLV Process**

Just over one fifth (22%) of inquiries were about SLV processes; for example, how to go about getting a photocopy of something, requests for copyright clearance, or how to ensure that a particular book could be accessed on the day of the inquirer’s visit.
SLV-specific
Most of the queries either related to the SLV, were queries about the SLV collection, or were queries about something or someone Victorian. Only a minority of queries were general reference queries, that is, queries that could be answered equally well by any public librarian in Australia, regardless of whether or not they had access to the SLV catalogue or collection. These general reference queries included some of the science queries (for example, a question about earthworms) some of the queries relating to cultural practice (for example a question about the historical origin of ‘kitchen tea’) and some of the queries relating to contemporary issues (for example, a query regarding recent events in Cyprus).

Gender of inquirer
Gender could be determined with confidence for 93% of inquirers. Very few inquiries came from librarians asking on behalf of their patrons.

Inquirers were almost twice as likely to be female than male. Almost two thirds (64%) of inquirers were female and just over one third (36%) were male.

- Females were more likely to inquire via email (71% of females compared to 62% of males) whereas males were more likely to write or ask in person.

- Males were more likely to have general interest inquiries (32% of males compared to 17% of females) while females were more likely to have family history inquiries (33% of females compared to 26% of males).

- Females were more likely to have book-related inquiries (12% of females compared to 5% of males), more likely to have newspaper inquires (15% of females compared to 10% of males) and less likely to have inquires about history (18% of females compared to 29% of males).
In order to determine whether the spread of subjects of the queries for May 2008 was typical, the subject of the queries from May 2008 was compared with the Search Classification\(^4\) of the entire set of queries from the RIMr database. A direct comparison was not possible as it was not possible to isolate the Search Classifications for the May 2008 queries. Instead the Search Classification was mapped to the broad subject coding used in this analysis (see Appendix for details). Although most of the mapping was fairly straightforward, the following assumptions were made in making the comparison.

- An examination of a sample of queries coded with the Search classification “Ready reference” indicated that these were about SLV processes. Hence, for the purposes of comparison they have been coded to SLV.

- Given that most of the person-nec queries were about family history, person-nec and genealogy have been added together.

Figure 7 depicts the comparison of queries from May 2008 with the entire set of queries from RIMr database. It shows that the distribution of queries by subject in May 2008 is fairly similar to the distribution of queries by subject for the entire period 2003-2008. The biggest difference is in the proportion of book-related queries, with May 2008 showing less of these than average. All other differences were less than

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\(^4\) This was one of 30 subject codes assigned by the librarian answering the query.
five percentage points in size and so cannot be considered notable. The comparison provides evidence to support the notion that the distribution of topics of the extended reference queries has been fairly stable between 2003 and 2008.

Conclusion
The report indicates that the SLV provides an important service in answering extended reference queries. In the month of May 2008, there was an average of 10 queries per day entered into RIMr and most of these were directly related to the SLV collection or were more general queries about Victorian history, Victorian people or Victorian places. Only a small minority of queries could have been answered adequately without reference to the SLV collection.

It is reasonable to assume that over time particular types of queries would become less prevalent as people increasingly turn to search engines or particular websites for information. This does not, however, seem to be the case with respect to extended reference queries. The analysis provides some evidence to support the suggestion that the distribution of subject areas of extended reference queries has been fairly stable since 2003. The likely explanation for this is that the type of queries being asked via the extended query service tend not to be the type that could be answered easily, if at all, using a search engine website. While the reason given for just under one third (30%) of queries was family history, the subject analysis suggests that the number of family history inquiries was closer to half of all queries.

Recommendations
It is recommended that the SLV continue to monitor the number and type of extended reference queries, paying particular attention to how the subject of the queries is changing or not changing. These data have implications for the level and type of staff assigned to responding to these queries.

It is suggested that the SLV pay particular attention to the content of queries relating to SLV processes, such as how to obtain copies of images, how to request a book for a particular day. Clearer information on the website may forestall the need for the public to lodge these queries.

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5 As mentioned in the Methodology, there is a margin of imprecision to the categories.
APPENDIX

Types of search queries 2003-2008
Details of the mapping from RIMr ‘Search classification’ to the classification used in this Working Paper.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RIMr Search classification</th>
<th>Number of queries</th>
<th>Classification used in this Working Paper</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australian History</td>
<td>3718</td>
<td>History</td>
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<tr>
<td>Australian Literature</td>
<td>487</td>
<td>Book-related</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bibliographic info and locations</td>
<td>2131</td>
<td>book-related</td>
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<tr>
<td>Biography</td>
<td>436</td>
<td>person -nec</td>
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<td>Copies</td>
<td>303</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family History</td>
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<td>genealogy</td>
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<td>Fine Arts</td>
<td>875</td>
<td>Art/music</td>
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<tr>
<td>Geography</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>place/building</td>
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<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>contemp issues</td>
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<td>History (other than Aust)</td>
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<td>Illustrations</td>
<td>193</td>
<td>Art/music</td>
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<tr>
<td>Language and word meanings</td>
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<td>cultural practice</td>
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