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Reference Services in a Digital Library of Historical Artifacts¹

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The National Archives of Singapore (NAS) is a Singapore government organization tasked with the preservation of national records. The NAS offers a reference service where NAS staff respond to public enquiries on archival resource matters. Through time, it was noticed that certain enquiries were being asked more frequently than others. Hence, physical folders were maintained to house information on subjects that were identified as popular enquiries. However, when swarmed with enquiries, this paper-based approach was found to be inadequate. The Enquiry Database (ED) was thus conceived to automate the reference service as well as to eliminate the necessity of the public to enquire in person at the NAS' premises for common enquires.

In the ED, subjects are divided and grouped under broader or more specific terms in which broad terms can branch out to narrower terms that are more precise or specific. Leaf subjects within this hierarchical organization are represented as virtual folders that contain the information sought by users. Functions supported in the ED include the ability to browse the subject hierarchy, search for folders, add/create new folders, modify existing folders, etc., through a web-based interface.

The ED is part of the NAS digital library project which aims to build a unified platform upon which all of the NAS' digitized resources may be accessed through various applications. The ED maintains an application-specific repository that stores the electronic equivalent of the physical folders. Folder contents are references to resources (e.g. photographs, maps and their associated metadata) found within other repositories of the NAS digital library. This approach is in line with the digital library's philosophy of reusability, where resources are stored in centralized repositories and reused across multiple applications.

The ED is expected to help free up time and resources for NAS staff as repetitive and routine tasks are shifted to computers and automated. In addition, the ED will be available online to users even when the physical reference helpdesk closes for the day, thereby offering a value-added service that enhances the image of the NAS reference service as an easily reached public information resource center.

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