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Sense and Sensibility- Multi-volume Reference Sets- Have They a Future?

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Sense & Sensibility — Multi-volume reference sets - have they a future?

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For the past few years, I’ve felt bad about the sales representatives from major micro-
form publishers who come to visit hoping to sell microform collections to the library. It
seems a cruel thing for a publisher to do - to send a representative out in this day and bud-
get to pitch microfilm to libraries. Libraries admire and praise the products, but in my
experience, an actual purchase order is forthcoming less and less often.

While sifting through snail mail, I have recently had unquiet feelings of the same sort
about the many glossy brochures for multi-
volume reference sets. Are we going to buy
these? Is anybody going to buy them? Their
publication represents huge multi-year invest-
ments of scarce resources and the time and
effort of many very talented people - but is
this a format that will compete a few years
down the road? In print? Electronically?
Both? Neither?

Microform collections and multi-volume
reference sets would seem to have very little in
common. Why am I bracketing them in
my mind?

Perhaps because what print multi-volume
sets and microform collections have in com-
mon is the way we fund them. They compete
along much the same decision paths and for
much the same pot of money.

Library funding, as far as splitting up the
money is concerned, has a certain doomed
inevitability to it. First the bill for serials and
electronic purchases has to be paid. At the
beginning of a given fiscal year, there is al-
most no way to shrink the size of this year’s
bill. If you don’t have a cancellation list in
hand, you are stuck with paying costs as they
come in. So that gets done first.

Then you buy some books - especially ap-
proval plans for them. Approval plans build a con-
sistency in collection coverage that libraries are
loath indeed to fiddle with. Cutting back when
funds are tight creates a collection with visible
gaps. Users experience difficulties finding
materials they have to come to expect will be part
of the collection. So approval books tend to
stay high on the totem pole.

What’s left after these core expenses gets
divided up to make the allocations for each sub-
ject, as well as the allocations to audio-visual
materials, rare, documents, maps and so forth.
These allocations haven’t gone up at my library
in some years. Nor have they gone down. But
at many libraries they have.

So what happens when we get an announce-
ment of a new multi-volume reference title? It
doesn’t come on approval, so it misses the ob-
vious route into research collection. The bro-
chures and email go to our subject selectors.
They tend to respond favorably. But they fre-
bly talk at paying for such a large purchase
on their book allocation. Such a set is likely
to make a hole the selector judges unacceptable.
Faculty, when asked, tend to be less interested
in reference titles than in monographs and jour-
nals. And a reference title which is available
only in print - meaning a walk to the library
seems to be falling rapidly on their radar.
The most frequent destination for a new high-
quality reference set request is the wish list.

This is similar to what has been happening
with microform sets. Visiting publishers’ reps
canvas subject selectors and come back to Col-
lection Development to report a high level of
interest in certain titles. The literature selector
liked this and the history selector was highly
complimentary about the. They have prom-
ised to be in touch with Collection Develop-
ment about funding. But, aside from certain
topics which are hot for us - so high priority
that we find money no matter what or fields in
which we have donor funding set aside or are
actively working on building a stronger collec-
tion - I seldom hear from any of the selectors
because they know that we don’t have funding
set aside for large discretionary pur-
chases. And they don’t want to use up their
credibility for emergency requests till they
are sure they know what is most urgent for
their subject area.

Multi-volume reference sets, at this point,
compete better at my library for one-time dol-
ars than to most microform sets. Librar-
ians value these tools highly and put them
toward the top of the list of desirable pur-
chases. But a fair part of the time, much in
this category goes unfunded.

As reference sets become available online,
will they compete better?

Many of them will. But online versions of
monographic sets almost always mean the con-
version of monographic costs to serials expen-
ditures and libraries are understandably wary
of placing subscriptions, however worthy, which
they may not be able to support in the future.

And expectations are high. Librarians
think in terms of paying for content. If pay-
ing every year, they expect new and updated
content. They don’t give a lot of thought to the
ongoing costs for a publisher to maintain
an online product. This is ironic, given that
libraries suffer on a daily basis from the same
problem. Finding the money to pay the in-
frastucture costs of technology and its staff
is probably the number one stress on library
budgets, but we don’t think much about the
same factors in publisher budgets.

Online reference works which make it
onto the serials and electronic budget will
presumably be judged on use and quality data
like other electronic resources. Some will
do well - others may not.

But if the acquisitions budget does not go
up adequately - and there seems little reason
to suppose it will - it will hold fewer titles.
Libraries will buy the most critical titles, the
ones they can’t live without, and probably
some of the niche titles for underserved
fields, or for fields in which the school has
distance ed programs or several campuses. It
is difficult to see how collections can offer
the breadth of title selection that they did in
print. Foreign titles, out-of-print titles, and
titles from smaller publishers have suffered in
print collections and, as on-going costs for
serials escalate, libraries fear they are pro-
ducing “vanilla” collections which are very
similar to each other. The same may well be
true for electronic research collections.

And They Were There
from page 81.

Claire Gaudiani, President of Connecticut
College, took a rather larger view of the aca-
demic library’s role in “societal improvement”
through its impact on students.

While not billed as such, the capstone of
the conference proved to be an invited paper
presented, you are stuck with paying costs as they
come in. So that gets done first.

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