1992

ATG Deadlines

Editor

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Recommended Citation
Editor (1992) 'ATG Deadlines,' Against the Grain: Vol. 4: Iss. 4, Article 34.
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.3789

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From Your Guest Editor:

A lot has changed since the first reference publishing issue of ATG rolled off the presses in September of 1997. But fortunately, we have been able to keep pace. Fran Wilkinson and Linda Lewis (see p. 1) always manage to focus on the big changes in their annual keynote columns. This year’s column is no exception. Fran and Linda explore the growing movement toward electronic publication of reference works. They sum up this trend with two brief, but provocative questions. When they started these columns five years ago, the question was: “Do we want it in electronic format in addition to print?” But now, they note the question is reversed. Librarians ask: “Do we want it in print, in addition to the electronic format?”

In interviews with five librarians from varied perspectives including reference, collection development and administration, this year’s column offers a number of interesting observations. These five librarians were asked to address the impact on libraries and library users of new, electronic online packages that include several reference tools, encyclopedias, and dictionaries. Their responses are revealing. Print still has a place, but the electronic versions may be gaining the upper hand.

Of course reference publishers are doing their bit to feed this trend. Publishing of more and more large sets online, not to mention the bundling of shorter reference works into searchable databases, contributes to the change. A separate interview with Sean Pidgeon of the Nature Publishing Group (see p. 60) adds weight to this observation. In fact, Sean openly questions the long-term future of large print reference sets by pointing out that the 20-volume Encyclopedia of Life Sciences was originally planned as an online-only product, and that the Nature Publishing Group sees the online version of ELS as the primary product. It will carry on being updated and enhanced, while in all likelihood, the first edition of the print version is the last.

In his article, “Aggregation, Integration and the Library Without Walls,” (see p. 26) Adam Hodgkin focuses on the bundling of shorter reference works. Adam’s article is a nuts and bolts discussion of the pros and cons for users and publishers of aggregated reference works in a searchable database. He writes from experience and his observations are challenging and insightful, raising questions, as well as answering them.

In keeping with the overall theme of trends toward the electronic, Steve McKinzie and Jonathan D. Lauer offer their observations on the impact of virtual reference services on collection development. As most of you know, virtual reference service is getting a lot of attention in the library community. Some proponents claim it is a panacea that will remedy the troubling statistics showing a drop in reference use in our libraries. But Steve and Jonathan have their doubts. They argue in “Digital Reference: A New Library Paradigm or the Emperor’s New Clothes” (see p. 34) that, while virtual reference has its place, it will not replace traditional services, nor revolutionize traditional reference collection development.

On a broader but equally compelling note, we have an interview with David Levinson and Karen Christensen of the Berkshire Publishing Group. They, and their company, occupy a distinct and unique niche in reference publishing. David and Karen describe Berkshire as “reference publishing’s equivalent of an independent film company. They are content providers who “come up with the concept, evaluate the competition, make the deal with the publisher, hire the creative talent, direct the content development process, and deliver a clean copy to the publisher.” In short, they focus on the fun parts of reference publishing (see p. 63).

For those of you who thought that CD-ROM publishing was dead, Burton Callcott detects a faint pulse in his review of the CD version of the OED (see p. 73). Burton points out that a standalone CD of a high quality work still has a place in some reference collections. And I add my two cents on this business of online publishing with a review of the Web version of the Encyclopedia of Life Sciences.

As always, we have done our best to provide an interesting snapshot of where reference publishing stands at the moment. And of course, this issue contains the standard ATG features that our readers have come to expect, and we hope, depend upon. Enjoy!

Tom Gilson, Guest Ed.