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Encyclopedias Have Come a Long Way, Diderot

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It's true, the ancient Greeks, Romans, and Chinese all had encyclopedias — digests or compendia of knowledge and information deemed essential at the time — but not until the incomparable French *Encyclopedie* burst onto the scene in the latter half of the eighteenth century did encyclopedias, as a genre, become truly popular, or of the people. Nowadays, encyclopedias are in the midst of another, even more spectacular sea change, as they undergo the transition from a print to electronic environment. Where are encyclopedias headed? Which ones are on the electronic cutting edge today? How did we get from that eighteenth-century French encyclopedia to the present? For those of us who work in the knowledge and information business day in and day out, it's worth taking a moment or two to consider these questions.

The *Encyclopedie* proved a monumental undertaking. Edited by the philosopher **Denis Diderot** along with mathematician **Jean Le Rond d'Alembert**, it eventually comprised 70 volumes, the first published in 1751 and the last two decades later, in 1772. More impressive than the set's size, however, was its content. Some of the most distinguished intellectuals of the day contributed articles, including **Voltaire**, **Rousseau**, **Turgot**, **Montesquieu**, **Quesnay**, and **Condorcet**, and the ideas they expressed in the encyclopedia had a profound and often disquieting effect on both the establishment, which adamantly resisted change, and an increasingly restless bourgeoisie. Indeed, the French government periodically censored the *Encyclopedie*, and **Pope Clement VIII** summarily condemned it. Historians credit the encyclopedia with helping pave the way for the French Revolution, one putting it this way: "The *Encyclopedie* raised a storm that blew away the smells of powdered wigs, love potions, and alchemists' retorts; shook the salons of the court and the chambers of bishops and parliamentarians still meeting in the shadow of stake and rack; and astounded the still humble new middle class." (Hans Koning writing in *The New Yorker*, March 2, 1981, p. 67)

Diderot's famous encyclopedia not only rocked French society and its political, religious, and cultural institutions to the core, it inspired compilation of similar large-scale encyclopedias in other advanced countries.

In Britain, for instance, what is today the best known of all English-language encyclopedias, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, first appeared in three volumes during 1768-71; the Britannica has continued to grow ever since, until now it encompasses 32 substantial volumes. In Germany, *Konversations-Lexikon*, later and better known as *Brockhaus Enzyklopadie* (or simply Brockhaus), made its debut between 1796 and 1811. Brockhaus, named for its influential founding editor **Friedrich Arnold Brockhaus**, treated knowledge in short, fact-filled, readable articles noted for their accuracy, objectivity, and timeliness. The encyclopedia's success was immediate — and contagious. Brockhaus served as the archetype for numerous other multivolume national encyclopedias spawned in the nineteenth century, the most prominent being *Encyclopaedia Americana*, published originally in the U.S. between 1829 and 1833 and to this day a major presence on the North American market.

Unlike Diderot's *Encyclopedie*, these new encyclopedias did not fan the flames of revolution nor did they radically alter the course of nations. Rather, they tended to be works of solid, unbiased scholarship tailored to meet the most basic informational and educational needs of the now dominant (and no longer humble) middle class, particularly its progeny. The nineteenth-century movement toward universal literacy, the advent of mandatory public education, and the rapid growth of colleges and universities created student populations at all levels hungry for encyclopedias and related reference materials. Not surprisingly, the most successful English-language encyclopedias launched in the twentieth century — *Funk & Wagnalls Encyclopedia* (1912-), the *World Book Encyclopedia* (1917-), *Compton's Encyclopedia* (1922-), the *Columbia Encyclopedia* (1935-), *Collier's Encyclopedia* (1950-), and the *Academic American Encyclopedia* (1980-) — continued to build on and refine the earlier model. Broadly speaking, only a dramatic increase in pictorial illustrations, plus the addition of color, distinguished these encyclopedias from their nineteenth-century counterparts.

That is, of course, until quite recently, when computer technology transformed the encyclopedia landscape with such suddenness that only now are publishers, editors,

analysts, and consumers beginning to sort out the implications of this change. Suddenly (or so it seems), the familiar bound volumes that

for centuries comprised "The Encyclopedia" have become digital impulses on a computer screen. Suddenly, users are abandoning encyclopedias in book form for those available on CD-ROM or via online information services, such as **America Online**, **CompuServe**, and **Prodigy**. Suddenly, almost every personal computer sold in North America comes bundled, or equipped, with an encyclopedia. Suddenly, encyclopedias can move and talk! Called "multimedia" because of their audiovisual components, these encyclopedias normally offer full-motion video, animations, and an assortment of audio (music, speeches, narration, animal sounds). What might Diderot and his encyclopedist cohorts have made of such developments!

In addition, encyclopedias are beginning to show up on the Internet, the main artery of the much-heralded information superhighway. Last year, *Encyclopaedia Britannica* became the first brand-name encyclopedia to offer its wares on the Internet (see *Britannica Online* at <http://www.eb.com/>), and surely others will soon follow, especially if Britannica demonstrates that "netpedias" (my coinage) can be profitable — a big if at this point.

At present, multimedia encyclopedias on CD-ROM have captured the hearts and minds of many North American consumers, much to the distress of those publishers whose fortunes remain tied to the sale of print sets. Hundreds of thousands of multimedia CD-ROM encyclopedias have been sold since their introduction in 1989, and the reasons for their success are not difficult to understand. Compared with print encyclopedias, they typically offer such advantages as: 1) faster and more thorough retrieval of information due to the power of the computer, which allows users to search the entire encyclopedic database, including individual words and word combinations, at very high speeds; 2) a larger and more flexible storage capacity, meaning that the contents of an encyclopedia no longer need be

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Publisher's Profile

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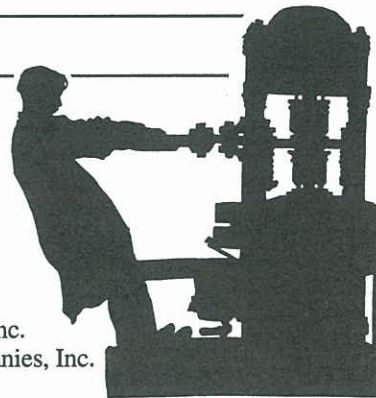
The McGraw Publishing Company was founded as a magazine publisher by **James H. McGraw** in 1899. Its first handbook, *Standard Handbook for Electrical Engineers*, was introduced in 1907. The **Hill Publishing Company** was founded also as a magazine publisher, by **John A. Hill** in 1902. The two joined forces in 1909 to form a book company, tossing a coin to determine whose name appeared first on the door. The companies merged all operations in 1917, following the death of **John A. Hill**, to form the **McGraw-Hill Company**. Today, The McGraw-Hill Companies is actually 116 companies, including such diverse organizations as **Standard & Poor's**, **F.W. Dodge**, **Shepard's McGraw-Hill**, **DRI** and magazines such as *Business Week*, *BYTE*, *Chemical Engineering* and *Aviation Week*, in addition to the book publishing operations

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limited to a fixed number of volumes; 3) inclusion of moving pictures and sound, which can complement and enrich printed text in ways still illustrations cannot; and 4) a price tag that is frequently much, much more affordable, i.e., multivolume print encyclopedias currently sell for between \$600 and \$1500, whereas the leading multimedia CD-ROM encyclopedias can be had for well under \$100.

In 1996, three multimedia CD-ROM encyclopedias dominate the American market: *Compton's Interactive Encyclopedia*, *Grolier Multimedia Encyclopedia*, and *Microsoft Encarta Multimedia Encyclopedia*. *Compton's*, which has the distinction of being the first encyclopedia to include multimedia, was originally issued in 1989, followed by *Grolier* in 1992 and *Encarta* in

1993. Since that time, the Big Three have competed aggressively for top sales honors, with no clear winner yet crowned. As far as quality is concerned, *Encarta* (best interface and multimedia) tends to be the first choice of critics, followed by *Grolier* (best print content) and then *Compton's* (best text for youngsters). By way of documentation, see my article in *Wilson Library Bulletin* (May 1995, pp. 42+), which offers a detailed analysis of the three encyclopedias. More recently, three experienced librarians rated the encyclopedias in *USA Today* (November 1, 1995, p. 11D); two of the librarians "narrowly" chose *Encarta* as the best, one chose *Grolier*, and "all three experts found something they like and didn't like about each." Also, at the **Charleston Conference** this year I talked with **Norm Desmarais**, the reigning prince of CD-ROM reviewing in this country, and he volun-

teered that these rankings — *Encarta* first, *Grolier* second, *Compton's* third — concur with his own assessments.

Yes, encyclopedias have come a long way since Diderot's day more than two centuries ago, when his celebrated set of books helped instigate the French Revolution. But from another perspective, present-day encyclopedias are not that much different from their forebears: they continue to be at the center of another revolution, the Information Revolution.

