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Reference: Product Categories in the Digital Age

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Abstract

In September 2016, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc launched a new division charged with creating digital resources for the academic library market. A number of these have reference at their core. This paper outlines in brief the logic for creating the new division and the role of reference within the resources. It then summarizes research we have undertaken since the division's inception to establish how "product categories" (i.e., encyclopedias, monographs, images, etc.) are valued by academics and librarians, the aim of which is to create products that are user-focused. And finally, this paper provides a brief case study of our most mature resource, the Berg Fashion Library, to ascertain how actual usage compares with how product categories are rated in the research.

The following paper was part of a three-person panel, "The Death and Rebirth of Reference Resources: Unpacking What's Happening With Changing User Behaviors."

Background

Bloomsbury started its life as a trade house focusing on quality fiction approximately 33 years ago. We are best known as the originating publisher of Harry Potter. In 2008, we launched an Academic Division, which has largely grown through acquisition and now represents about a quarter of overall revenues.

We have been producing large-scale digital resources for the academic community since 2010, when we launched the Berg Fashion Library. Not long after, we launched the Churchill Archive, Drama Online, and our own e-books platform, Bloomsbury Collections. In 2016, Bloomsbury decided to consolidate around successes we had in this area to create Bloomsbury Digital Resources (BDR), a separate, dedicated business unit charged with creating, marketing, and selling digital products directly to the academic library market.

BDR Objectives

To achieve our goals, we had to create infrastructure around all areas of the new division, but for the purposes of this paper, I am going to focus on the new product development process. An ultimate aim for the BDR business is to make decisions that are evidence-based and data-driven. We therefore require extensive qualitative and quantitative outreach to a minimum number of librarians and academics in order for a resource to be greenlighted. Part of the research I am presenting asks both groups of respondents to rate product categories (reference, monographs, pedagogical tools, images, video, etc.). The objective is to learn what end users find most valuable so that we can supply it. Our long-term aim is to aggregate this data in order to develop a coherent set of valuation criteria that can be used to benchmark the likely success of a new product. In this paper I present an overview of our findings and pose some questions about product category labels in the digital age.

Product Categories

But first I want to pause to consider how we operate as stakeholders in the information supply chain. Publishers are very attached to what we call "product categories" (for example, textbooks, reference, journals, or monographs). There are very good reasons for this. Historically, product categories defined how a content item would be priced, discounted, packaged, and consumed. It has been very important for publishers to get these categories right. I won't go into the details but suffice it to say that they are determinative and deeply embedded in publishing culture. I suspect product categories are no less important for librarians because they help to position a content item. For example, handbooks are popular now with the librarians we have canvassed.

Research Methods and Sources

As this session is about reference content, reference is my focus in this paper. Not all the division's products draw on reference, but a considerable number do, and in fact many have reference at the heart.

The research we have undertaken has been both qualitative and quantitative. I am going to present findings that largely dovetail with those of Oxford University Press (2017; Pawley & Chamberlain,

2018)—the key difference is that all our research is resource-specific. In other words, we did not conduct the research in order to assess the value of reference to the academic community generally but rather to determine its value for a subject-specific product. Because of this, the majority of our outreach has been to academics. To date, we have surveyed 319 academics and 66 librarians to generate quantitative data, and carried out qualitative interviews with a further 56 academics and 39 librarians. The interviews are by Skype or phone and are approximately one hour in length. This is an ongoing research project that we will refine over time.

Content Rated "Very Important" or "Important" by Librarians and Academics

In total, if we look at the combined responses of academics and librarians (Figure 1), reference as a category is highly valued; it's actually the strongest category, with 76% of respondents rating it "important" or "very important," compared with e-books at 70%, multimedia content at 62%, and study resources at 55%. (NB: categories are generally more nuanced than the data in Figure 1 suggests; for example, "reference" and "multimedia" include narrower categories that have been aggregated in order to simplify the presentation.)

Academics rate all categories slightly higher than librarians, although the differences are small—78% rate reference as "very important" or "important" compared with 74% of librarians (Figure 2).

Qualitative Feedback

This is generally very positive for reference. The examples below are typical:

> "A reference source would be helpful and seems to be Bloomsbury's strength. Something with broad entries and key readings related to each
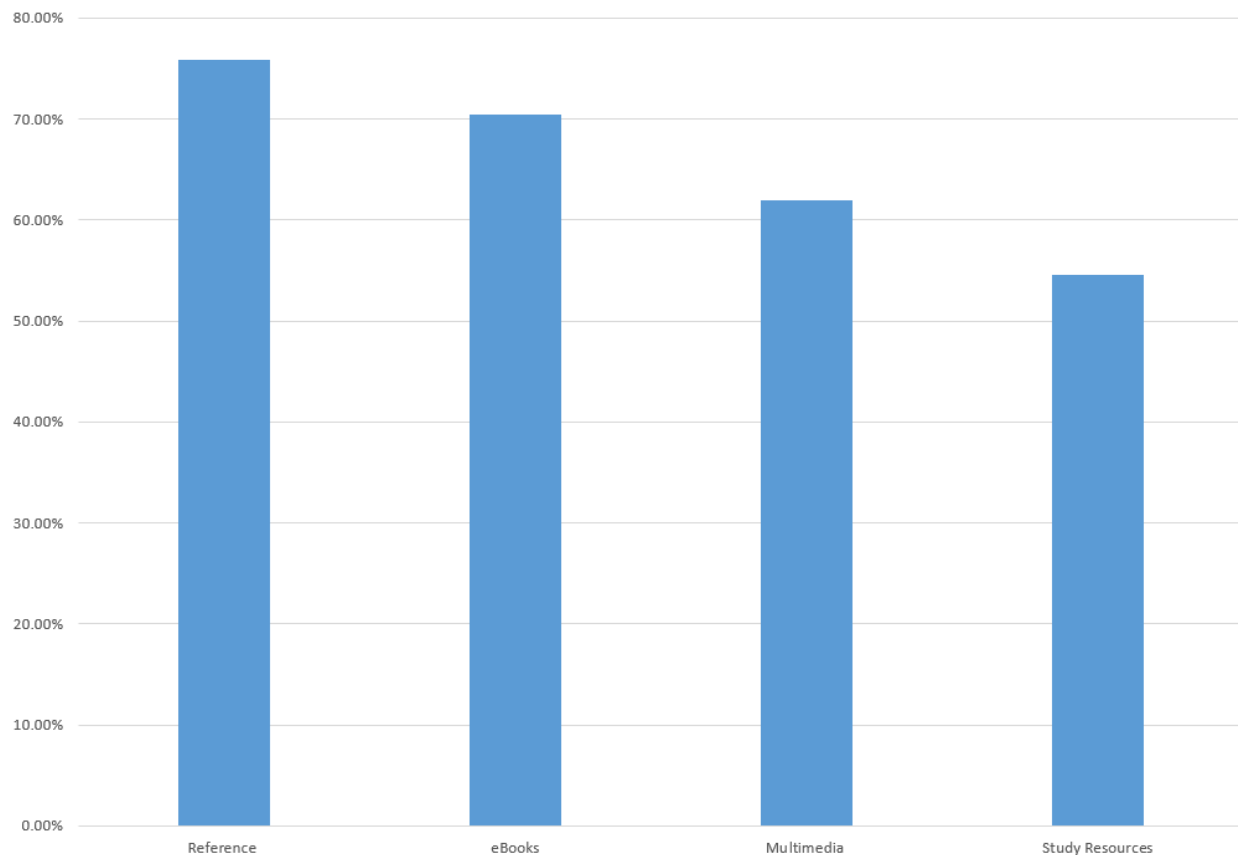

Figure 1. Content rated important and very important by academics and librarians
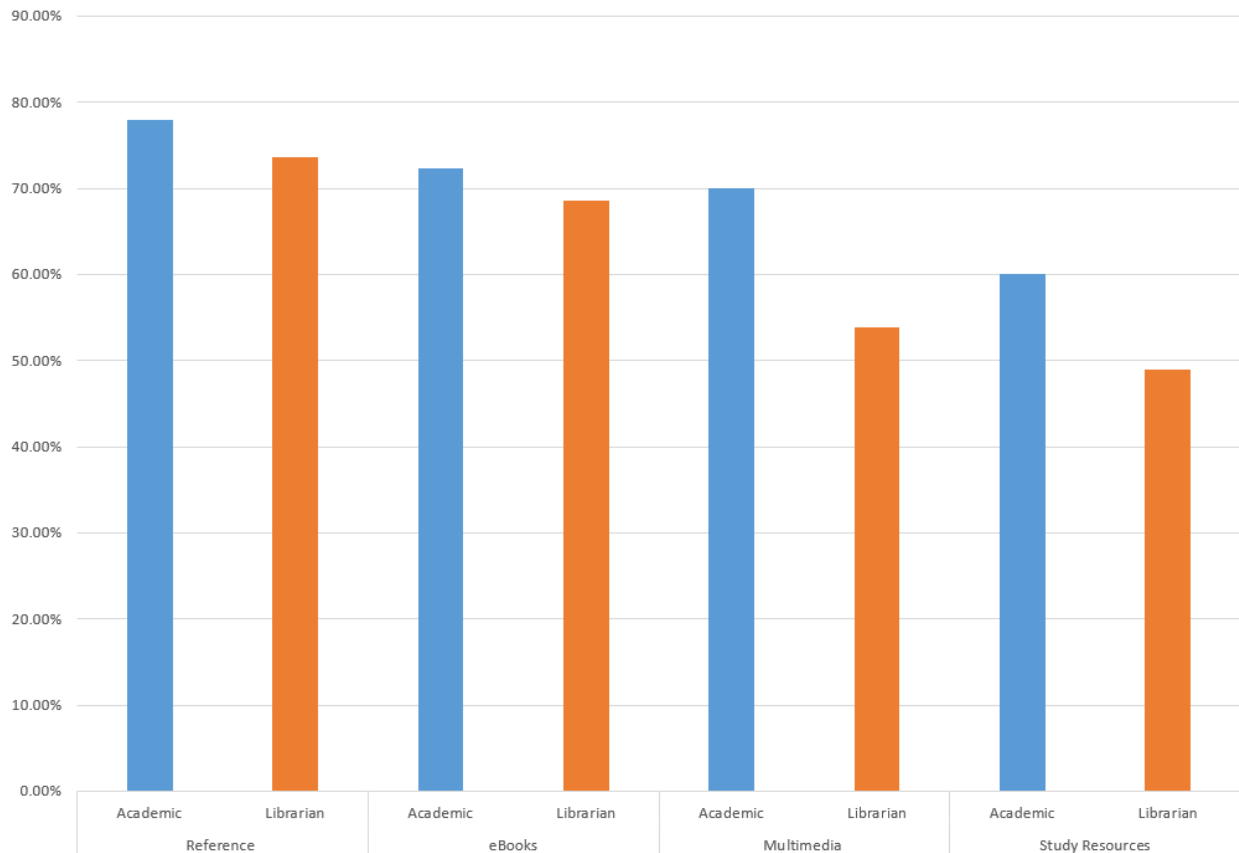
Figure 2. Content rated important and very important by academics and librarians separately

topic." *Librarian, level 4-year or above, private not-for-profit, doctoral universities; very high research activity (U.S.)*

"Postgraduate students and colleagues also rely on handbooks and electronic resources to gain an overview of topics/areas that they are unfamiliar with." *Academic, Scottish university, non-Russell Group (U.K.)*

"[Encyclopedia articles] would absolutely be used by undergraduates, mostly for overview articles. When we teach students how to research we tell them encyclopedias are the place to start. Students save a whole lot of time going to overviews." *Librarian, level 4-year or above, private not-for-profit, doctoral universities; very high research activity (U.S.)*

"[Handbooks are] very popular with the students, and tutors like them as good all-rounders, though more for basic studies rather than really

in-depth research." *Academic, theological seminary (U.S.)*

Usage Case Study

But we wanted to know: does usage support these valuations? So we compared the results from the surveys against usage data from the Berg Fashion Library (BFL). BFL was chosen because it is our oldest resource and has a particularly well-established and stable user base, but also because it is very strong on both reference and e-book content. It includes 25,000 indexed items split relatively evenly between reference and e-book chapters.

Using Google Analytics, we compared reference usage data with e-book data from the past two years (September 2017–August 2019); we only have full years' data from this period due to a platform migration and so we were unable to review earlier usage. Biblio guides are included in the reference

data set and are freely available outside the paywall. This favorably impacts unique Page Views (PVs) but should not impact time on page.

Findings

Reference unique PVs roughly align with the size of the content set—47% PVs and 48% of the content respectively. Average time on the page is higher if we factor in biblio guides (2.16) compared with 2.09 for e-books (2.06 for reference without biblio guides).

Conclusions

In our research, the value placed on reference content is higher for academics than librarians.

Users access reference content in line with the percentage of content it represents.

If we include biblio guides, more time is spent viewing article-length reference material than e-book content.

Questions the Research Raises

For me, the research raises as many questions as it answers. Given the absence of clear trends, how can we usefully interpret the data and, more practically, how does it help us make better products that respond to user needs?

Across industries, it can be difficult to think outside established boundaries. Academic publishing, where product categories are deeply embedded, is no different. Textbooks and reference, for example, undertake very different journeys in a publishing house and are often purchased by different stakeholders in the information chain. As a result, they are treated as discrete categories. But from an end user's point of view, they share quite a number of traits: most fundamentally, both provide overviews of foundational topics in language that nonspecialists can understand. Surely both are therefore high value.

Putting aside budgetary implications at the library end, I would like to question whether product category labels (reference or textbook, for example) are a help or a hindrance in the digital age—and how these categories will fare over the long term. With product categories evolving, proliferating (blogs, for example), and also becoming more porous and complex (journal articles might incorporate video, for example), how helpful is it to continue to define content in a straitjacket? Monographs, journals, textbooks, reference, all mean something within the academic information ecosystem and come laden with preconceived notions about value—for example, although there are many discussions about first-day or inclusive access, some libraries resist purchasing textbooks. In the context of budgetary restraints, this is completely understandable. But most of us share a mission to provide information to end users that has a clear value for them and that gets used. What do end users want and how can we best serve their needs? Do (or should) labels matter at all to end users, and should the supply of useful, quality content to someone seeking the information it contains be adversely impacted by these labels?

I am going to end there—with the above question rather than an answer.

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