September 1997

Reference Materials-So Many Choices, So Little Money: Librarians and Publishers Speak Out!

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Recommended Citation

Wilkenson, Frances C. and Gilson, Tom (1997) "Reference Materials-So Many Choices, So Little Money: Librarians and Publishers Speak Out!," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 9: Iss. 4, Article 7.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.2209>

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ISSN: 1043-2094

Against the Grain

"Linking Publishers, Vendors and Librarians"

Reference Materials — So Many Choices, So Little Money: Librarians and Publishers Speak Out!

by **Frances C. Wilkinson** (Director, Acquisitions and Serials Department, General Library, U. Of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM 87131-1466; 505-277-7219 (voice); 505-277-4446 (fax)) <fwilkins@unm.edu>

The book and serials industry has recently witnessed a proliferation of reference materials. At a time when reference and collection development librarians have many more choices than ever before, they also have less buying power than ever before! Concern abounds about the fairness of current pricing trends, the best and worst ways to communicate about reference titles, which reference materials should be published and then selected by librarians, the impact of electronic materials, decisions regarding what format to publish/select, and what are the future trends in reference publishing. To address these issues, an interview-style joint discussion among librarians responsible for reference selection (one reference librarian and one collection development librarian) and publishers/editors of reference materials (one large publisher and one smaller publisher) was held. Their differing perspectives were highly significant because of what they

reveal about the industry as a whole.

1. Are the current pricing trends for reference materials fair or unfair? Please explain.

The Librarians...

Answer from Linda Lewis, Director of Collection Development, University of New Mexico General Library:

"It sounds a little evasive, but I do have to say that it depends. In general, most reference monographs are priced relatively fairly. Since the basic dictionaries, handbooks, bibliographies and similar reference sources have a comparatively small audience, the publishers generally seem aware that extremely high prices will reduce their

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If Rumors Were Horses

I'll tell you, it may have been summer, but LOTS has been going on. Well. Have you heard? **Celia Wagner** — the magnificent, fabulous, funny and perceptive — has joined **Academic Book Center** as of September 2, 1997, as Manager of its Approval Department as well as to assist in marketing and sales. Yes, my mouth was wide open, too. Celia will be a member of Academic's Management Committee. She will be reporting to **Daniel P. Halloran**, President. "Celia's in-

telligence, extensive library experience, and wonderful personality will be an exciting addition to Academic," says Dan. "Our approval plan business is growing. With nearly twenty years of experience in approval plans, Celia will be bringing a wealth of expertise to Academic." Celia worked at **Blackwell North America** for nearly twenty years. **Lorene Dortch**, Academic's current Approval Plan Manager, says she is happy to gradually reduce her work over the next several years and to turn the department over to Celia, though she plans to maintain her contacts with customers.

And, more about Celia. She is continuing her commitment to *Against the Grain*, grace à Dieu (as the French say) and will remain as Associate Editor. You'll note that the astute **Tom Loughran** (Blackwell) has continued with Book Pricing Update (see this issue, p.58), and who knows, will we have two of these fabulous columns? Time will tell.

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1043-2094(199709)9:4;1-H

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sales. In other areas, pricing is much more unpredictable. Electronic resources vary greatly in costs with prices depending upon the number of simultaneous users, or the number of Internet IP address, or the number of possible users, or various other factors. And if a library consortium is involved, pricing becomes even more complex. The question of who should pay for the research and development costs for new electronic products is a difficult one to address. Some of the most outrageous pricing happens with electronic resources, requiring that librarians evaluate these materials with care."

Answer from David Null, Head of Reference, University of Wisconsin-Madison:

"I think it depends upon the type of reference material. In general I think print materials are pretty fairly priced, at least in my fields, which are primarily humanities and social sciences. Prices sometimes seem a little high, but given the specialized nature of many reference materials and the fairly small market, I don't think they are out of line. I'm more concerned about electronic reference materials, particularly electronic indexes and abstracts. While some companies seem pretty reasonable, others don't seem so. My library has not canceled many paper subscriptions in favor of electronic ones (we tend to still believe we need an archival paper copy), but we are looking much more seriously at doing so. How companies charge for electronic vs. paper is an issue, how they handle charging for electronic products — simultaneous users vs. old fashioned connect time, etc. are important issues. I also don't think there has been much work done on price increases in electronic reference sources. We track price increases for serials, especially in paper format, quite well, and we are at least starting to do the same for electronic journals, but we have not been as good about tracking pricing for electronic indexes, for example."

The Publishers...

Answer from Lynda James-Gilboe, Senior Vice President, Marketing, Gale Research:

"I don't believe that fairness is really the issue here. Both librarians and publishers are doing their jobs. Librarians are working together in consortia and statewide/regional initiatives in an effort to earn volume discounts from publishers. This is as it should be. At the same time, publishers need to continue to cover costs and will need to develop pricing models that provide for that. For example, the interest in usage-based pricing can be problematic for publishers whose product development costs remain consistent regardless of usage. Just as cable companies charge users for the availability of access to their services, regardless of whether the set is turned on or not, so too, do publish-

ers need to pay employees for the data they compile, regardless of whether it is accessed or not.

"I think the issue of fairness comes up because publishers that specialize in institutional markets — such as Gale — are compared to those serving consumer markets. We do tend to have higher prices. Consumer products are far less specialized and as such, are appropriate for much greater numbers of customers, allowing publishers to spread development costs over a larger base. More importantly, the editorial intervention and research required to produce reference products account for the greatest percentage of our development costs. There's a great deal of knowledgeable human intervention that takes place in every Gale product. Technology doesn't do this work for us — content experts read every bit of text and make the links that will allow customers to get the greatest use from our products. Producing this type of data is very expensive and is designed for a much smaller market than the general consumer audience.

"We do continue to look for ways to lower our development costs — through technology and through new more efficient work teams and information sharing that can impact editorial costs. More importantly, we're trying to tighten the focus of every product, making it exactly what our customers are seeking."

Answer from Dr. Bohdan S. Wynar, President and founder of Libraries Unlimited:

Introductory remarks: "In recent years there has been a great proliferation and diversification of reference works. More publishers, including trade publishers, are producing materials in this area. At *American Reference Books Annual* we are seeing more visual materials in reference books, a diversity of formats (e.g., technological — online and CD-ROM), and more reference materials geared to the general public and younger users. Some claim there is a 'dumbing down' in reference material — shorter sentences, limited vocabularies, and more visual as opposed to textual material. This is, in part, true because much of the reference materials being produced now is geared to a wider and more diverse market, not just for scholars and information professionals. However, it is also important to remember that visual knowledge can be as important as verbal knowledge. (For example, in a field guide to birds, photos can inform the user more effectively than mere words.)

"As the market fragments, there is also information on a greater variety of topics — e.g., information on black history or gay rights. More books are being classified as reference books, too. There are even pop-up reference books now. Some of the reference works out there are really just junkyards of used information with no practical organization for access, while others are very so-

phisticated and up-to-date reference tools. Some are very gimmicky — good ideas and pretty covers with no substance between the covers. Some reference titles simply recycle information from other publications, often produced by the same publishers. It's great to have options, but the variety also means buyers must become more savvy in their purchasing. There are more reference books to choose from than ever before and less consistency of quality, style, price, and usefulness. Within their current budget limitation, librarians can no longer take the "some of each" approach. They must learn about their needs and their patrons' needs, then find the materials that best suit those needs. Evaluative reviews, such as those published in *American Reference Books Annual*, in some bibliographies, or in some of the professional journals (e.g., *Choice*, *Reference Books Bulletin*, *Library Journal*), can help librarians find the resources they need. We, of course, contend that *American Reference Books Annual* is the best reference review source for librarians, as the reviews are written by subject specialists (often practicing librarians) and they give a greater depth of information."

Dr. Wynar's Answer to Question 1:

"Pricing is just one area where there is a great deal of diversity. One might observe that some publishers seem to take advantage of their position in the marketplace. Consumers are charged inflated prices for products because they will (or indeed, must) pay them. Although this could be perceived as unfair, it is also a fact of life in a market economy. There was a time when one could correlate price of a reference book to the amount of information it contained, the number of pages it had, or whether the book had color plates. Those days are over. Price no longer reliably indicates value.

"Then there are a few publishers who make concerted efforts at keeping their prices low. We at Libraries Unlimited see ourselves as one of these publishers. Although we are well aware of what the competition is charging, we strive to keep our prices not only competitive, but also affordable to those who need the products. Librarians may or may not have a good idea of which publishers fall into which category. Library schools could do more to educate professionals in this area.

"With electronic products in particular, pricing is all over the map. That, in part, is because it is difficult for publishers to assess the true costs of these new product lines. Consumers too have trouble assessing what they pay for electronic products. Hardware and software costs should be figured into the ratio, as should user education costs. In a recent issue of *Reference Books Bulletin*, editor Mary Ellen Quinn states: 'The worth of a reference book is defined by its usefulness.' This is something consumers should keep in mind when making purchases."

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2. What are the best ways to communicate about new reference titles? What are the worst ways?

The Librarians...

Answer from Linda Lewis:

"The best ways require targeting information. Since personal contacts are not realistic for most publishers, they need to at least try to get mail to the appropriate departments. Any general mail should be addressed to the collection development department, the subject selector, or the head of reference, not to the library director. Reviews remain very valuable. The worst ways are untargeted junk mailings, whether snail mail, voice mail or email. A dozen copies of the same ad sent to every possible department and person only results in the decision of whether the paper can be recycled or must be tossed. Multiple mailings to one institution are an irritating waste."

Answer from David Null:

"I still rely heavily on brochures and personal contact with publishers, although we also go over major reviewing sources. The latter tend to focus on more general types of reference material, and in a large research library we often want more esoteric materials that are harder to find. At times I think that email from publishers would be good, but when I have gotten mass e-mailings about reference titles, I often haven't paid much attention to them. The more our email gets cluttered up, the less likely we are to pay much attention to things that don't require immediate attention."

The Publishers...

Answer from Lynda James-Gilboe:

"Feedback from our library customers tells us that published reviews are one of the most important communication tools for new reference materials. Beyond that, catalogs and simple, straight-forward literature are important tools. Some library customers prefer to have a sales representative telephone them to point out and discuss new product offerings. At Gale, we avoid fax and email promotions since they are generally not well-received by librarians."

Answer from Dr. Bohdan S. Wynar:

"There is probably not a best or worst way to communicate about reference titles. As a publisher, we try to reach our customers in whatever way we can. We communicate through catalogs, advertising, press releases (and subsequent reviews), conferences, our Web site, jobbers and distributors, and word of mouth. My best advice to librarians on the issue of communication is to consider the source. Obviously, advertising and press releases are biased, but reviews and word of mouth can be too, if one considers the fact that the needs may be very different and that some journals are advertising-driven."

3. If you are a publisher, how do you decide what reference materials to publish for your company? If you are a librarian, how would you tell a publisher what to publish?

The Librarians...

Answer from Linda Lewis:

"Regardless of format, the basic criteria remain: Do we collect in the subject? Is the item at the appropriate academic level? Does the item provide new information or a new approach? What is the reputation of the publisher, author, or editor? Is the price realistic?"

Answer from David Null:

"We look primarily at whether we think a reference source fills a need in our primary areas — social sciences and humanities. We also, however, have a very large reference collection, over 90,000 volumes, with many general reference materials and basic reference materials in other subject areas. Given our primary purpose, we probably look more for more specialized reference materials, things from other countries, in other languages, etc. than many smaller libraries."

The Publishers...

Answer from Lynda James-Gilboe:

"At Gale, new business development is conducted hand-in-hand with our customers. Nothing is ever published that has not been tested with customers. In fact, many of our product concepts originate directly from customers — when Gale decides to publish an idea submitted by a librarian, he or she receives \$1000. Gale has developed many systems for obtaining continuous feedback from customers including advisory boards, market research surveys, focus groups, library visits, and informal telephone calls. Beyond having customers tell us that they like an idea well enough to buy it, we consider these kinds of things: 1) how well does the idea fit with other titles in the list, 2) what are the product development costs and issues, 3) what distribution channels will be needed, and 4) what competition exists."

Answer from Dr. Bohdan S. Wynar:

"As a publisher, we look for areas where there is a need for information. Specifically, we publish materials that will be useful to libraries and librarians. We are a small company and we believe we have a unique understanding of what our market needs. First and foremost, we seek to serve those needs. It doesn't always come down to the bottom line with us, as it would with a larger company. Our standards are high, and if we don't think a manuscript meets the needs of our market, we don't publish it."

4. Discuss the impact of electronic materials on the world of reference in general.

The Librarians...

Answer from Linda Lewis:

"'Revolutionary' may sound too dra-

matic, but it is accurate. It hasn't been too many years since the debate was whether libraries should cancel print indexes and rely on the new media of CD-ROMs. Now more and more rely on FirstSearch, EBSCOhost or other electronic Internet resources while dropping the similar print resources. Electronic resources will not take over everything, however; there are still many libraries not yet able to use these new resources fully. Also, many materials are better suited to print than electronic presentation. Books will remain a basic part of reference collections. Still, new technologies will continue to develop, forcing new changes. Publishers of traditional tools such as directories now face competition from the Internet as well as from other print publishers. Publishers that can organize and present information in unique and valuable ways will prosper, but I do expect continuing challenging times to continue for all of us."

Answer from David Null:

"I think electronics have had a major impact, primarily positive, but somewhat negative also. For example, we have over 100 databases running on our network, plus many more stand alone CDs, and we have had a Netscape front-end since January of 1996. The costs associated with those things, including automation costs, are obviously high, but I think the benefits to our users have been quite high also. We do have some difficulties knowing what to do with many of the stand alone CDs we get, especially government ones. We don't really have room to load them on our stand alone machines; we may not have the expertise to deal with them. It seems at times that everything is available on CD, or increasingly over the Web, but the electronic versions are almost always more expensive than paper versions. As we buy more electronic material, we are forced into buying fewer print reference sources, and again in a library like mine, many of the specialized, more esoteric materials will probably never be available electronically. From a service standpoint, we find that our patrons, and younger librarians too, often don't want to use anything that isn't electronic, and they miss an awful lot. Plus, there are things that are just simply easier to use in paper. There also seems to be a general perception both among the public and many people within the university, that reference sources available electronically don't cost anything. In fact, electronic reference sources usually cost more and trying to get people to understand that is difficult. I mentioned automation costs briefly, and I should say that we are extremely fortunate in having a large, excellent automation department, but many libraries are not that fortunate. And finally, I should probably mention, and I'm sure we're not alone in this, that printers are now the bane of our reference existence."

The Publishers...

Answer from Lynda James-Gilboe:

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"While electronic availability has provided librarians with more choices, it has also provided new challenges. Budgets that used to be exclusively focused on materials acquisition are now being stretched to include hardware purchases. In some states, at the same time librarians rejoice over special grants aimed at creating needed technological infrastructures, they are disappointed to find that these efforts are often driven by people who don't stand at the reference desk, and in some cases are not even librarians. This is especially problematic when it comes time to make reference purchasing decisions.

"It's a double-edged sword for publishers, too. While electronic delivery means we can provide additional features, better searching, and in many cases, a more effective reference product, there are some new investments that need to be made. For example, customers have been asking for an electronic version of *Dictionary of Literary Biography* and we've provided an Internet-delivered product this summer via GaleNet. This series encompasses nearly 200 volumes of text and illustration that had to be rekeyed (scanning technology is still a long way from meeting the accuracy requirements of a reference source) into a format that could be read electronically. While new products are created in a way that allows for all types of delivery (print, online, CD) much of the *DLB* series was published in the sixties and seventies, when its future was expected to be print-only. Many of the most essential reference products involve this kind of start-up investment to convert them to electronic formats.

"Another question you might want to ask is 'what is the impact of the Internet on the world of reference?' Patrons increasingly turn to the Internet, believing that the answer to any question is there and furthermore, it's free. What they're losing sight of is that the role that publishers has always played is still needed. Someone needs to sift through that sea of information, organize it, and evaluate it, creating knowledge, not just information."

Answer from Dr. Bohdan S. Wynar:

"Electronic materials have had a tremendous impact on the world of reference. Publishers and consumers are still learning how to most effectively use them and what materials are best in this format. There are a lot of poor quality reference works — and also some very good ones. So there is a great deal of confusion about what to publish/what to buy in electronic form. One of the positive effects of the technological revolution is that it has caused publishers to rethink their product lines. The increased amount of visual data in reference material is also in part a result of technological changes, both in the printing industry and in

market demand. But technology is seductive and, like everyone else, librarians need to look beyond the glitz, beyond the bells and whistles to the real substance of a product."

5. If you are a publisher, how do you decide whether a reference title should be published in paper/print, electronic format or both? If you are a librarian, how do you select a format?

The Librarians...

Answer from Linda Lewis:

"In order to decide which formats are best, we look at the content, the presentation, the use, the access and the costs. While indexes lend themselves well to electronic formats, statistical data books can be more difficult for users to read on terminals. Reference materials in very high demand are generally kept in both paper and electronic format in order to meet the needs of the patron. When the electronic version is simpler to use, such as an index covering multiple years on one CD-ROM, we often cancel the paper format. When we can provide remote access to materials from offices and dorms, and when the material is easier to use than the print format, we have found increasing support from the campus. In some cases, the cost of the electronic versions is simply prohibitive; the paper format is retained even though we would prefer to switch."

Answer from David Null:

"So far most of our decisions about electronic reference materials have been based on broad use across campus, ability to run on our networks, and ability to be accessed remotely, and whether the electronic version is easier, more convenient to search or provides some other feature(s) that the print does not. We have not yet canceled many paper sources when we have purchased electronic versions, mostly because of issues revolving around archiving electronic materials. We have tended to think that we need a paper archival copy. However, as our budget has tightened, we have to think more seriously about canceling paper. We are also looking much more closely at how much our networked electronic sources are being used, cost per use data, etc. to evaluate whether we will keep them in electronic format, or at least running on a campus network."

The Publishers...

Answer from Lynda James-Gilboe:

"Again, this decision is really driven by the customer and the data they plan to use. Certain products because of their need for currency are really best developed in an online environment, while other products are available in a combination of print and electronic formats and still others are print only. Librarians continue to tell us that for multi-volume print series, a combination of

print and electronic options is desirable. In some settings, the electronic version helps save shelf-space while in other settings, librarians answer this question for us by saying "have you ever seen a classroom of kids descend on the library needing to use a reference set? Many students can be served at one time by distributing individual print volumes — if the product is electronic a line of toe-tapping, impatient students quickly forms." Finally, print is still considered to be an important back-up tool even when sophisticated networks are in place."

Answer from Dr. Bohdan S. Wynar:

"Which way is most useful to our market? Which is most affordable to the greatest number of users? Does the electronic format offer any added value? These are questions we ask when considering electronic formats. There are still many libraries that cannot afford the set up and maintenance of sophisticated technology. A book is compatible with any library system. A CD-ROM is not."

6. What do you feel are the future trends in publishing reference materials?

The Librarians...

Answer from Linda Lewis:

"A juggling act, walking on a tightrope. We have to look for the best balance of formats, to keep up with the new technology, to meet the needs of users with wide ranges of demands and experience, while keeping within a budget that never stretched far enough in the beginning."

Answer from David Null:

"I think publishing will become increasingly electronic and that fewer paper sources will get published. I worry about losing some of the more specialized reference sources in paper in favor of broader-appeal electronic products. I think librarians are going to have to pay much greater attention to issues such as licensing agreements, price increases in electronic reference materials, use statistics, among others. I think librarians need to get more involved in the reference publishing business, working more closely with publishers and vendors to try to influence the types of electronic reference sources that we feel we really need, in the formats that we want, instead of relying on publishers to decide for us."

The Publishers...

Answer from Lynda James-Gilboe:

"Customers are looking for full solutions. They don't simply want to be pointed toward an answer, they want the answer. This creates a new challenge for publishers who must sharpen their information-gathering and evaluation skills. I expect that the future will bring librarians and publishers together as partners as efforts are made to digitize specialized library collections in an effort to share them with a wider audience. The importance of user communities around cer-

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Op-Ed
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So who will carry the torch for the glorious future of print on paper in the 21st century, which we are all tired of hearing about before it even starts? Not those who are intent on seizing what they see as the electronic high ground. Most of them have moved away from publishing into entertainment and communications. The safe future of print is in the hands of those who matter most — the authors and the readers, who in the end will opt for the artifacts that are best suited to the human mind and body. Supporting them will be small- and medium-sized publishers, who are enjoying a renaissance, because they have been fortunate enough not to have enough capital to invest in electronics and clever enough to stay close to their authors and readers.

It is time to ask whether the emperor has any clothes. To the electronic absolutists, to the obsessive terminal gazers, to the false prophets of a paperless society, to those who hint at some mystic link between the millennium and the so-called information revolution, we should say: "We have seen the future and it doesn't work." Paper, not the computer, will remain the vital and reliable repository of human knowledge.

NB — Adapted from a speech to the United Kingdom Serials Group on April 8, 1997. — KS

Rumors
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Principles for **Licensing Electronic Resources** have been drafted by the AALL, ALA, the Association of Academic Health Sciences Libraries (AAHSL), ARL, MLA, and SLA. These six associations represent an international membership of libraries of all types and sizes. The intent of the principles is twofold: to guide libraries in negotiating license agreements for access to electronic resources, and to provide licensors with a sense of the issues of importance to libraries and their user communities in such negotiations. The principles are available on the Web at <<http://arl.cni.org/sccomm/licensing/principles/html>>.

The Society for Industrial and Ap-

plied Mathematics (SIAM) has announced a substantial new enhancement to the electronic editions of its 10 research journals. SIAM plans to significantly reduce the waiting period between a paper's acceptance and its electronic publication in a SIAM journal. By mid-1998, SIAM expects to have reduced this time to an average of four months while continuing to maintain its high standards of peer review, copy editing, and production. This will be accomplished through author cooperation and a revamping of the production process within the SIAM office. For more information on how to subscribe, see SIAM's Web site at <<http://epubs.siam.org/help.html>> or contact SIAM Customer Service at 215-382-9800 x321, 800-447-7426 (U.S. only), or <service@siam.org>.

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tain reference subjects will grow as people share their interests electronically in virtual communities and discussion groups. And finally, librarians and publishers will continue to explore electronic pricing models that provide librarians with an ability to provide patrons with broad access and publishers with an ability to stay in business. This

will be critical as an ever-growing percentage of reference materials are sold electronically."

Answer from Dr. Bohdan S. Wynar:

"More diversification in form and content, more and better technological applications, and more books, too.

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