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ATG Interviews David Tyckoson

Head, Reference Services — CSU Fresno

by Tom Gilson (Head, Reference Services, College of Charleston Libraries) <gilsont@cofc.edu>

David Tyckoson recently published an article in American Libraries that has caused quite a bit of comment. See the latest issue for a bevy of letters to the editor. — TG

ATG: There has been an obvious increase in electronic reference publishing, but at the same time no let up in the number of print resources. How does the diversity of formats, not to mention the continued volume of publishing, impact library reference collections?

DT: In terms of the volume of sources, it is certainly greater than it was 15 years ago. But even when we were just dealing with print resources, we always had a considerable volume. There were multiple sources covering the same topic, as well as multiple editions of the same reference. But at the same time, we had well-established channels for identifying and evaluating these reference works ranging from advertising flyers to bibliographies like ALA’s Guide to Reference Books and sophisticated reviewing sources like the “Reference Books Bulletin” in Booklist.

ATG: And the advent of electronic resources changed this?

DT: Not initially. At first we were dealing with a new format, CD-ROM, but the references being published were familiar. They were tried and true standbys being published in a new format. It was not a selection issue. CD-ROM was a better way to do it. Speed and ease of use were the issues. The CD-ROM version of the MLA was a tremendous improvement over the print in terms of usefulness. Admittedly, these sources were pretty expensive and many of us may have suffered from sticker shock but we adjusted. After all, patrons loved it. But in the process, we lost something. In order to cover the cost, libraries began canceling peripheral indexes and our collections started becoming very similar.

ATG: But today there is a variety of electronic products on the market.

DT: Yes, there is no doubt about that. These first CD-ROMs were successful so more publishers started getting involved and they were interested in creating new products, not just electronic versions of old ones. While these new products have given librarians more resources to work with, it also has made our decisions far more complicated. These new products do not go through the traditional review process so we have had to find alternative ways to make decisions. Now, there is more direct marketing and the use of product trials in making selection decisions. We also have to consider hardware needs, which further complicates matters. And, this concern about the right equipment is even more critical now that we are networking. The capability to network resources has a tremendous effect by making resources available remotely wherever and whenever a patron wants them. It is great for service, but it requires even more technical expertise on the part of the librarian. A reference department may have a mixture of stand-alone CD-ROMs, networked LANs and Web accessible databases, so the decision is not only what do I want, but how do I deliver it. All this change may not be a revolution in reference collections, but it is certainly an significant evolution.

ATG: Given the variety and volume of reference materials on the market, how would you define a balanced reference collection in today’s library? How can a head of reference or a collection development librarian build a balanced reference collection?

DT: That depends on community needs. Every library serves a unique local community and that community defines your idea of a balanced collection. There is no overall definition. Some libraries may need more science materials, others more literature. It is the local community and their needs that decide. At CSU-Fresno, we have learned over a long period of time what programs are taught and which ones demand library research. We buy sources that fit those programs. For example, we purchase lots of business and health science materials, but little other than the basics in the field of law. This is because we have business and nursing programs, but no law school. The most important knowledge that a reference librarian should have is not how to use computers or reference books, but an understanding of the needs of the community that the library is supposed to serve. But today, librarians have to make another big decision. We have to decide on the format and that decision is influenced by a variety of factors, and one of the most influential is networking. Networks give smaller libraries better access than ever before. With consortia and state library agreements, smaller libraries have benefited, even more than larger ones. Many small libraries are able to buy into networked resources at a relatively low cost, making information available to their communities that would not be possible any other way.

ATG: Originally, Grove’s Dictionary of Art was also being released as a CD-ROM, aimed at the individual user. Do you think CD-ROM products of major sources like this still have a place in reference collections? How about CD-ROM versions of less popular sources?

DT: Microsoft’s Encarta was marketed to the individual and it has done pretty well. But, I am not a big fan of stand-alone CD-ROMs. They need dedicated equipment and are limited to a single user. Price is also a major factor for me. If the price is similar, it is no contest. We try to get the networked version or a Web product. I will get low use, but significant titles like the Encyclopedia of Bioethics, in print rather than CD-ROM.

continued on page 42

40 Against the Grain / September 1999

<http://www.against-the-grain.com>
Tyckson Interview
from page 40

As you know a lot of the government's publications come out on CD-ROM. For the most part they sit on the shelf until someone asks for them, which is rare. Recently, I
shocked our catalogers when they asked me
what to do with the CD-ROM that came with
the print volume of the Almanac of Business
and Industrial Financial Ratios. I told them
to throw it away. It is just a PDF file of the
printed pages and adds no value whatsoever.
Career Guidance's College Catalogs on CD-
ROM are another case in point. While we
did not throw it away, I actually preferred the
microfiche. The CD-ROM version is just a
PDF file, an image requiring electronic equip-
ment, making it harder to access, with no ben-
efit. For electronic products to provide added
value, they have to provide added utility to
the information, like letting the user manipu-
late data or be able to search through the ful
text. When a product comes out that is sim-
ply the reproduction of the print version in an
electronic format, the print remains the more
useful option.

ATG: But there is a Web version of the
College Catalogs available now? The cata-
logs are still PDF files but the searching is
more user-friendly.

DT: Yes, I know, and my preference is to
go with a more searchable Web product or at
least a networked CD-ROM whenever pos-
sible. I was just using the College Catalogs
as an example. I have a problem with CD-
ROMs that are just PDF files and that are not
really searchable and offer no added value to
the print or microform versions.

ATG: The growth of electronic reference
works has implications for the way selection
decisions are made. Are there enough review-
ing sources for Web and other electronic
products? Are reviewing sources enough? What
about database trials or preview copies of
CD-ROMs? Are they more helpful?

DT: No, there are not enough reviewing
sources but it is getting better. One of the
problems with reviews of electronic sources
is that by the time they come out, the product
has often been changed. So, the timeliness of
reviews is a major concern. We rely a tremen-
dous amount on trials of "big ticket" items.
But there are so many levels of some of these
products. How do you choose among the vari-
ous offerings of IAC, EBSCO and UMP? It
is very difficult even with trials. When you
get the trial, the publisher will inevitably give
you access to their entire product line. If you
decide to buy it, you may only be able to af-
ford a segment of the entire package. Just
within the IAC set of databases, for example,
there are dozens of options: General Peri-
dicals Index, Academic Index, Expanded
Academic Index, General Reference Cen-
ter, General Reference Center Gold—the
list goes on and on. And this is not to pick on
IAC, since all of the vendors do this now. You
may be happy with the one that you try, but
be less happy with the version that you actu-
ally purchase. The fact that vendors are tak-
ing the same information and repackaging it
in so many different ways adds to the com-
plexity of deciding which services to pur-
chase. With the less pricey items, we rely on
reviews or just buy it. If a low priced CD-
ROM does not work out, we simply do not
buy it again, when a new edition is released.
It is always worth $100 — $200 to take a shot.

ATG: This expanded world of reference
products also has budgetary implications.
How can reference and collection develop-
ment librarians best convince administrators
that funding needs to be expanded too? What
strategies have worked for you?

DT: Budgeting is often the most difficult
issue in collection development. It depends
a great deal on the local administration. Some
institutions want to be "cutting edge" and are
on the lookout for electronic resources. But
if you want to be "cutting edge" it is going to
cost. Either in terms of more money added to
the budget, or at the cost of reference books
not added to the collection. This has to be
made clear to the people making the finan-
cial decisions. We need to be on guard that
we do not cut into the core sources that meet
our community's needs to get high tech ac-
to peripheral sources. We are fortunate at
CSU-Fresno. Our administration does a
pretty good job and does not want to sacri-
fice core sources. In fact, the California State
system has established a core electronic col-
lection including Lexis/Nexis, CARL
UnCover, Dow Jones News Retrieval, and the
Ency-
clopedia Britannica.

"It is disappointing to see publishers
reverting to only electronic formats."
These services were chosen as
essential for all CSU students and are available on
every campus. We are currently in the process
of establishing a system-wide set of core
journals that will be available electronically
as well. The idea behind this Journal Access
Core Collection (JACC) is that we are telling
the vendors which titles we want in elec-
tronic form rather than purchasing the pack-
age that they have put together. It will be
interesting to see to what degree this approach
succeeds.

The other issue that comes up when buy-
ing these services is what are we buying? If I
get IAC for ten years and then switch to
EBSCO, what do I have for my ten years in-
vestment with IAC? I am left with nothing
tangible, or even intangible, for that matter.
Suppose I decide to subscribe to the Gale
Group's new Biography Resource Center and
drop my print subscriptions to Contemporary
Authors and some of the other print
sources contained in this new service like the
St. James Press titles. What happens if the
Gale Group decides to sell St. James Press
or decides to alter the Biography Resource
Center's content, or the unthinkable, ends up
going out of business? We have changed from
buying information to leasing it and the rami-
fications of this change are not always clear.
From my perspective, I want continued ac-
cess to what I have already paid for, and with
electronic products like this, I have no guar-
antees. With print, at least I can always keep
what I have already purchased.

ATG: This is a very exciting and challeng-
ing time to be a reference librarian. What
about the future? What type of reference col-
lections will we be working with in five years?
Ten years?

DT: Future predictions are tough. I wish I
could have predicted the Web taking off the
way it has. When I first saw the Internet it
was the domain of a very few computer types,
but it got easier to use and there developed a
ton of content. But getting back to your ques-
tion, things will change, but we will still have
all of the current formats. There will be more
electronic products but print will remain vi-
able. I think we will still have the same num-
ber of print resources being published. Chris-
tine Nasso of the Gale Group remarked at a
recent ALA program that "publishers still have
to feed the beast." And what I think she
toat by is that print products feed into
electronic products. There is a symbiotic
relationship between the two. I see that con-
tinuing. If anything goes down, it will be mi-
croforms.

But the real thing to watch is the impact
of networking. The network revolution is even
more important than the initial computer revolu-
tion. When the first computers came along, they
gave us the power to improve our individual
work performance. When we linked those
computers together and shared information
and data, each one of us acquired the power
and the knowledge of all of the individual
members of the network. It is the power of
the network that has allowed the Internet to
play such a dominant role in society in such a
short time. And of course, there will be some-
thing that no one anticipates which will come
along and change everything again.

There is only one thing that will not
change. What reference librarians do will be
the same: provide one-on-one service to
people needing information. Our tools will
change and evolve, but working with the in-
dividual patron remains the reason we are in
this business.

ATG: Thanks again for taking time out to
talk to us.

DT: No problem. I enjoyed it.

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