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Facts Go Online: Are Print Reference Collections Still Relevant?

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But we can do a few things to assess our efforts. Webpage counters, comparatively over time, can be an indicator of use. Where we have worked directly with faculty on a particular class, their comments and suggestions will give us important feedback as we refine our efforts. User evaluations from instruction classes, too, can provide insight and direction. Pretty lame, but a start. Assessment is something we'll refine

Endnotes

1. The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools recently withdrew accreditation from Barber-Scotia College. Ninety percent of its students receive some form of federal financial aid, and are now ineligible to receive it. See "Barber-Scotia Won't Appeal SACS Action," *Charlotte Observer*, 10 July 2004, at www.charlotte.com/mld/charlotte/living/education/higher_learning/9122719.htm?1c.
2. The six regional associations of colleges and schools, named after the region in which they operate, comprise the principal higher education accreditation bodies in the United States. They are: Middle States, New England, North Central, Northwest, Southern, and Western. See, for example, the North Central Association's Higher Learning Commission Website: www.ncahigherlearningcommission.org.
3. See Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association. *Handbook of Accreditation*. (Chicago: HLC, 2003), 3.2-11, at www.ncahigherlearningcommission.org/resources/handbook/Handbook03.pdf.
4. "U.S. Congress Questions Accreditation Practices." *The Diamondback: The University of Maryland's Independent Student Newspaper* (College Park, Md.), October 18, 2002. At www.inform.umd.edu/News/Diamondback/archives/2002/10/18/news4.html. See also "The ABCs of Accreditation." Though without author or institutional attribution, the piece offers a brief useful summary of accreditation issues, interactions between federal agencies and accrediting associations, and reorganizations among those associations, at www.1stdegree.info/pages/accreditation.html.
5. For a description of the project, methodology, results, and updates, see: <http://lib.umflint.edu/consummary.html> and <http://lib.umflint.edu/conupdate.html>.
6. *Magazines for Libraries*. Edited by Cheryl LaGuardia. 12th ed. (New Providence, NJ: Bowker, 2003). This source fails to include a number of significant journals of opinion on the social and political right (e.g., *First Things*, *Human Life Review*, *Modern Age*, *Regulation*), so in this area will need to be supplemented. The editor may have sound reasons for some of the dozen or so omissions I noticed. But if *First Hand* belongs, so does *First Things*. Happily, *ATG* made the cut. Check out its review on p.637.
7. *Guide to Reference Books*. Edited by Robert Balay. 11th ed. (Chicago: American Library Association, 1996).
8. For an update on ARL's E-Metrics Project, see the "Statistics and Measurements" section of Duane Webster's summary of recent ARL activity in *Bowker Annual* 2003, 48th ed., pp.181-82.

as we go, but we need to demonstrate awareness and begin.

Final thoughts

Well, those are a few ideas you might have ready to greet the accreditation train when next it wheezes into town. Some of you may have even better ones. Great. We could all profit from hearing them.

Some others of you may resent the new out-comes orthodoxy. You may believe that what we do in academic libraries is self-evidently a good thing. I have sympathy for that view. In academic libraries we collect the great conversation that takes place between serious people across the generations. Our collections embody

a set of judgments about what we, as educators believe worth holding ready, or having readily accessible, for our students. Maybe none of them in a given year will read any **Twain**, or **Tocqueville**, or **Orwell**, none listen to any **Beethoven**, or **Haydn**, or **Wagner**.

But were that the case, we shouldn't be unmoved. We ought to do something about it. We ought, as the new **NCA** criteria admonish, to make sure "that something worthwhile is happening to students because learning resources exist." If we use our imaginations to act and to assess, we will discover that libraries can be even more central to effective teaching and student learning than even we librarians suspected. 🐘

Facts Go Online: Are Print Reference Collections Still Relevant?

by **Dave Tyckoson** (Head, Reference Department, Henry Madden Library, California State University, Fresno) <davety@csufresno.edu>

They sit there, right outside my office, waiting for someone like me to come along. I see them every day, walking past them time after time, seeing them so often that I no longer notice their presence. They've been there longer than I have and at least some of them will remain long after I have moved on. Like many objects that are so familiar to us that they fade into the background, they have become a sort of wallpaper for my everyday existence. Some announce their presence in bright colors of orange and red and yellow. Others sit sedately in coats of muted browns and blues, lined up neatly in row after row, like soldiers at attention, awaiting their latest orders. Yet those orders rarely come these days.

I take comfort in their presence, although, like many old friends, I no longer consult them as frequently as I used to. They are always there for me, ready when I need them. But it seems like I just don't need them very much anymore. As you might guess, I am talking about my old friends, print reference books.

Looking out my door, I see these familiar volumes hundreds of times a day. Perhaps symbolically, although certainly a mere coincidence of building geography, as Head of the Reference Department my office sits at the head of the reference collection (the A call numbers in the LC classification). The row of low shelving outside my door contains encyclopedias: *World Book*, *Americana*, *Britannica* (including a current set, the classic 1910 11th edition, and a reproduction of the eighteenth century original), an old, well-worn copy of *Collier's*, and my own sentimental favorite, the *Academic American*, with at least one volume missing which can never be replaced. Mounted on the wall outside my office, so close that I can literally reach around and grab a volume without stepping outside, sits *Contemporary Authors*. And staring at me, in a straight line from my office door, at eye level from my desk, almost daring me to grab it, sits that single vol-

ume that personifies the reference book, the *World Almanac*.

Behind these gems sit 35,000 additional volumes of reference works covering every topic under the sun. Encyclopedias, dictionaries, handbooks, almanacs, chronologies, directories, indexes, and abstracts, all waiting for someone to come along to absorb their contents. From philosophy and religion to business and economics to art and music to physics and chemistry to health and medicine to library science and bibliography (ah, those mysterious Z's), these reference books contain a consolidation of all human knowledge from all over the globe from the beginning of recorded history to the present day. This collection, refined and built over the past 90+ years, for which we order new titles every day and remove outdated volumes on an ongoing basis, represents the totality of human thought and experience. In many ways, this reference collection, and every other reference collection like it, represents the sum total of human intellectual achievement. So why don't I ever use it any more?

Several recent events have led me to question the use and relevance of maintaining such a print collection. One was a meeting at last summer's **ALA Conference** in Orlando. In a conversation with a representative of a major reference publisher, I was asked what new sources we need in a particular subject area. I surprised myself with my response when I said "Nothing. What we need has either already been published or is all on the Web." Another event was a discussion with one of the librarians here at my library. We were deciding on whether to buy a new edition of a classic reference work. Although we both agreed that we used to use that title all the time, we decided that we did not need to spend the money to buy it again this year. But the precipitating event that brought this into focus was *Facts on File*.

Facts on File. It's one of the first reference
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works that I ever learned about, way back in my beginning reference class in library school. *Facts on File*. It comes out every week with a summary of the news, which we could use to keep up with current events or search back issues for historical information. *Facts on File*. Even the name of the product defines it as a reference tool: Facts — on File! *Facts on File*. It is a long-running reference source that stands as one of the pillars of the reference genre.

So what happened with *Facts on File* that started me down this gloomy path about reference books? We cancelled it. Faced with perceived upcoming budget cuts,¹ we decided that the \$960 per year (2004 list price, your mileage may vary) could be better spent elsewhere. Not only did we cancel it, but that decision was unanimous among all of us reference librarians. We spent time discussing the merits of continuing several other sources, but not one of us spoke in favor of continuing *Facts on File*. In fact, not one of us could clearly remember the last time that we had used it.

How could things have come this far? How could a source that was once one of the basics of reference service now be something that we will not even bother to purchase? Is it because it's no longer a good reference source? No, the product is as good or better than it's ever been. Is it because it's too expensive? Although price is always a factor, we pay a lot more for some other less well-known subscriptions. Is it because we replaced it with an equivalent electronic database? No, we do not subscribe to a news or history database that covers the same material as *Facts on File*. The truth is that people just do not ask for that kind of factual information any more.

The cancellation of *Facts on File* got me started thinking about the rest of the reference collection. If we could live without this standard, what about some of our other core sources? Do we still use them? Do we still want them? I went back to a list of core reference sources that I developed when I filled in as instructor for Bill Katz's reference course at SUNY-Albany. Taking twenty of the top titles that accompanied *Facts on File* on that old core list, here is what I discovered when I honestly examined my current use of those titles:

Books in Print. I mostly use Amazon.com for this information, but if I use BIP, I use it online.

Ulrich's. I just go to the journal Web pages to find this information.

American Library Directory. Once again, I usually go to the individual library Web page.

U.S. Government Manual. I find the agency on the Web.

Encyclopedia of Associations. Go to the organization Web page.

Million Dollar Directory. I still use this on occasion for quick address information or to find a primary SIC/NAICS code, but the corporate Website gives you much more information than you can find in here.

Ward's Business Directory. Same as *Million Dollar*, but I do use this occasionally for the ranking information it provides.

College Blue Book. I use the index by degree offered, but go to the university Website for information about the school.

World Almanac. This is still my favorite for quick facts. However, the facts that I find myself looking up are more often than not to solve answers to sports or trivia questions generated by discussions with our student assistants and less and less for questions from library users.

Statistical Abstract. I use this more than most print sources, but not as much as I used to. I would use it even less if I could remember how to use the *American Factfinder* on the Census Web page.

Europa Yearbook. I still use this for background on a country, but rarely. Online sources like the *CIA World Factbook* or *Country Studies* have replaced much of its use.

Guinness Book of Records. I can't remember the last time I looked at this one.

Famous First Facts. About once or twice a year, this answers a question.

Acronyms, Initialisms, and Abbreviations Dictionary. This gets used as much as ever. Try typing an abbreviation into a Web search engine and you'll see why.

Chase's Annual Events. Like its title, I use it about once a year.

Bartlett's Familiar Quotations. This and other quotation books still get used, although usually only after searching the Web. Most times, the quotation that I want is not in here, but I look anyway.

Oxford English Dictionary. Still used in print, but only because I don't like the online pricing model.²

Physicians Desk Reference. Someone asks for this about once every month.

Handbook of Chemistry and Physics. It's used because of a beginning chemistry class assignment. Otherwise, it would gather dust.

Occupational Outlook Handbook. It's still helpful for the odd career question, but it's also available on the Web, which is where most students find it.

Do you notice a trend here? These are twenty titles that a decade ago I thought formed the core of a general reference collection. Today, most of them see little or no use. Your core list will contain different titles than mine, but my guess is that if you conduct the same exercise you will come to similar conclusions. And notice that these are the classic titles. For the most part, other reference books have seen the same decline in use, but they had even less use to begin with.

Shelving statistics from my library validate these impressions. During the 1994/1995 academic year, approximately 46,000 reference volumes were reshelfed. Throw in figures for other reference-like items, such as phone books, annual reports, college catalogs, etc., and that number rises to 62,000 items. Last year, only 11,000 reference books were reshelfed, less than 200 of which were auxiliary materials. There is no doubt: reference books are simply not used as much now as they were in the past.

Why the change? What has happened in this time period to cause people to use fewer reference books? The development of the Internet as a communications tool and source for content and the subsequent development and improvement in search engine software has transferred the demand for factual information from libraries and reference books to individuals and Websites. People used to come to reference books for this information because reference books were the most convenient sources for facts. They came to libraries because libraries had the reference books. Now, with the Web, people have the power and resources to find that information themselves. To paraphrase Joe Jones:³ "Google works. Now what are reference librarians going to do?" A related question is: "Google works. Now what are reference publishers going to do?"

The answers to these two questions take two very different directions. Reference librarians still have plenty to do. People have the power and the resources to find information, but they do not always have the skills. I don't believe that reference librarians were ever primarily functioning as fact finders, although that is the common image of the reference librarian. What small role this did play in our activities has been diminished even further by the Internet. People can use Google and Yahoo and the Internet to answer easy questions themselves. They now come to us with more complex information needs, which is why the amount of time that we spend with each person is increasing even as the number of questions is going down.

For several years, reference statistics as measured by the number of questions asked has decreased nationwide. This has been a persistent topic of discussion on LIBREF-L at least since 1998 (search the archives for reference statistics). Yet ask any reference librarian about their level of activity and they will tell you that they feel busier than ever. Reference librarians have a present — and a future — helping people use the resources available to find the information that they need. In helping, we select relevant resources, demonstrate search strategies, teach critical thinking skills, and help evaluate results.

This is really no different than what we used

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to do with our old friends, the reference books. Librarians did not write the texts, arrange the entries, or create the indexes in reference books; we helped people use the best tools that we had. We do the same thing in the electronic world. We don't build the databases, write the software, or index the files — we help people use the best tools that we have. Yesterday those tools were books. Today that tool is **Google**. Tomorrow that tool will be something else. The only constant is that reference librarians will be there to help people use them.

For reference publishers, I doubt that the outlook is as rosy. For centuries, printed publications were the best sources because they were the only way to disseminate information to a wide range of people on a timely basis. Publishers developed products that filled specific needs for information at the same time they made profits for the company. The publishers controlled content and distribution. When electronic resources first came about, publishers migrated those publications into the electronic world as proprietary products such as the **Gale Resource Centers** or the **Oxford Reference Collec-**

tion. However, use still required purchase by a library and some sort of authentication of the user through IP address, proxy, or password, which limited distribution and access. With the free-for-all world of the open Web, no one controls the content and distribution is universal. Buried amongst the Viagra ads, mortgage refinancing offers, and porn is a wealth of factual information beyond what most libraries ever contained in their print reference collections. Barring a complete collapse of the Internet or a total restructuring of the economics of the Web, publishers will no longer have control over content or distribution. The public has discovered this wealth and they are not going to return to reference books as long as the Web is more convenient, faster, and less expensive.

The future does not look good for reference collections. I will still buy reference books, but not as many as I used to. As the use of the ones that I do buy declines, I will transfer them into the main book stacks, so that the few people who do use them will be able to check them out. Over time, the reference collection will wither away. I am not sure if it will die out completely, but the prognosis is not good. If I were a reference publisher

(as many of the readers of this journal are), I would start looking for a new line of business. When the classics mentioned above have become of questionable value, the rest of the reference collection is in deep trouble.

I am going to miss *Facts on File*, I really will. In fact, since it is prepaid for 2004, it will actually keep coming until the end of the year. Each week, our student assistant will dutifully file it in its funky blue binder, never to see the light of day again. Of course, we'll keep the old ones in case someone wants to use them. But after December, this little weekly messenger will quit bringing us its news that no one reads. At the end of the year, perhaps we should have a ceremony to mark the end of *Facts on File*. Or should we have a funeral, marking the symbolic end of the print reference era?

Endnotes

1. I use the word perceived because we actually ended up with a healthier budget than expected. This makes the canceling even more remarkable, since we decided to cancel it anyway.
2. See "What Were They Thinking: The Oxford English Dictionary on the Web," *Against the Grain*, v. 12 no. 4, September 2000, pp. 38-42.
3. Janes, Joseph, "Introduction to Reference Work in the Digital Age," New York: Neal-Schuman, 2003, p. 31.

Electronic Reference: The Publishers' View

by **Irving E. Rockwood** (Editor & Publisher, **CHOICE**, 100 Riverview Center, Middletown, CT 06457; Phone: 860-347-6933 x119) <irockwood@ala-choice.org>

Readers of last September's issue of *Against the Grain* may recall my article, "Reference Publishing: The View from Middletown." In this piece, I noted that the number of print reference titles being submitted to **CHOICE** has been declining steadily. As **Bob Balay** wrote in the November 2002 issue of **CHOICE**, "fewer [printed reference titles] come through the door every month, and even the fall releases, coinciding with the beginning of classes, do not produce the flood

of new titles we have seen in the past."

One year later, the picture is little changed. As the chart below indicates, publishers were submitting nearly 1,900 new reference works per year to **CHOICE** as recently as 1998-1999. Today they are submitting roughly half as many. Publishers who submit titles to **CHOICE** are producing significantly fewer print reference titles than in the past, even as the total number of titles submitted to **CHOICE** holds relatively constant.

Unfortunately, we cannot prove this. Although we track the number of print titles submitted, we are unable to do this for electronic works." These statements too remain true in 2004.

How then to find out what is happening on the electronic reference publishing front? The obvious answer was to ask the publishers themselves. To that end, **CHOICE** recently conducted an online survey of reference publishers, an effort that elicited responses from some 23 intrepid individuals from an equal number of firms. The resulting sample represents roughly 20 percent of the publishing houses that have submitted one or more reference works to **CHOICE** over the past five years. We make no claims on behalf of the statistical significance of our results, but we do think they are interesting and hope you will agree.

What then, did our respondents tell us? How does this brave new world of electronic reference publishing look from the other side of the divide? What exactly is happening out there?

Well, for starters, a lot of our respondents are already publishing electronic materials. Some 16 out of 23 (roughly 70 percent) indicated that they publish at least some electronic reference titles. Although dominated by commercial houses, the affirmative group included

Print Reference Titles Submitted to CHOICE, 1997-2004

Volume	Period	All Titles Submitted	Reference Titles	Reference %
35	Sept 1997-Aug 1998	22,956	1,852	8.1%
36	Sept 1998-Aug 1999	23,472	1,891	8.1%
37	Sept 1999-Aug 2000	25,108	1,782	7.1%
38	Sept 2000-Aug 2001	23,160	973	4.2%
39	Sept 2001-Aug 2002	22,160	1,014	4.6%
40	Sept 2002-Aug 2003	23,425	937	4.0%
41	Sept 2003-Aug 2004	23,375 (est.)	1,066 (est.)	4.6% (est.)

In my 2003 article, I went on to observe that, "Here at **CHOICE** we suspect that the decline

in print reference titles is being...offset by a corresponding increase in electronic title out-

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