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Facts Go Online: Are Print Reference Collections Still Relevant?

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Final thoughts

Well, those are a few ideas you might have ready to greet the accreditation train when 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 outcomes 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 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 Collie’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 volume 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 especially this 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...
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, 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:

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 reshelved. 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 reshelved, 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 Janes: "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 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 have decreased nationwide. This has been a persistent topic of discussion on LILREF-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

<http://www.against-the-grain.com>
Electronic Reference: The Publishers’ View

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

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 [print 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.

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

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 output. 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 instepid 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... 

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