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Food for Thought -- Information Quality in Reference Publishing

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what are your current plans for your print program?

How do the revenue and market potential of these two formats compare? This question elicited a total of 12 responses. Fully one-third of these four were non-committal. As one perhaps slightly depressed respondent noted, "The budgets are the budgets. Everyone has only so much money to spend. Libraries are struggling with where they allocate their spend[ing]." Most of our respondents, however, expressed optimism about electronic's future revenue potential, at least over the longer term. The following comments are typical:

"The revenue we derive from our online database sales is still a relatively small but increasing percentage of our overall revenue. We believe there is a growing market for online reference materials."

"Electronic has more market/revenue potential in the future."

"For us print reference materials still generate the bulk of our revenue from reference products. However the market potential is clearly on the electronic side, and we are investing heavily in this area."

These responses, with their optimism about the future of electronic reference publishing, provide a nice segue to our next question, *Which of the following best describes your firm's plans for your print reference publishing program?*

- We plan to phase out our print publishing program
- We plan to expand our print publishing program.
- We plan to continue our print reference publishing program at its current level.

Print lovers—like myself—will be heartened to know that none of the 13 publishers who answered this question chose the first response. No one, it appears, is planning to phase out their print reference publishing program. In fact, four out of 13 (30.8%) are planning to "expand" their print publishing program. But most, nine out of 13 (69.2%), are planning to continue their print program "at its current level"—presumably while expanding their electronic program. Except perhaps for one respondent who wrote, "We plan to continue our print reference program to the extent necessary

but also plan to phase it out to the extent possible. We want to invest in the creation of reference products that facilitate linking to other content and other resources. This is only possible on the electronic side." Print is dead. Long live print.

What then, in the view of our respondents, is the state of electronic reference publishing? In a word, "promising." Most plan to do more of it. Despite this, virtually none are currently planning to phase out their print program. And most are optimistic about the future of electronic reference, even if the exact arrival date of that future seems a bit fuzzy. The overall mood seems to be one of cautious optimism, as exemplified by the following two comments:

"The inroads many publishers have made in the electronic reference publishing field have made us both enthusiastic and cautious about our own entry into this area. We feel the industry is still grappling to find the best method for publishing electronically, and we are therefore thoroughly investigating the many options available to us."

"It seems likely that electronic products have more growth potential than print (at the expense of print). But folks have been saying that for years, and we're still waiting."

And so perhaps are we all, except for those of us who are not—a group that includes many librarians, library patrons, and a growing number of publishers. Clearly if title submissions to **CHOICE** are any indication, many reference publishers have already significantly reduced their print title output. And if the results of our mini-survey are any guide, the most likely explanation is a steady, if at times, hesitant and uncertain shift to electronic materials.

What this all augurs for print, and for libraries, remains to be seen. Print, it seems to this observer, is unlikely to go away completely as a format for reference materials. Print's handiness, portability, ease of use, and relatively low cost will continue to make it ideally suited for some types of works, particularly those designed primarily for individual use. The advantages of electronic on the other hand—the ability to link, to accommodate many different types of data, not to mention its immense storage capacity—make it the better choice for a range of products that are either impossible to produce in print or would be less useful in print. The future of reference publishing, it would seem, is more likely to encompass both bytes and books than either alone.

Food for Thought — Information Quality in Reference Publishing

by **Karen Christensen** (Co-founder, Berkshire Publishing) <karen@berkshirepublishing.com>

This time of year, I like to watch city people buying sweet corn. At **Taft Farms** in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, the sign over the rough wood corn bin reads, "Don't pull the ears, our corn is freshly picked and raised by the integrated pest management method." The bin is invariably surrounded by tourists with tense shoulders and rapid hands, pulling and picking at the moist green ears, shamelessly stripping back the tops to peer quizzically at the silky threads covering the kernels.

How do you tell if an ear of corn is going to taste like morning sunshine stirred into cream? The fact is, corn flavor is largely determined by the variety the farmer has grown and by how fresh it is.

This two-part article is an introduction to the process of creating reference works today. I don't write from a lofty position in a bastion of academic publishing, but from the down-to-earth experience of founding and running a growing publishing company, **Berkshire Publishing Group**, that has had the privilege, over the past ten years, of working closely with most of the major reference publishers in the United States. In the next installment, I will explain some of the financial issues and challenges that affect the products offered to you by publishers.

Right now, let me now lead you out into the cornfields and show you where encyclopedias begin and how they grow.

Information Quality

Quality matters to publishers, as it does to librarians, but how we define quality varies. One person might feel that scholarship is the only factor needed to evaluate a reference work; thus, the numbers of contributing professors from **Yale** and **Oxford** is what really matters. Some feel that currency and political correctness are essential.

I've met some librarians who feel that it is not their place to comment on the quality of the books they buy because, to paraphrase **S. R. Ranganathan**, every book has its reader, and every reader, his or her book. The Web, with its infinite space, comes close to offering an infinite array of material, but publishers, librarians, and retailers, being limited in what we can offer, must stake our hopes on a high-quality selection.

At its best, an encyclopedia is some of the finest food for thought you can ask for. What makes a fine encyclopedia depends on the topic, however.

For *World History* (forthcoming, Dec. 2004), we strove to balance scholarly authority with a fresh presentation. With the *Berkshire Encyclopedia of World Sport* (forthcoming, May 2005), we suspect readers will value an author's experience as an athlete or sports professional over academic status.

continued on page 44

Food for Thought — from page 42

Despite their very different topics, both these encyclopedias — and, we hope, all our offerings — have a broad appeal and relevance. Consider the topic the seed of an encyclopedia.

Once it has been determined and the schedule set, the publisher's role is to nurture it with the ingredients of information quality: *vision*, *validity*, and *voice*.

Vision

Vision may not be what people first associate with an encyclopedia, unless it's the vision — or obsession — of a single lone researcher who slaves for decades, like **Samuel Johnson** or **James Murray**, the tireless lexicographer whose labors brought us the **OED**. Today, knowledge doesn't stand still for long enough to be gathered by that method. Our means of sharing knowledge are changing all the time, and today's great reference works are the creation of extensive networks of experts brought together by publishers who provide financial support and practical expertise.

Quality comes from a clear vision: clarity of purpose, an understanding of what a new book or series will do for a particular audience. Vision also encompasses the creators' understanding of how their particular project fits into both the larger and the more particularistic scheme of things.

Vision makes a difference in a variety of

ways. When your vision is clear, it becomes easier to recruit top scholars. We have made a minor specialty of creating encyclopedias in new areas — defining the field of environmental history, or leadership, or community. I know we're getting it right when those we invite to contribute respond with, "I don't usually write for encyclopedias but this is something different. What an ambitious, important project."

Vision also creates a sense of urgency that goes well beyond the business need to create a product quickly. Both the publisher and the librarian who buys the work ought to be able to see, and explain, the special value and utility of the new publication. What does it do differently and better? Does it offer unique syntheses within a familiar field? Does it give us a new perspective on a standard subject (sociology, say), or take us into an area that is going to be vitally important in the future. (Something we tried to accomplish in the soon to be released *Berkshire Encyclopedia of Human-Computer Interaction*.)

There is plenty of excellent, solid reference that can hardly be called visionary. My contention is, however, that competition from free online sources is going to make utilitarian reference increasingly difficult to sell, while distinctive publications will become the reference resources that will succeed alongside, and as part of, the Web.

Validity

Reference works vary enormously, but all can be assessed by the validity of their content.

The publisher is responsible for assembling consistent, accurate, comparable information and putting it together in a way that makes sense.

To do this, publishers make dozens of choices, some conscious and some not. Berkshire's business choices are conscious — and will be made more transparent in Part II of this article — but many of the choices that create validity are unconscious. One way to improve reference is to become more explicit about what we're promising, what standards we're setting for ourselves and our writers.

Coverage is a key part of validity. We want our content to be varied — but always logical and consistent. Decisions about what to include in an encyclopedia can take months, and ideally new decisions should be made up through the time a project goes to press. But there are always misses. "Light Pollution," for example, is an article we wish we'd included in the *Encyclopedia of World Environmental History* (Routledge 2004). Somehow we never included "Ancient Greece" in our early lists of articles for *World History*, perhaps because it doesn't get much special attention today from world historians. We struggled to find an author who could do it justice and provide the synthesis needed — not just an article about ancient Greece, but one that would explain its influence on the world over the past two thousand years. (Fortunately for us, senior editor **William H. McNeill** stepped in to do the job.) The network, or fishing net, of relationships we develop in the course of a project can provide important new ideas and catch embarrassing omissions.

continued on page 48

ATG Special Report — Acquisitions and ILL: Part II

Guest Edited by **Michelle Flinchbaugh** (Acquisitions Librarian, Albin O. Kuhn Library, University of Maryland Baltimore County (UMBC), 100 Hilltop Cir., Baltimore, MD 21250; Phone: 410-455-6754; Fax: 410-455-1598) <flinchba@umbc.edu>

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Expanding the ILL Role — Interlibrary Loan Contributing to Collection Development

by **Catherine A. Reed** (Coordinator of Interlibrary Services and Reference Librarian, Earl Gregg Swem Library, College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia 27187) <careed@wm.edu>

Introduction and Background

In an academic environment, interlibrary loan is an integral part of student and faculty research and thus can be considered a natural extension of the library's collection. Interlibrary loan's role has always been to fill that immediate research need. Periodically, ILL is asked for summary reports to help identify gaps in library collections or subject areas with high usage. These traditional methods of working together with Collection Development only go so far. We decided to investigate other options described in the literature. In our pilot project to selectively purchase monographs, we are not looking to circumvent ILL, but to look at long range ways to expand ILL's role of improving

access to information and in the long run improving our library collection.

The **College of William & Mary** in Williamsburg, Virginia serves approximately 7500 students and offers degrees through the doctoral level. The **Earl Gregg Swem Library** is the central library on campus and contains more than 1.2 million monographic volumes. **William & Mary's Marshall-Wythe School of Law** and the **Virginia Institute of Marine Science** have their own ILL Departments and are not included in this study.

Demand for ILL materials in **Swem Library** has steadily increased and in 2002-2003, the department handled almost 37,000 requests, for both borrowing and lending. 11,000 of these

were requests from our faculty and students for items not held in **Swem Library**. Our Acquisitions department relies heavily on approval plans to fulfill a large portion of **Swem's** collection development needs. This is verified by the fact that only eight university press titles with 2003 imprints were ordered through ILL in the last year. ILL identifies those titles not covered by the approval plan.

Review of Literature

The literature addresses the issue of opting to purchase interlibrary loan requests, calling it buy vs. borrow, just-in-time acquisitions, books on demand, etc. The **University of Virginia** has successfully incorporated a Purchase Ex-

continued on page 46

Digital Delivery of Interlibrary Loan and Democratic Digital Collection Development at Stanford

by **Glen Worthey** (Humanities Digital Information Service, Stanford University Libraries and Academic Information Resources, in Stanford, California)

Summary

Under two successive grants provided by the **California State Library** with **Library Services and Technology Act** funds (FY 1999-2000 and 2000-2001), and then through calendar 2002 under internal funding, the **Stanford University Libraries** created and implemented a pilot project to provide **digital delivery for interlibrary loan (dd-ILL)** of out-of-copyright, monographic materials. The project demonstrated successful solutions to two distinct sets of problems: first, it assisted in and expanded the day-to-day work of our traditional interlibrary services; and second, it contributed to longer-term goals of building digital library collections.

Delivering digital surrogates to remote patrons allayed concerns for the safety and preservation of rare or fragile materials. In this way, **dd-ILL** made possible ILL circulation of previously non-circulating materials, and thus extended the range of materials delivered through ILL (and, incidentally, increased the fill rate of loan requests). By focusing on monograph-length items, the **dd-ILL** program also provided unique selection principles for augmenting our own

digital library collections. Unlike thematic or collection-specific projects, which are chosen by faculty or librarians, materials chosen through **dd-ILL** reflected the needs of broader-based user communities, including users from non-research universities and public libraries. This implies a radically democratic, user-based method of digital collection development, one driven by the community perhaps most likely to benefit from the collection it is helping to create itself. Thus, in addition to expanded ILL service, the digitization of ILL-selected materials has served both as a collection development tool and as the impetus for longer-term digital collecting initiatives.

The **dd-ILL** program had an overwhelmingly positive response both from remote users and from the **Stanford** staff whose materials have been digitally delivered as ILL items; indeed, the **dd-ILL** program jump-started a series of user- and librarian-initiated requests for the digitization of out-of-copyright monographs, and the body of digital work created during three years of **dd-ILL** now forms the core of a **Stanford** digital collection of pre-1923 holdings. Compared with the output of our current

digitization technologies, efforts, and plans, this core (just under a thousand titles) is quite modest; still, it's a proud part of our digital library collections.

dd-ILL and Traditional ILL

dd-ILL significantly expanded current practices in electronic ILL, for example, **Ariel**: first, the scope of digitized materials was extended (and indeed, restricted) to monographs — that is, to items of scope significant enough to merit consideration for inclusion in a permanent digital collection, and with existing descriptive metadata rich enough to facilitate later discovery. Second, it was anticipated that there would be no paper copy produced at the receiving end, as there usually is in the **Ariel** workflow; here, delivery of ILL materials was, at least potentially, entirely digital.¹

dd-ILL was created as an experimental project to offer complete, out-of-copyright works in digital form in response to users' requests. This scan-on-demand service for monographs was apparently the first of its kind in the world (though the **Library of Congress** inaugurated a very similar, though unrelated and less ambitious, digitize-on-demand service almost simultaneously with **Stanford**). The program

continued on page 49

Food for Thought — from page 44

Voice

The third way to look at reference content is in terms of its voice.

Voice is the sum total of how we present the knowledge we've gathered, from the size and number of volumes to the design of pages and navigational tools. Then we get to the words on the page or screen, the content itself. An encyclopedia's voice should not resemble the cacophony of *Iron Chef*. Nor should it resort to the jargon and passive prose that makes some academic language an exclusive tongue that others cannot understand.

But too much editing risks losing an article's personality, passion, and humor. That's why creating an appealing voice for their publications is such a challenge for publishers. Here are some signs of a well-conceived and edited reference work, one whose voice is right: Articles on similar topics are organized similarly, and openings provide elementary facts and immediate context for the topic. You know right away why any given article is in the work and what you will get out of it. Sentences are reasonably short, the language is vivid and active, and there are plenty of facts as well as thoughtful explanation of what they mean and why they might matter.

An essential component of the relationship between the reader and the work is the assumption that we are all striving to understand and grow in knowledge together. Any note of superiority should be scrubbed from a reference work. In fact, I see interactivity as an important need. In the future encyclopedias may well become venues where scholars, inside and outside the academy, will ask and respond to questions and connect with one another.

In 1995, we decided to add sidebars of primary text to articles in the *Encyclopedia of World Sport*, and we've done this ever since. In *World History* we are adding short quotations from figures as varied as **Sophocles** and **Darwin**, **Marie Curie** and **Monty Python**. These kinds of additions are popular because they add something essential to the voice of a work: human stories. They connect abstract knowledge with the concrete realities of human experience.

Conclusion

I'd like to conclude with another strongly held belief: that the publisher has a responsibility to think critically about how closely the work produced matches the original intention, and the description provided to readers. **Samuel Johnson**, creator of the first authoritative English dictionary, said, "There are two things which I am confident I can do very well. One is an introduction to any literary work, stating what it is to contain, and how it should be ex-

ecuted in the most perfect manner; the other is a conclusion, shewing from various causes why the execution has not been equal to what the author promised to himself and to the publick." [sic.]

Conscious of the flaws in our work, we always try to admit where we fell short — for instance, in failing to include that article on light pollution I mentioned above.

But we don't grow our own corn, and farmers have adapted. They grow new varieties that stay sweet in the bin, in the bag, even in the refrigerator. The corn from **Taft Farms** is about as good as it gets, but these new varieties just aren't the same. They are sweet, but they are starchy too, sticky in the mouth instead of tender fresh like old-fashioned varieties. Agriculture is changing, both for good and ill, just like publishing. External pressures and social changes mean that we may be producing the equivalent of the sweet but sticky new corn varieties. Publishers aren't so very different from farmers, really, trying to get the best, most profitable crop they can. We ask the same questions small farmers do: How can we stay in business doing something we love? Are we contributing to sustainable (knowledge) communities? And maybe, when we have a moment to reflect on both past and future, we wonder how to recapture the elusive sweetness of old-time corn on the cob. 🌽

Watch for Part II coming soon. — KC

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