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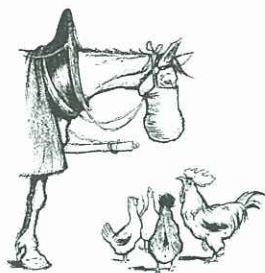


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Reference Universe: Unlocking Libraries' Reference Collections

by **Eric M. Calaluca** (President and CEO, Paratext, 2806 Flintrock Trace Road, Suite A-204, Austin, TX 78738; Phone: 512-402-9959; Fax: 512-402-9979) <ec@paratext.com> www.paratext.com

"No one ever uses our reference collection anymore." I'm sure I'm not the only person to hear this from reference librarians — and they don't just mean their print reference; one hears it about online reference tools as well. But why is this so?

Part of the problem may be the paucity of good access points. The reference selector in the library may know what's in their specialized reference collection, but the average library patron has no idea of the riches the collection contains. A patron who begins research at the library's online public-access catalogue (OPAC), will find that there are no more subject headings in the bibliographic record for a 20-volume specialized encyclopedia than there are for a 30-page monograph — a situation that obviously does not do justice to the depth of information covered in the encyclopedia. How will the patron find an article on existentialism in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* when the subject heading for this 10-volume work is as limited as it is? Yet that article is, arguably, the best starting point for someone beginning a study on the subject.

Genesis

My partner **Bob Asleson** developed **Reference Universe**, based upon years of our both being baffled by the limited use made of most libraries' core reference materials. How could it be that the most treasured components of many a library's holdings were gathering dust? The trigger to creating **Reference Universe** was **First Stop**, a work produced by **Joe Ryan**, a librarian at the **University of Vermont**, and published in 1988. **First Stop** is a keyword-in-context guide to approximately 300 specialized encyclopedias. In 1998, **Allan Mirwis** of **Kingsborough Community College** compiled a supplemental edition that focused on greater depth of access but fewer titles.

Ryan's thesis was this: 90 percent of all reference questions are best answered by specialized subject encyclopedias. These works are where the patron will find articles that are authoritative, concise, and usually followed by bibliographies that guide further reading.

But printed guides like **First Stop** are naturally limited in scope and outdated even before published, given the number of new titles that appear each year. Inspired by **Ryan** and **Mirwis's** work, **Bob** and I decided to create a tool that would leverage both our knowledge of reference publishing and the "updatability" of the Web — a master index of reference works that would be current and comprehensive.

Challenges

As we progressed, however, we soon discovered that there were good reasons why such a tool hadn't appeared before—it's not

an easy thing to pull together. To create a truly comprehensive guide — one that offers detailed content information (the full back-of-the-book indexes and tables of contents) on the more than 30,000 specialized reference works published in English since 1985, we realized we would have to integrate data from hundreds of sources. Moreover, focusing on print alone wouldn't do: every major publisher has e-versions of their works, so the tool would have to facilitate access to both forms.

Then there were the practical challenges that came from having to coordinate with publishers and libraries. **Reference Universe** brings together reference publishers, each library's local holdings, and our activities at our company, **Paratext**. **Paratext** gets data directly from reference publishers, but we also maintain a substantial program of digitization for older titles and those that are hard to track down. **Reference Universe** does not simply organize the flood of new titles from major publishers, it also includes works from smaller publishers, such as **Berkshire Publishing Group**, which are producing high-quality works, but whose imprint may not yet be as familiar to many librarians.

Organizing and reformatting these data, which arrive in numerous formats, is a challenge anyone in our industry will appreciate. Our production managers **Peggy** and **Paul Fulton** have done amazing work over the past years, integrating and making sense of all the variant formats.

Technologically, there are many challenges to integrating the back-of-the-book index and table-of-contents data and then linking search results to each and every library's own OPAC. It's one thing to build a large finding tool; it's quite another to customize it for each library that is using it.

Some problems are more stubborn than others. For example, anyone reading this will agree that the inconsistencies in the way eBooks are catalogued within library OPACs is a real problem. Those inconsistencies present technological challenges to customizing **Reference Universe** for every library. OpenURL is not yet as useful for reference works as it is for other materials, and even if it were, the problem of linking to the article level for each distinct publisher would still remain. However, we've overcome every problem we've faced so far, and the linking to eBooks will soon be as seamless as linking to the records for print titles.

Innovations

Reference Universe innovates by opening up a library's reference collection in a way never before possible. Federated searching of millions of citations from print and electronic

reference works elevates, I believe, reference services to a new level of both accuracy and comprehensiveness.

It's also innovative technologically, in the way it peers into a library's holdings in real time. If a new work is catalogued while you're searching, the next search will bring that newly catalogued work up as well. Bear in mind, **Reference Universe** queries are outside a library's OPAC, so each query engages in a matching process to each library's OPAC, in real time, and offers customized views of reference holdings on any topic.

A third innovation that **Reference Universe** offers is interactive usage statistics, which permit a library to use it to help with collection development, weeding, and remote storage.

Reception

We launched a prototype of **Reference Universe** at the **Association of College and Research Libraries** meeting in Denver a few years back. The response was amazing. I had at least a dozen reference librarians come up and say, "This is what I do all day, but I keep it all in a spiral notebook behind the desk!" One even told me, "Finally, something in the exhibit hall I understand." That was a good feeling.

The benefits for libraries are clear: with a single index to organize what exists in the world of specialized reference — electronic or print — a library can not only organize and unlock its quality reference material, but also ensure that the reference works acquired in the future will also receive higher use.

As for reference publishers, some grasped the significance of what **Reference Universe** offers more quickly than others. **Ron Boehm** of **ABC-CLIO**, for example, was extremely helpful and supportive of the project from the prototype stage. Some publishers took a little longer to grasp the notion. Fortunately, however, by means of demos and lots of nagging, most did come to see what the database means, both for research and for their own bottom line. As a consequence, we now have analytics from over 250 imprints in the database.

Misunderstanding

Although generally librarians are extremely enthusiastic about **Reference Universe**, occasionally there is some confusion. Many librarians confuse it with full-text encyclopedia packages like **Gale's Virtual Reference Library**, or **Oxford Reference Online**, or **Xrefer**, when in fact it's actually an index that points to these titles, or to print if that is the better source.

Some librarians were hesitant to begin using **Reference Universe** because they had given up hope that their print, and even elec-

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tronic, reference collection would ever be used in a way proportionate to its cost. This is hardly surprising, given that no library has had, until **Reference Universe**, possessed a tool to actually unlock the reference collection.

However, most on-the-desk reference librarians have been big supporters of **Reference Universe**. Using this tool maximizes the substantial investment the library has made in high-quality reference; they've worked "in the trenches" for years and are grateful to be able to offer more targeted assistance to patrons at the early stages of the patrons' research. **Thomas Mann**, of the **Library of Congress** and author of the **Oxford Guide to Library Research**, called **Reference Universe** "a godsend for reference librarians." That comment sums up the usual reaction of reference librarians to our product.

Print versus Online

I've been asked what I would say to a critic who argues that a resource such as **Reference Universe** is simply preserving an outmoded medium — print — beyond its usefulness. It's the old question of print or electronic. But to me, that's not even the right question, at least not in the realm of specialized reference. Rather, the question for serious librarians is: What is authoritative, and what is not? One of the main functions of any library is to help patrons separate the wheat from the chaff, and sometimes print reference works are the finest wheat. It would be a shame not to take full advantage of them. When one considers that there is little chance that the entire realm of printed reference will ever find its way online, an access tool like this becomes the only avenue of discovery. Ultimately, it's our hope that **Reference Universe** brings back a little bit of the serendipitous fun of roaming the reference stacks and seeing where the next good notion takes you.



against the grain people profile

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BORN & LIVED: Born in Detroit, lived in Washington, DC most of my life, now live in Austin.

EARLY LIFE: A great Italian family. 5 boys, 1 girl. Lots of sports. My father was a Mechanical Engineer and my mother loved words. They gave me a love of structures and language.

FAMILY: Married early this year. My wife, **Samantha**, is a graphic designer, and now completing graduate work in psychology.

EDUCATION: B.A. and M.A. in Philosophy from the **University of Dallas**. Minored in Classics. Study of the ancients is the cure for worry... nihil novum sub sole.

FIRST JOB: Technical editor at **General Dynamics**. I got to see F-16s up close, which was cool.

PROFESSIONAL CAREER AND ACTIVITIES: Started at **Chadwyck-Healey** in 1987. Left in 1993 to begin **Paratext**. **Bob Asleson** agreed to join with me in 1999. **Bob** is the most accomplished executive in our industry and also the most decent. I'm a lucky guy.

IN MY SPARE TIME I LIKE TO: Weekend soccer, golf, oil painting, travel, cooking with way too much garlic.

FAVORITE BOOK: *A Soldier of the Great War* by **Mark Helprin**.

PET PEEVES: "The students only want full text!" Since when was education synonymous with making things easier for students?

PHILOSOPHY: Philosophy students don't have 'a philosophy.'

MOST MEANINGFUL CAREER ACHIEVEMENT: It's a tie: **Reference Universe**, and developing the **Patrologia Latina Database** during my time at **Chadwyck-Healey**.

GOAL I HOPE TO ACHIEVE FIVE YEARS FROM NOW: Updating this from a small study in rural Italy.

HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS: Those who understand libraries and love scholarship will really thrive; those who don't will do something else for a living.



The Good Library Campaign and the Future of U.K. Libraries

by **Tim Coates** (Management Consultant and Advocate for Public Libraries) <timcoatesbooks@yahoo.com>
Weblog: www.goodlibraryguide.com/blog

The last ten years in the United Kingdom have been "the *Harry Potter*" decade. If ever there was a star who encouraged children and reluctant book readers to enjoy life between the covers, it was **Harry**, in this series of wonderful books whose stratospheric popularity has inspired awe among everyone connected with books or the publishing industry.

So you would assume that public libraries in Britain have been flourishing during that time. What other institution, after all, could

better benefit from and encourage the fruits of the craze for **Harry Potter** than the public library? But you would be wrong. During those years book borrowing from British libraries has fallen from 420 million books each year to 250 million. The decline is continuous and relentless; at this rate, the graph hits zero in about 15 years' time. By 2020, British lending libraries will be a thing of the past.

Declining Book Collections

How has this come about? Book sales

have been wonderful. Market research shows that the number of people reading and enjoying books continues to grow and touches all corners of our society. Magazine sales are also strong — reading is increasing in popularity. But in Britain, a country long admired for its educational system and for its magnificent contributions to literature, library book collections have fallen, over the past decade, from 80 million books to 60 million books. Although funding for public libraries keeps rising, the

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