

February 2017

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Recommended Citation

Schmittroth, John (2017) "A Little Publishing History-Publisher-Librarian Discourse & The 150-year-old Reference Source," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 29: Iss. 1, Article 34.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.7733>

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A Little Publishing History — Publisher-Librarian Discourse & The 150-Year-Old Reference Source

by **John Schmittroth** (Business Development Consultant) <johnschmittroth@gmail.com>

One of the coolest experiences I've had in my reference publishing career was involvement in Gale Group's acquisition of the "Ayer newspapers directory" (as we called it) in 1986. This transaction matched a relatively young reference company with one of the oldest continuously published directories in the Western Hemisphere. At the time, Gale had developed into a leading library publisher after its modest beginning as a home business in the 1950s. With a much longer history, the Ayer directory had been published annually since 1869 by (and for) advertising agencies to provide a consolidated national listing of newspapers.



The Ayer directory was Gale's first major corporate acquisition and thus a big event for the company. During the integration process, Gale worked closely with a lively librarian advisory board to better understand the market needs for the product. In a decisive day-long meeting, the librarians substantially changed the proposed publishing plans for Ayer's and defined a course for the decades to come. Following are recaps of Ayer's and Gale publishing histories, and details on the post-acquisition strategy defined by the advisory board.

Ayer's History

"The object of this annual is to assist an advertiser in making a selection of papers that will serve his purpose in territory he desires to cover." — *American Newspaper Annual*, 1880

N.W. Ayer & Sons was a Philadelphia advertising agency that launched the *American Newspaper Annual* in 1880. This competed with the older *Rowell's American Newspaper Directory* that first appeared in 1869, and both titles appeared for a number of years. N.W. Ayer subsequently acquired the Rowell's title and merged the two directory products in 1910. This first combined annual edition listed more than 20,000 news publications in about 1,400 pages and was sold for a price of \$5. (Library of Congress information and links to older Rowell and Ayer editions are at http://www.loc.gov/rr/news/news_research_tools/ayersdirectory.html.)

The Ayer directory was designed as a business tool for advertisers, providing details on title, publisher, format and size, circulation, ad rate, subscriber price, subject specialty (if any), etc. for the listed papers, which appeared geographically. As additional useful information for the advertiser, the directory included brief profiles on the newspapers' local market areas (e.g., 11,000 towns in the 1910 edition), such as population, manufacturing/economic activity, geography, transportation, etc.

One can imagine that this content was extremely useful for advertisers in an American era of rapid westward expansion, economic growth, and related creation of new markets

and customers to reach. Over time, looked at from a somewhat different perspective, the Ayer directory was recognized by the library community as an invaluable information guide since it comprehensively covers authoritative news sources about particular places and subjects, independent of its specific advertising-related details and uses.

N.W. Ayer & Sons continued to publish the directory for most of the 20th century. It began to emphasize the inclusion of periodicals in the 1930s by changing the title to *Ayer Directory of Newspapers and Periodicals* and later settled on the more general term *Ayer Directory of Publications*.

During changes in its business in the 1980s, N.W. Ayer turned over its directory publishing operation to IMS Press, part of a pharmaceutical data company also in the Philadelphia area (as I recall).

Gale Background

Gale originated in the 1950s in the home of automotive marketer Frederick G. Ruffner where work on the first edition of *Encyclopedia of Associations* was begun. This publication found great traction in the library market and in the years to follow Ruffner proceeded along a very successful path of organic development of additional products such as *Research Centers Directory*, *Contemporary Authors*, and numerous other reference publications.

After three decades of assiduously building Gale, Ruffner decided to sell the company. In 1985, Gale was purchased by International Thomson, an international, decentralized collection of specialty publishers. A Thomson strategy was to acquire a leading company in a sector of interest, maintain its brand and operations, and fund additional fold-in acquisitions for the acquired company.

Gale Acquires the Ayer Directory

In 1986, just a year after Thomson acquired Gale, it acquired the Ayer directory from IMS Press to fold into Gale operations. Gale immediately set about creating a strategic publishing plan for the future editions it would publish. At the time, the directory contained nearly 25,000 listings, about evenly split between newspapers and magazines carrying advertising. This was considered to be definitive coverage of newspapers, a first place to look. The coverage of magazines on the other hand was considered selective, especially compared to the leading periodicals directories of the time, which reported many more titles.

Gale developed plans to aggressively grow the numbers of periodicals listed so that over time, the Ayer directory would come to serve as a one-stop source for BOTH newspapers and periodicals. The production of new editions of the work would be carried out by an established

Gale directory publishing team under the veteran leadership of Kay Gill. The team was pumped for the challenge of growing the directory, especially since initial anecdotal market research (e.g., conference conversations) about Ayer's revealed the sentiment that, "yes, more periodicals would be great!"

On the sales and marketing side, Gale's new directory very naturally plugged into the well-established and effective direct mail and telemarketing channels for other Gale products. Once the publishing plan was set, the improved product features could be incorporated into the market messaging for future editions.

Librarian Advisors Speak

To formally vet and finalize its plans for the Ayer directory, Gale convened a day-long advisory board meeting. This involved a small panel of proven advisors from public, academic, and corporate libraries. These librarians were "thought leaders" with whom Gale had ongoing and frank dialogues on various aspects of reference publishing for libraries. Present for Gale at the meeting would be key executives plus operational representatives from various departments including editorial, sales, and marketing, so all could hear the same conversation first hand.

In the meeting, Gale reviewed its plan to greatly increase the periodicals coverage, along with the associated compilation details and milestones. In response, and unanimously, panel members asserted that they use Ayer's for NEWSPAPERS rather than periodicals (except as a last resort). With their experience and the plan details provided, the librarians recognized the plan's trade-off that may not have been apparent in more casual conversations. That is, any efforts to increase periodicals coverage would necessarily come at the expense of further enhancing newspaper coverage (no coverage ever being perfect). The librarians already had periodicals directories in their collections and didn't need this content duplicated inside of Ayer's.

Instead, the advisors reported they would dearly like to see continuous improvement of newspapers coverage. Areas for attention might be small town newspapers, newer towns and suburban papers, ethnic and minority publications, free and alternative publications, etc. When adding magazines, and considering the geographic orientation of Ayer's, a priority could be local sources such as city business journals or regional local history magazines. The types of sources recommended were not necessarily significant advertising carriers of great interest to the ad industry, but they did represent enrichment and diversification of local news and information coverage, better aligning the directory with general library interests. In public libraries, for example, besides having advertising and PR users, the source might be consulted by relocators, genealogy and local

continued on page 68

be rebalanced. Even at the start of **MI-SPI**, there was an implicit understanding that there would be a next iteration of the collaborative collection in the near future.

A small sub-committee drafted a memorandum of understanding, which is available for viewing at the MCLS Website http://www.mcls.org/files/2214/0190/4499/MI-SPI_MOU.pdf. With the addition of new members and accompanying data refresh completed in early 2016, the scope of **MI-SPI**, as defined in the MOU, is broadening. Four additional public university libraries became full participants in 2015/16, **Ferris State, Northern Michigan, Oakland, and University of Michigan-Dearborn** with the understanding that they would be committed to retain materials for the same period of time and under the stipulations of the existing MOU. These new partners needed to submit updated data sets for the group analysis, along with the original partners participating in the 2015 data refresh. Nine libraries participated in this updating process. **Eastern Michigan and Western Michigan** elected not to, an option written into the MOU for the original seven partners, but both institutions are still committed to their original title retention commitments. The refreshed collective collection contains 2,463,620 title holdings, and the rebalanced retention total is smaller than the original set at 433,313.

The refreshed shared collection follows the same retention criteria as the original pilot collection, with an added twist. The retention assignments for **Eastern Michigan and Western Michigan** must be added on as a separate criterion in GreenGlass to incorporate their titles. Current criteria for retention are:

- retain two copies among the nine currently participating libraries if both **Eastern Michigan and Western Michigan** do not already have a commitment to retain it, and the holdings among the nine libraries are more than two.
- retain just one copy among the nine currently participating libraries

when either **Eastern Michigan** or **Western Michigan** already have a commitment to retain it, and the holdings among the nine libraries are more than two.

- retain all copies within the nine library group if the group holdings are fewer than three, U.S. holdings fewer than 50, and **Michigan State** and **University of Michigan** do not have one and **Eastern Michigan** and **Western Michigan** have no retention commitments for this item.

The **MI-SPI** partners are currently discussing these additional issues:

- Disclosing retention assignments in WorldCat.
- Creating a floating shared collection shifting ownership to the partner library that has requested use of another partner's retentions title. Rather than returning the item, it would simply go on the borrowing library's shelf and the retention assignment would shift to that library.
- Clarifying the existing ambiguity for retention of multiple editions. Policies for handling new editions are inconsistent among the partners and this could create retention discrepancies in the future.

Much discussion has and will continue to take place among the group of participants about further development of the Green Glass for Groups (G3) interface. G3 could possibly act as the collective, centralized, cloud resource from which to obtain information about different editions, missing items, weeded items, and physical condition notes at the partner sites. Hopefully, the G3 interface may become more interactive. The opportunity to communicate within the group about reassigning retention commitments, for example, when an item is lost or when replacement costs are excessive, is viewed as an important element in the future of shared collection management.

A lingering question the partners are grappling with is whether the retention books are really on our shelves. And if so, are they in usable condition? The validation project **EAST**

has undertaken is of significant interest to the **MI-SPI** partners. The sample inventory model East is using could be applied to the **MI-SPI** collection. It could supply the answer to the lingering question.

In 2013, academic libraries in Indiana received a grant to undertake a shared print project. That project has moved forward under the auspices of the **Academic Libraries of Indiana (ALI)**. In July 2016, **MI-SPI** representatives met with representatives of **ALI** to brainstorm about future collaboration between the two groups. There is substantial overlap in the goals of the two projects, and both projects used **SCS** to analyze their data and produce retention lists. As the conversation progressed and we learned more about each organization's projects and plans, it became apparent that staffing was a significant difference between the projects. **MI-SPI** operates with a volunteer steering committee and minimal staff time from **MCLS**. **ALI** has staff time dedicated to their initiatives. We agreed to consider our next steps and have a second meeting planned for January 2017.

There are many innovations and challenges ahead for **MI-SPI**. The original, 2012 MOU had two distinct goals — 1) to create and maintain a distributed, shared collection of identified print monographs, to ensure that circulating copies are retained within the group, readily accessible to group participants and other Michigan libraries; 2) to responsibly reduce the size of local print collections by reducing duplication of low-circulating titles among participating libraries so that library space may be freed up for other uses. As of 2016, other goals are being considered — to explore opportunities for collaborative collection development between and among the participants, to expand the collective collection to include other formats such as bound periodicals and microforms, and to pursue possible partnerships with library groups in surrounding states. The group is enthusiastic and motivated about expanding the collective collection and collaborating with other groups to share responsibilities for more resources. The future of the shared collection movement is exciting. 🌱

A Little Publishing History ... from page 66

history researchers, business suppliers, job seekers, freelance writers and illustrators, media researchers, students, etc.

The meeting's detailed and passionate discussion was in general surprising and very informative to the **Gale** team!

New Publishing Strategy Implemented

Gale heeded the advice. The publishing plan was substantially changed to focus on the addition of newspapers and related geographic information sources as a top priority, while more gradually expanding general periodicals listings. **Gale** published its first full edition under the title *Gale Directory of Publications (GDOP)* and included many hundreds of additional newspaper listings as advised, a growth process that would continue cumulatively in subsequent editions.

In following years, additional market feedback including specific customer requests resulted in the further expansion of *GDOP* to include TV and radio stations listed in the same familiar geographic arrangement. While this was not specifically envisioned at the time of the kickoff advisory board meeting, the expansion aligned with the publication's defined mission to focus on local news, information, and advertising sources, rather than attempt to cover the universe of periodical sources.

Today, the 2016 (152nd) edition of *Gale Directory of Publications and Broadcast Media* provides a curated compilation of some 60,000 media listings, and is published in multiple print and electronic formats. 🌱

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