

# **The Digital Reference Collection in Academic Libraries**

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## **Abstract**

Reference services and reference collections in academic libraries are going through significant changes. In this paper, some of the issues prevalent today in building and maintaining digital reference collections will be discussed, such as: presentation and organization, marketing, use, and selection of digital reference resources.

## **Closing the books**

In March 2012, a few days before the Illinois Association of College and Research Libraries (IACRL) took place the news about *Encyclopedia Britannica* stopping the print edition was announced by major academic and popular media outlets. Joab Jackson (2012) from *ComputerWorld* was one of many to report how the world-renown *Encyclopedia Britannica*, after 244 years, would change their publication to only and entirely digital. An online edition had been published parallel to the print edition for some time, but the market forces and users' adaptation to digital formats were decisive for the encyclopedia, first published in one volume in 1768 (twenty-one years before the beginning of the French Revolution).

Although this move was not a surprise, academic publishers are rapidly converting their traditional reference paper collections into digital products and creating new ones.

## **What is happening with reference collections in academic libraries?**

In this section, some of prevailing issues concerning to the reference services and reference collections in academic libraries are summarized:

- A. The diminishing presence of paper Reference collections;
- B. The archiving of back runs and older reference editions of paper volumes;
- C. Current practices in academic libraries for digital reference collections;
- D. The kind of digital reference resources being acquired;
- E. Management of the selection of digital reference resources: who is making the final decisions for purchasing?
- F. The managing of subscriptions or one-time purchases for permanent access;
- G. The presentation and organization of digital reference resources for easy access to patrons (subject LibGuides, portals, Reference collection pages, online catalog, discovery tools);
- H. Usage studies done to determine if patrons are finding the digital reference sources they need;
- I. The marketing of the digital reference collection;
- J. How relevant is the use of digital reference resources for students' research?

## **Results of a survey**

The Engineering Libraries Division (ELD) of the American Society for Engineering Education (ASEE) ran a very active listserv with open subscription with over 600 members, ELDnet-L. In the fall of 2011 a survey posted by Aleteia Greenwood (2011), Head Librarian, Science & Engineering, University of

British Columbia about print reference collections brought interesting results. The following are the edited comments received:

Last year our library downsized its entire collection by about 45% or so to make room for a nice redevelopment. Our reference area was filled with printed works, mostly older and many online. Also many old abstracts & indexes, many of which were also online.

We are trying to dismantle our Reference Collection. We have weeded extensively.

Neither our info desk staff nor the customers are using the overwhelming majority of the printed material. Many of the major reference works are available online.

Not completely, but we have whittled it down by about 70% over the years.

We did not completely eliminate our Reference collection but we did downsize it considerably.

As you mentioned many of the reference books are now available as eBooks. Concerning our library, we did move most of our collection into the stacks.

For about the last year (maybe more), we've typically been adding books to the regular stacks that in the past we would have put in reference due to either their nature.

Our main library on campus made most of the reference collection part of the circulating collection as part of a remodeling project a couple of years ago.

We scaled our ref collection back considerably two or three years ago, and will probably scale it back again.

Yes, we radically downsized our reference collection a couple of years ago.

Although the results of this survey are limited to the use of science and engineering paper reference titles, they show a strong indication of how the print reference collections in academic libraries are changing. Nevertheless, a topic not covered in this paper is the issue of making the reference collection, print and digital, more usable for academic programs.

### **The UK Benchmarking survey of research support**

More evidence of change was identified by fellows at Loughborough University Library in UK. Lund, P., Young, H. (2007) in their report from surveying research support at UK libraries made the following statement in chapter 3.4, Electronic Reference: "In recent years publishers have recognized electronic reference, like all eBooks, to be a growth area with competing products, such as Oxford Reference Online and Gale Virtual Reference products becoming available. E-reference is increasingly being seen as a means to replace the traditional, space-intensive, printed reference collection within the library building. Libraries are also seeking to counter student reliance on the easy access to non-peer-reviewed websites, such as Wikipedia."

### **Seminal articles about digital reference collections**

In this section some seminal papers discussing issues related to the digital reference collections are summarized.

Polanka, S. (2008), in her column Is print reference dead?, made these comments: "Many libraries are seeing a decrease in print reference usage, including Wright State University. Of the 14,000 volumes in our collection, only 30 percent have been used, and the volumes purchased in the last five years account for only 6 percent of the collection usage. With the demand for an information commons, 24/7 access, and distance learning, we began investing in e-reference titles

The reality is, print reference is dead, nearly dead, or never existed for many of our users, yet we still have patrons who need and prefer print."

The Digital Difference in Reference Collections. Michael K. Buckland (2007) from the School of Information, University of California in an article about the digital reference collection noted: "One of the very first digital library developments was the transition of bibliographies and other reference works to digital formats and the rise of online services which allowed new kinds of remote searching. But, somehow, the reference collection as a library service has not transferred effectively into the digital library environment. How might we re-design the functionality of the reference collection in digital environment? We approach that question through an examination of four reference genres: 1. Subject bibliographies, for which topic vocabularies and cross-references are important; 2. Gazetteers, which, when coupled with maps and bibliographies, allow new ways to search by place; 3. Chronologies, which when digitized and combined with time lines and named time periods, transform search by time; and 4. Biographical directories, which, with improved design, could link persons with their contexts in new and more effective ways." This paper presents work of a project entitled: Support for the Learner: What, Where, When, and Who?

Ramaswamy, M., Baillargeon, T., and Simser, C. N. (2008) in discussing their experience about making the digital reference collection more visible, commented how their e-book reference collection includes "encyclopedias, directories, dictionaries, and so on. Vendors such as netLibrary, Dekker, Gale, and ABC-Clio offer electronic reference books as part of electronic book packages." They continue: " K-State Libraries' e-Reference resources were going largely undiscovered because the titles were listed individually in the Libraries' Online Public Access Catalog (OPAC) but were not visible on a shelf in the reference collection like their traditional print counterparts." Further they said: "Although e-Reference titles could be found by searching the library's catalog, only skilled searchers had the ability to discover them and there was no easy method for browsing the Libraries' e-Reference collection. Once the codes were developed, a decision needed to be made about where to place them in the MARC record." These codes were then used to create dynamic queries, popularly known as canned searches.

Preserving serendipity was a major concern in a paper by Ford, L., O'Hara, L. H. and Whiklo, J. (2009). They argued that "the reference collection traditionally rewards serendipity by presenting key resources in a compact group. Our patrons can't browse electronic reference materials across various online platforms, and they miss out on potential serendipitous discoveries." They continue by saying: "Our central question was whether libraries can preserve the browsability of the print reference collection in an electronic reference collection." In their project, they looked at: "Whether the library had an e-reference collection. Whether it was accessed through a subject portal. The number of clicks from the homepage the e-reference collection is found. What the collection is called. Whether it was dynamically generated. Whether it included links to electronic books paid for by the library (not just free resources). Whether there were any "Web 2.0" features such as tagging, browsing, or book covers."

To give more relevance to the importance of easy access to reference resources, remember that Nielsen and Loranger (2006) had said that people (users) generally spend less than 30 seconds looking for something on a Web site, and only about 10% of users will spend about 5 minutes looking for an answer.

Angela Boyd (2011), Psychology & Web Services Librarian, from the University of California, Santa Barbara Library, in her widely posted web presentation about the advantages of having a digital reference collection said: "Don't have to worry about volumes being currently used or misplaced; Don't need to know specific titles. Keywords can find titles for you; Librarians create online reference shelf suggesting best titles for specific subjects."

### **The presentation of the digital reference collection**

Based on the research done on this issue, one solution to discovering digital reference resources by library users is by creating a 'Digital Reference Shelf'. While there are several software options available, some

like LibGuide are very easy to use; librarians with little training can develop their own shelves. A recommended procedure would be to have a group selecting the most important titles; an example of this type of presentation is the one at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Library Ereference page; and the one on the Central Michigan University Virtual Reference Collection page. See Appendix 1.

## Conclusions

Academic libraries are looking for ways to increase visibility for the hundreds of reference titles now available to their users only online. The literature and surveys done indicates that the paper reference collections are becoming less relevant. If Polanka's words "the reality is, print reference is dead, nearly dead, or never existed for many of our users" are correct, then academic libraries are at a point when they have to re-evaluate traditional ways for making reference collections accessible. There is a need for re-inventing the marketing for campus users and creating effective outreach programs with the teaching faculty.

## References

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## Appendix 1. Presentation of Digital Reference Collections

# Two examples University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Library Ereference

Home Services Get Help About Us

search library site Search

**UNIVERSITY LIBRARY**  
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

Ask A Librarian Contact Us My Library Account

Library > Ereference

SUBJECTS FORMATS FOR LIBRARIANS

**SEARCH FOR RESEARCH RESOURCES**

enter search terms Full-text Go

Find articles in encyclopedias, dictionaries, and reference books by keyword or heading.

**STARTING POINTS:**

These resources simultaneously search several reference sources (encyclopedias, dictionaries, and more), providing quick access to reliable facts.

ABC-CLIO Ebook Collection  
Credo Reference  
Gale Virtual Reference Library  
Oxford Digital Reference (Shelf List)

**RESOURCES BY SUBJECT**

A-Z List	History
General Reference	Literature
Art	Medicine and Health
Article Indexes and Abstracts	Music
Biography	Political Science
Biology	Popular Culture
Business	Psychology
Country Information	Religion
Education	Science
Environmental Studies	Social Sciences
Film	Women and Gender Studies
Government	

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# Central Michigan University Virtual Reference Collection

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## Virtual Reference Collection

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 Indicates that an online search guide is available.

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- Associations & Organizations ▶
- Audio/Video ▶
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- Book Recommendations ▶
- Book Reviews ▶
- Used Booksellers ▶
- Business & Economics ▶
- Chemistry ▶
- Citation Tools ▶
- Colleges & Universities ▶
- Company / Industry Information ▶
- Dictionaries & Thesauri ▶
- Dissertations ▶
- Diversity ▶
- Education ▶
- Electronic Book Collections ▶
- Electronic Journal Collections ▶
- Encyclopedias ▶
- Engineering ▶
- Foreign Languages ▶
- Genealogy ▶
- Government Publications ▶
- Grant Information ▶
- Health Sciences ▶
- History ▶
- Laws & Regulations ▶
- Libraries ▶
- Literature ▶
- Maps ▶
- Music ▶
- News ▶
- Philosophy ▶
- Photographs & Images ▶
- Quotations ▶
- Science ▶
- Social Sciences ▶
- Statistics & Data ▶
- Style Guides ▶
- Tax Information ▶
- Telephone Directories ▶
- Test Preparation ▶
- Test Reviews ▶
- Virtual Libraries ▶
- Zip Codes ▶

### Research Tools

- ▶ StartingPoint
- ▶ Research Guides
- ▶ Centra - Libraries' Catalog
- ▶ Find Articles & Databases
- ▶ Citation Linker
- ▶ Virtual Reference Collection
- ▶ CONDOR - Online Repository

### Services

- ▶ Ask A Librarian
- ▶ My Account / Renew Books
- ▶ Documents on Demand
- ▶ Book A Room
- ▶ Course Reserves

### Library Instruction

- ▶ Library Tutorials
- ▶ How Do I...?

### Events and Exhibits

- ▶ Calendar Of Events
- ▶ Library Exhibitions

### Other

- ▶ Library Student Employment
- ▶ Libraries' Newsletter
- ▶ Subject Librarians
- ▶ Suggestion Box
- ▶ Support the Libraries