Is Print Reference Dead?

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Is print reference dead? To some—Generation Y, drive-through patrons, and distance learners—it is. To others—historians, archivists, and librarians—it's not. 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. In surveys of 145 librarians at the 2007 ALA Annual Conference and several follow-up presentations, 58 percent said print reference was dead or on its way out, while 33 percent said it's still kicking.

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. WSU purchased around 300 titles from the Gale Virtual Reference Library (GVRL), generally multivolume subject encyclopedias to support our English composition curriculum. Usage of these titles in 22 months was an astounding 67 percent.

Why isn't our print reference collection getting used? Partly because it's invisible! There are several factors that explain the invisibility predicament. First, the Y factor. For Generation Y, born with a laptop, cell phone, and iPod in their hands, print reference books are not part of the research process and probably never will be. Second, our MLS programs are not teaching as much print reference as they used to. Third, our collections are too large for us to learn, much less access, and they are largely hidden from our online catalogs, where they appear only at the title level. The catalog provides no glimpse into the table of contents, index, or entry headings. I did a search for hunger in the WSU catalog and retrieved more than 547 items. Limit that search to reference items only, and the result is a dismal 5 items, surely not representative of what the collection actually contains.

How can we mine the rich contents of our reference collections? Paratext's Reference Universe, an index of both print and electronic reference titles, searches tables of contents, indexes, and article headings, functioning as a central access point to titles in our collections. Persistent links in Reference Universe to the catalog for call numbers and to a variety of vendor e-book interfaces provide significantly better access to our titles than the catalog alone. My hunger search in Reference Universe retrieved more than 600 results from print and electronic reference titles in our collection, revealing an amazing variety in coverage. Clearly, this is one way to better use and understand our existing collections. And e-reference interfaces, which allow us to search by keyword, article titles, photos, date, and many other parameters, may lead to greater use of the traditional print reference titles.

Though the right mix of print and digital reference will vary from library to library, now is the time to move toward e-reference. Librarians, stop buying so much print, and when you do, put it in the circulating collection for more exposure and use. What's holding you back? One barrier to e-reference is price. Many of you have told me that though you would love to have e-reference titles rather than print, they are too expensive. Depending on a library's population or student FTE, you could be paying double the price. For example, at WSU, we recently paid $398 for the electronic version of a title that costs us $200 in print. But the cost per use of the electronic title is much less, and as e-book technology becomes more mainstream, prices should go down. Until then, consolidate reference purchasing, buy through a consortium, negotiate prices, buy in bulk, and purchase to own, not lease.

Access is another barrier to the purchase of e-reference. Currently there are two ways to access our electronic books—the catalog and the vendor interface. I've already discussed how ineffective the catalog is in retrieving content inside our titles. Unfortunately, this leaves the user with searching the vendor interfaces—all of them, individually. This is cumbersome and ineffective. It's time for publishers to start playing together in the same "searchbox." Wouldn't it be nice if all print and electronic books could be searched in one interface? GVRL is one of the leaders in aggregating electronic reference books, but in our ideal library world, GVRL would also search print titles the way Reference Universe does, and Reference Universe would offer the extensive search and download features of the vendor interfaces.

So, is print reference dead? Not quite, but the use of print sources is declining, content is invisible, many users prefer to search electronically, and many libraries are being asked to consolidate their print collections for other needs like computers, coffee shops, and group areas. So get ready, start embracing e-reference, and watch your usage go through the roof.

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