The Challenges of New Editions

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The Challenge of New Editions

For years, reference publishers have provided new editions of print sources. In an electronic environment, some of the updating processes and access issues are presenting a new array of challenges. I'll discuss several of these challenges below, drawing on information gathered through an informal March 2011 survey of reference publishers and aggregators, including ABC-CLIO, EBSCO, Gale/Cengage Learning, M. E. Sharpe, Oxford University Press (OUP), Sage Reference, and Salem Press.

CONTINUOUSLY UPDATED DATABASES

With online reference publishing transitioning to a model of continuous updating, new editions may become a thing of the past. Gale's Grzimek's Animal Life and ABC-CLIO's Pop Culture Universe, for example, are designed to be "living encyclopedias," where updating is ongoing. A slightly different example is Sharpe Online Reference, which contains content that is updated annually. Unfortunately, if content is not archived, the historic value of reference materials is lost. For publishers, archiving content that is continuously updated is a difficult, costly, and time-consuming task. But the continuous-updating model also offers many benefits. Damon Zucca, editorial director in OUP's scholarly reference department, says, "One important outcome of this sort of transition is that article content will be regularly assessed by editorial advisors and updated by authors on an ongoing basis. We know there are archive questions, and we will address this issue responsibly, but our primary concern in reference is to ensure that OUP content is 100 percent reliable and always up-to-date." As the market moves to continuously updated reference databases, it will be important for librarians to stress the value of archiving previous articles, images, and other pieces of online content to preserve historical and cultural perspectives. For publishers, the challenge is finding a cost-effective way to provide this service without jeopardizing the reliability of their content.

NEW EDITIONS

For content that is not in continuously updated databases, publishers still provide new editions when warranted. In fact, most reference publishers currently produce new editions of popular titles and make them available in both electronic and print formats. Processing these new editions in traditional print form has been pretty cut-and-dried for libraries—current edition in reference and older ones in circulation, storage, or possibly discarded. But as reference volumes transitioned to an e-book counterpart, that process has become complex. The new edition is purchased and accessible on the vendor platform, but in some cases (three out of the seven publishers and aggregators surveyed), the older edition is removed from the platform and may not be accessible once removed. This raises many questions. For example, once an electronic reference title is removed, where does it go? Do libraries receive an archival copy of the title, and, if so, in what format? What are libraries doing with these archived copies of older reference books? The answer is not as simple as moving the title to the circulating or storage areas. It now requires server space or a dedicated computer in the library to store the electronic files and some way to access the material, such as new links added to the catalog or even a separate user interface. These options are not practical for libraries. Where it is important to access previous editions, retaining them within a reference platform is more convenient.

ACCESS TO MULTIPLE EDITIONS

Luckily, several publishers and aggregators keep older editions on their platforms. ABC-CLIO, EBSCO, Gale, and Sage are examples. Then the question becomes, How is the previous edition handled in a keyword search? It would seem logical that the older edition would be less relevant in a search, allowing the newer edition to appear higher in the search results. But if publication date is not a factor in the search algorithm, then older-edition content should be located first, a challenge if currency is paramount. One possible solution to this predicament is to link reference articles to one another, leading the user to the most up-to-date content and demonstrating the development of a topic over time through links to previous editions. Sage Reference Online has adopted this functionality. According to Rolf Janke, vice president and publisher, "content is available, but it's never come up," while others stated that "the most up-to-date content and demonstrating the development of a topic over time through links to previous editions. Sage Reference Online has adopted this functionality. According to Rolf Janke, vice president and publisher, in the search results, entries from the new edition appear first, but previous-edition material is linked with an explanatory note. Gale has planned this enhancement for a future release of Gale Virtual Reference Library.

WEEDING

Of course, libraries may not want previous editions and would prefer the option to weed these titles. This option is available from the reference publishers who retain older editions on their platforms, but it is met with mixed response from the library community. Some publishers stated that "in theory, the option is available, but it's never come up," while others stated that "the majority of our customers do weed their collection as they do with print." It seems to me that the question of "to weed, or not to weed?" is still valid when it comes to online reference. Although shelf space, one of the major reasons that libraries weed, is irrelevant, currency and accuracy are important factors in reference, and some may choose to weed their e-reference collections to guarantee that timely information is available.

Online reference materials serve a valuable purpose for librarians and users, but this format has its challenges when it comes to new editions. It will be important for librarians and publishers to work together to ensure the best access to content.

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