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My case study of tradition, the future, and the Guide to Reference Books is informed by three anecdotes and an image.

I went to talk to one of my colleagues not long ago to ask whether she had thought of buying an archival set I had seen in a publisher's catalog. We wondered what works were reproduced in the set, so we decided to look at the publisher's website. I anticipated our getting there from a ready reference page I compiled a few years ago with a link to Acqweb at Vanberbilt, then link through a couple layers of alphabetical lists to the website and do the search. She, a graduate of the same now defunct library school as I and pretty much of an age with me, simply typed the title of the set into Google, and we found the catalog entry in that one step.

The second is a recent article in my local paper about Vivisimo and Grokker, software products that categorize the information sources returned by a Web search. The reporter paraphrases the cofounder of Vivisimo as saying: "If the Internet is a giant bookstore in which all the books are piled randomly on the floor, then Vivisimo is like a superfast librarian who can instantly arrange the titles on shelves in a way that makes sense."

The third is an anecdote told by a high school librarian: A student approaches his librarian and asks her for information on obsessive-compulsive disorder. She leads him to the Encyclopedia of Psychology and a relevant monograph. As recorded, the anecdote does not describe the look on the boy’s face or the tone of his voice, but it is evident that an adversative conjunction implicitly begins his reply, “This is a book; I need information for a report.”

And, finally, Gale's recent ad in which a modish, grinning guy is sitting at his laptop, talking on his cell phone, left leg informally cocked on his chair, and apparently at home, for in the hazy background out the sunlit patio door sits a woman in a lounge chair. The headline is "Taking reference off the shelf"--how different the sunlit home from the cavernous reference room, how much more convenient the home for the intimacy implicit in the image of the grinningly be-referenced guy, an intimacy that all of us who work with students know is not so hazily playing in the minds of our users as they more or less elaborately camouflage their search for social interaction with studious behaviors in our reading rooms.

Reference librarians occupy a mythic place in the popular mind for working on both sides of Dr Johnson's, or for that matter Desk Set's, knowledge divide for they both know things and they know how to find them. Yes, we create welcoming environments; yes, we help people form reading tastes and thus their experience of the world, but it is finding things, those proverbial needles in that proverbial haystack of information, for which we are most praised. We perform these miracles, of course, by knowing a collection and how to scan pages, being able to manipulate the catalog and the classification and shelving schemes of the place where we work, and having good memories. We know the structure
of sources and the relationships among them, and by experience, intuition, imagination, perseverance, and often the sheer magic of the lucky chance, we not only find the right haystack but the needle in it.

The reference collection has always been a mystery to all but us. We have known for a long time that people have to be taught, perhaps forced, to use it, that reference sources are hard to identify in the catalog, that using reference sources seems, to students anyway, to interpose yet another step between receiving an assignment and asking for an extension of the deadline, and that questioners do not know how to state their information need in terms of the information packages in the collection. To most people, after all, knowledge is not ordered; it is circumstantial and segmented; it is arrayed, not arranged; and, if it is ordered or arranged, that order remains opaque and intimidating, not something to be learned but something to be gotten around.

How things have changed. What used to be readily distinguishable haystacks, shelved for us librarians according to the classification scheme, are now one. We call it the universe of information, and that universe is one universe, the Web is its god, and Google is his prophet and diviner. The fondest dream of library users, of being able to walk in the door and effortlessly find anything, has been realized. There is no package now, no ordered library, nothing not to know— the keyword search, abetted by a relevance algorithm and blue links, has dispatched the mystery of the collection—rabbits always come out of the hat. It's as though all the books are indeed piled at the front door, and flipping through a couple you always find what you need, always get lucky enough even in cases where you cannot spell well. Stay at home networking your girl and your laptop, get your info from the librarianly algorithm ordering everything for you because every bit of info that once had to be mined through the hierarchy of sources is right there now on the surface of the search.

Let's go back in time, though, to another age, to 1902 and the publication in that happy year, by the Drexel Institute’s Alice Bertha Kroeger, of *Guide to the Study and Use of Reference Books: A Manual for Librarians, Teachers and Students*. In addition to her topically arranged annotated bibliography of reference titles and a bibliography of books and articles on reference librarianship, Kroeger offers, in her 104 pages, general and chapter introductions that discuss the importance of a reference collection, the nature of reference service in various kinds of libraries, methods for studying reference publications, and the history and characteristics of classes of reference works. Kroeger’s slender book thus codifies the principles of education for reference librarianship and its province of expertise; her *Guide* marks a professional practice and its proper space.

In its time and its several aspects—hortatory tract, textbook, vademecum, bibliography, and canon—the Guide has become a cornerstone of the literature of US librarianship. It has been used throughout North America and been sold internationally as the "source of first resort" for ferreting out answer to users' questions, training reference staff in the repertory of publications with which they should be familiar, inventorying and developing reference collections, enabling interlibrary loan staff to find sources to verify requests, providing a starting point for local instructional materials, bibliographies, and research projects, and serving as a gateway to the wider repertory of the reference literature. Librarians value it because it is at once comprehensive and selective, because it is arranged hierarchically in categories useful to them, and because it is designed to be scanned quickly.

The Guide is thus encrusted with strong and ancient traditions. It has always been directed to a specialized professional audience in research-oriented environments, and it has been vitally important to, and is designed for, the practice of librarianship in a print culture. As the profession of librarianship subdivided and specialized in the 20th Century and as the library education and reference literatures proliferated, the Guide's metabibliographic function expanded and its direct pedagogical function diminished.

In the present, then—when the training of librarians is undergoing substantial adjustment, when we are witnessing manifold changes to lower and higher education and the beginnings of online reference service, changes in publishing markets, and challenges to financial and production models for publications of all sorts—in an environment where the ontology of information is perceived by many to be changing, along with its modes of construction, assemblage, storage, discovery, and delivery—time tested notions of authority, collection, method, and educational interaction are all in question. What happens to the very traditional Guide in the world of Google and modish guys? As the dinosaurs of print stagger off to the last watering hole of remote storage and a brave new band of fiber optic and silicon mammals take their place as lords of the planet, am I editing what will become the Maginot Line of librarianship?

In many ways tradition holds sway while adapting, as tradition does, to the opportunities of the new environment. We who are working on the Guide are, for the most part, retaining the organization and taxonomy developed in previous editions, while modifying sections to conform to our understanding of developments in publishing and academic disciplines. On these criteria, we will be adding a new section for such interdisciplinary literatures as those of cultural studies, gender studies, and cognitive science. We will enter websites, acknowledging the difficulties of so doing, and the title of the Guide will substitute the more capacious “sources” for “books.”

The obligation to incorporate the Web into the Guide invites a widely ramifying re-engagement with the traditional question, “What is a reference work?” Given its chronological limitations, the 11th ed. includes electronic sources but only in so far as they are e-formats of printed publications. We have discussed at length and come to potentially controversial decisions about such questions as where or whether to enter search engines and whether an archive of journals like JSTOR or a transient body of full-
text periodicals like Lexis/Nexis is a reference work. We have had to think about how to handle online library catalogs, whether to include Worldcat and RLIN in the bibliography section, and how to handle sources, mostly journal indexes, that have multiple vendors and interface manifestations.

With this edition we are taking advantage of networked computing in the processes of compilation and editing. Previous editions, though increasingly decentralized as to their contributors, remained highly centralized editorially. Bob Balay and his colleagues took copy in many forms from contributors, then found or created bib records, determined cross references, put annotations into a database, shaped sections, etc. For this edition, we have created a database into which contributors download MARC records from an authoritative source; the database interface then provides a work space for creating the annotations, section notes, and cross references, and a function for assigning records within sections. Since we rely on unedited MARC records, the new edition uses LC subject headings, in addition to its own table of contents hierarchy, for its topical structure. As eventually published, keyword searching will further mitigate the need for the index the printed editions necessarily had.

I expect that the published Guide will be searchable in the usual ways that annotated bibliographic databases are searchable. However, the Guide seems to me to fracture in the e-world, as a database of records lending itself well but as a guide with strong textual elements less so to the ways of that world. Design precedents exist for a clickable hierarchy of contents and such a hierarchy is useful for learning the territory of a subject; I remain concerned nonetheless that a bibliographic database, even one that is selective and overlaid with a table of contents, is still not fully a guide. I worry about how to present introductory material so that it is legible on screen and about how to relate headnotes to the database so that browse displays of search results benefit from the narrative offered in headnote commentary.

Beyond these, new ways of doing things afford us several possibilities:

- linking to local catalogs for collection analysis
- making it easy to extract records for local uses
- finding business relationships with publishers to link Guide annotations to other databases
- including the Guide as a constituent, along with Sweetland's Basic Reference Sources, or Kennedy's Reference Sources for Small and Medium Sized Libraries, of a website searchable to produce layered results for different kinds of libraries and levels of questions from a site.
- perhaps create an interactive space for those using the Guide
- And, most of all, returning the Guide to its onetime future as a highly self-conscious teaching tool. Since it is a hierarchically arranged annotated bibliography, the Guide teaches about sources and some of their relationships; and it teaches about disciplines in terms of their content, vocabularies, and structure. In addition to our emphasis on headnote discussion and compare-and-contrast annotations, we could further increase the Guide's pedagogical value by
- linking to reviews or to the tables of contents, front matter, and sample text pages of the sources entered
- enhancing online browsability with such graphic means as tables, charts, and timelines displaying the features of similar or chronologically successive sources
- linking to extant or newly commissioned surveys of the practice and publishing history of the reference literature of a field
- linking to essays on the state of scholarship in a field in order to help reference librarians remain current
- and either partnering with one of the two publishers of reference service textbooks or in some other way building an online teaching infrastructure around the Guide.

The Guide, then, has considerable potential for adapting to life in the age of the Web, for it is a meta-site, is now and has always been a portal. I do not have time to engage the debate about whether in the Age of the Web the reference librarian will become an extinct species as our students travel to Digitopia in their Googlemobile with Vivisimo at their side. But let me say this: the well-documented reluctance of college students to approach a reference librarian may well be exacerbated by the apparent know-thing ease and self-service anonymity of the information universe. But I would agree with those who maintain that reference librarianship can continue to occupy a central place in this decentralized, at-home world of the Web because I can imagine still the need for a professional group for whom information is arranged and interpreted as opposed to merely arrayed. Especially in educational environments, people will continue to seek advice from an “expert,” not a magician of needles and haystacks, someone who can help them follow the map of possible sources. Such a meta-source as the Guide, therefore, should still find a market; it may indeed be especially useful in our sunny digital world because it will direct attention to sources that may never achieve the Web.