Short Paper #1 – Ready Reference

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While many of the challenges facing librarians and information professionals in the early 21st century are well-known, some have been introduced somewhat recently. One such challenge arose due to the impact of the availability of online resources on the selection of reference sources. While there generally is more familiarity with traditional print reference sources, online resources carry with them several intrinsic benefits, a few of which are robust searching and indexing options, access from remote locations during off-hours, and a more interactive environment where users' preferences are made more actionable – for instance, a user may select precisely which fields of information he or she desires, sort the data in the way that best suits their needs, and output it in a variety of ways.

These benefits come at a price, however, and one which is not exclusively monetary. Questions about ownership vs. access persist as library institutions have typically been accustomed to buying books or microforms, objects that may be held in the hand and stored in perpetuity. In the online realm, this is not always the case; often, libraries retain access to their online content only for as long as they pay their licensing fees. Additionally, there is ever the relevant question of "What happens to a reference desk that relies upon online resources in the event of a power outage?" These questions must be answered by reference librarians across the world, carefully weighing the costs versus the benefits of electronic resources. In this paper, I will evaluate a series of both print and electronic resources with some of these issues in mind, reviewing in turn three print resources, two electronic resources, and finishing with a comparison of two popular print and electronic thesauri and a more general overview of the "print vs. electronic" question. A final note: all resources are described rather fully in the annotated

bibliography which follows the body of this paper, and thus I attempt to restrict my comments to evaluative ones.

Bartlett's Familiar Quotations is a resource that may be valuable to a fairly wide audience, ranging from curious schoolchildren looking for a pithy quote to round out a book report, to history scholars analyzing the quotes of a particular period on a subject. This is enabled primarily by the choice of arrangement; quotations are arranged chronologically by the birthdates of their authors, making temporal comparisons quite simple. Furthermore, an extensive keyword index is included providing contexts for all chosen keywords. This KWIC tool is quite a powerful one indeed and, while not entirely intuitive to folks who may be unfamiliar with such a tool, is organized well enough for such users. Unfortunately the contexts for the keywords are unpredictable in length, leading to some possible guesswork by users seeking to answer the question of "What quotation is such-and-such a line in?" The scope of the resource is fairly broad, though at times it seems a bit too "Western" in its coverage. Overall, I would rate *Bartlett's* a worthy addition to nearly any reference collection given its potentially wide appeal, powerful search features, and simplicity of usage.

Perhaps a more scholarly reference source is the *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, which is loaded with statistics and summaries thereof on the organization of the United States, making it particularly well-suited to provide data for high school and college essays among other uses. The coverage is rather broad, which could draw a number of different users to the resource, ranging from population data to environmental information, election numbers to details on the federal budget. While the seemingly arbitrary organization of the source leaves something to be desired, it does have a more or

less complete subject index with a number of cross-references. Quite confusingly, the index refers not to page numbers but table numbers, which I imagine might disorient users not accustomed to this sort of organization. What the *Abstract* lacks in intuitive organization, it makes up for in authority; sources for the statistical data, some of which are unpublished, are cited regularly. As far as geographic coverage, some international information is included, but this source is primarily for data on the United States as the title would indicate.

Users seeking information on occupational growth trends may find a source that fits their needs perfectly in the *Occupational Outlook Handbook*. The *Handbook* provides data on job growth for many sectors in the United States, peering into the scientific equivalent of a crystal ball to make projections about these shifting trends years into the future. Of particular value are a couple of the special features included within, such as the Tomorrow's Jobs section which highlights "projections of the labor force and occupational and industry employment that can help guide [users'] career plans" (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2004). Such projections may be of great value to users as the source is an authoritative one, the Department of Labor, and the methodologies used to make the projections are explained for those who are either skeptical or interested. The body of the volume is organized arbitrarily by job "categories," though this is ameliorated some by the alphabetical index of occupations at the back of the book. Another attractive feature of the *Handbook* is the inclusion of a plethora of useful charts and photographs depicting various work environments.

In its publisher's own words, *Gale Ready Reference Shelf / Encyclopedia of Associations* "provides integrated access to 355,000 entries culled from the databases of

fourteen of Gale's most popular reference directories," indicating that it is quite a voluminous source indeed. With access to this amount of data, intuitive search and browse interfaces are thus even more necessary. For relatively simple searches, they provide just that, as described in my annotation. However, the advanced search is rather cumbersome, requiring the user to be well-versed in a proprietary query language. For what it's worth, there are easily discoverable help pages describing how to use the query language, but I wonder if it wouldn't be easier to provide an "advanced search page" like so many other websites do, whereby one can search all fields and records with a variable number of input boxes and drop-down options. Additionally, while several search interfaces are presented to users, there is no interface for browsing and thus one of the advantages of seeking materials in the print environment is absent – the ability to locate similar materials due to a collocated environment, which has a digital analog, so to speak, in web-based browse interfaces.

One does not find similar failings in *Books in Print with Review*, which perhaps is even more useful – i.e. answers potentially more types of questions – than the *Ready Reference Shelf*, providing a wealth of bibliographic information about books, audio, and video that are in print, out of print, and forthcoming. *Books in Print with Review* provides a simple search, the defaults of which needn't be changed for the most simplistic searches. For users with deeper, more complex information needs, there is a small number of checkboxes and a drop-down box for selection of a search field. Additionally, there are two high-level browse interfaces, one allowing users to browse by subject categories, and the other allowing browse access to indexes of authors, publishers, series, titles, and more. An interesting inclusion is an index of materials by award name and

year, so users may view all Pulitzer Prize winners, for instance. Searches may be saved for later perusal, in case a user decides that he or she may have found a list of sources fitting their needs, but wishes to continue searching using other terms and options. The combination of configurable, powerful search features and numerous browseable indexes makes *Books in Print with Review* a fantastic resource for a wide variety of users.

The questions asked of both *Roget's International Thesaurus*, a traditional print reference work, and *Thesaurus.Com*, a similar online source, are likely the same: "What does X mean?" and "What's another word for Y?" being perhaps the most common. The contrasts, then, are largely found in how each source answers these questions. The layout of *Thesaurus.Com* is about as simple as is imaginable; there is a single input box , a radio button for selection of thesaurus or dictionary look-up, and a submit button. A user types in a word, decides whether thesaurus or dictionary entries are desired, and clicks "Search." As far as ease of use is concerned, there could scarcely be a simpler alternative. Usage of *Roget's* is slightly more involved, depending on the information needs of the user. I suppose most users would go directly to the thesaurus's keyword index, which has a heavily cross-referenced, alphabetical list of all the terms which are included. Other users who have a more linguistic or philological bent would likely begin by taking in the elegance of the organization of concepts into categories and classes, which is a tremendous aid in terms of collocating like terms. This is perhaps the most attractive feature of the print thesaurus, though I fear its significance and beauty may be lost on many users. *Thesaurus.Com* has more commonly appreciated special features such as sound representations for many of the words included, so users are able to determine proper pronunciations of terms as well as look up synonyms and antonyms. As

previously mentioned, the online resource also has what I like to call a "metadictionary" function, which grabs definitions of a term from several different dictionary sources, providing the user with a number of different definitions, some etymological information, and a bunch of common idioms in which the term is used. Overall, the online resource may be more useful to a wider audience, but I feel the true value of the print resource is in its elegant organization which most users would probably not appreciate. The two resources therefore would make an awfully nice complementary pair in a reference collection.

Generally speaking, I tend to prefer electronic resources for a number of reasons. Though there may be exceptions to this point, electronic resources tend to be more current than print resources, often receiving numerous updates a year: a scheme which is at times improbable for print resources given the prices of paper and distribution. Electronic resources also allow for a more dynamic, integrative user experience due to the ability to tie together content of different types. To put it plainly, one can embed video and audio in electronic resources, whereas they are separate entities entirely in the print realm. Such capabilities make electronic resources infinitely useful in learning environments, especially those which follow principles of constructivist pedagogy. Additionally, electronic resources are more interactive and user-aware. Print sources that contain a great deal of data need to make decisions about the sorting and presentation of its information. With electronic resources and the inherent functions of databases, users can select themselves how they want their data sorted and what segments of it they will use or filter out. That said, print resources have benefits as well, primarily those of a generally lower cost and a simpler ownership solution, not to mention the sometimes

magical experience bibliophiles have when first opening a book and thumbing through its

pages. A reference collection ought to strive for balance between print and electronic

resources for reasons such as these.

Annotated Bibliography

Books in Print with Reviews. (2004). New Providence, NJ: R.R. Bowker. [Available: http://www.booksinprint.com/bip/].
    Books in Print with Reviews provides bibliographic information for books, audio, and video sources which are in print, out of print, and forthcoming. A single-fielded search interface is included, allowing keyword, author, title, and ISBN queries to be executed. Two browse interfaces are included as well, one which is by subject and the other which is by index, broken into author, publisher, series title, and more.

Encyclopedia of Associations. *Gale Ready Reference Shelf*. (2004). New York, NY: Thompson Corporation. [Available: http://galenet.gale.com/a/acp/db/grr].
    The online *Gale Ready Reference Shelf / Encyclopedia of Associations* consists of a number of search interfaces, giving access to data on organizations, publications, and databases. Three simple searches permit searching by name, location, and subject, the last of which is free-text, whereas three multi-fielded searches empower users to search across a multitude of fields. For more advanced users, an expert search mode is provided, requiring knowledge of a special query language which is documented in the online help section.

Kaplan, J. (Ed.). (2002). *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations (*17th ed.). Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company.
    Bartlett's Familiar Quotations is a compilation of notable quotations, arranged chronologically by the birthdates of the quotation originators. The compilation provides an extensive, alphabetically-arranged keyword-in-context index, providing search capabilities.

Kipfer, B.A. (Ed.). (2001). *Roget's International Thesaurus* (6th ed.). New York, NY: Harper Collins.
    Roget's International Thesaurus is a structured list of words which are grouped into fifteen classes of categories, allowing for collocation of similar concepts. The categories, which are numbered and cross-referenced, are arranged using a classified system akin to that devised by Roget in the 19th century. In addition to an alphabetically-arranged index of concepts, a guide to using the thesaurus is included in the preface.

Superintendent of Documents, Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor. (2004). *Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2004-05 Edition* (Bulletin 2570). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
    The *Occupational Outlook Handbook* provides summary and analysis of data on job growth trends in the United States, projections of job trends a decade into the future, and advice on methods for job-searching. The *Handbook* is organized by job category, using alphabetical arrangement within each category, and contains an alphabetical index, with cross-references, of occupations.

Thesaurus.Com. (2004). Los Angeles, CA: Lexico Publishing Group. [Available: http://thesaurus.reference.com/].

    Thesaurus.com, the online version of *Roget's New Millennium™ Thesaurus*, provides a single-field search interface allowing users to view synonyms and antonyms for submitted words. Also available is a multi-dictionary search, displaying numerous, different definitions for each word, including a number of common idioms of which the word is a part.

U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce. (2003). *Statistical Abstract of the United States* (123rd ed.). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

    The *Statistical Abstract of the United States* is a summary of chiefly U.S.-related statistics covering topics such as population shifts, education levels, crime rates, environmental indicators, federal election data, federal budget information, and a number of others. An alphabetically-arranged, cross-referenced subject index links back to the statistical data, most of which is provided in tabular form, though some charts and maps are also provided.