
The Return of the *Guide to Reference* (Books)

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Guest Columnist

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If you are a librarian of my generation, you probably fondly refer to the *Guide to Reference Books* as “Sheehy.” Younger librarians most likely refer to it as “Balay.” When Robert H. Kieft assumed the daunting role of general editor of the new edition of the *Guide*, reference librarianship was in transition, moving from print to online. As a result of this migration, the *Guide* too has transformed in format and purpose. Read on to find out how the new edition of the *Guide* has been developed to enhance its role as a teaching and training tool.—*Editor*

A few years ago, I wrote a piece for this journal called “When Reference Works Are Not Books: The New Edition of the *Guide to Reference Books*.”¹ It appeared in a column called “Off the Shelf and Onto the Web,” which ran from volume 38, number 1 (1997) to volume 42, number 1 (2002). In it I discussed early plans for the new edition of the American Library Association’s (ALA) *Guide to Reference Books*, now called *Guide to Reference*. So much has happened since then, and so many trends we saw early in this decade have gathered momentum, that I would like in this editorial to discuss more recent thinking about the *Guide* and its future.²

At the very least, since I wrote that column in 2002, the stream of works moving from the shelf to the Web has become a flood as publishers and aggregators for the reference market produce ever more works online and, outside the reference library proper, as Google Book Search, Open Content Alliance, and other projects daily add thousands of titles to the universally searchable online library. If, even as late as 2002, we doubted where things were going, it now goes without saying that we are living on the far side of an information revolution that began when the Mosaic browser encouraged the commercial and public development of the Web in the mid-1990s.

We have seen the “book box” library become the “search box” library almost overnight as the Web and search have become, respectively, a preferred medium for information publication and access and a model for expectations of doing research. Mass digitization, search algorithms, and social or populist information distribution channels and forms of knowledge production are coming to dominate how we think about information, and we may well be on the verge of an information publishing world where sources not on the Web will not only be hard to find but may be presumed not to exist.

That’s another way of saying we live in the most exciting time for librarianship since the giants of the Dewey generation walked the earth. Collections, publishing, modes of service

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and access, the relationships among libraries, and the library's role in society as a collecting institution are all in process of reinvention. If nothing else, recent experience with users in the online environment has confirmed that the library has never been about books, recordings, and pages of census information, but about how people interact with texts, images, data, and sounds and how they take these into their own thinking and work.

The service edifice built by reference librarians beginning in the late nineteenth century does not so much threaten to collapse as to be reborn in ways that we are still groping to discern. Librarians are sketching the new reference architecture by harnessing the power of the Web; they are defining new roles, services, communication channels, and user relationships online and are helping design interfaces and guidance for online users. As more users, at least in the academic world, live and work more on the Web, reference departments around the country are weeding their print collections or sending them to the stacks or storage while building ever larger systems to track and give access to their electronic resources.

For the new edition of the *Guide*, we have addressed some major challenges, big questions about how to compile for the Web a source that was created in and for a world of print collections, physical interfaces (service desks and books on shelves), and a “linear” research model. Some of these questions have been asked by *Guide* compilers before, others are new to the current edition, and all of them ask us to reconceive the *Guide* for the changes that have taken place in reference publishing, reference service provision, and the culture of information seeking since the mid-1990s:

- How do we account in the organization and content of the *Guide* for changes in scholarship, publishing, academic vocabulary, and user populations?
- What do we lose or gain on either side of the gap between the advantages of a print and an electronic edition?
- How do we create a distributed contribution and editorial structure?
- If a bibliography like the *Guide* is conceptually like a database, then what is the conceptual online equivalent of a guide?
- How do we fuse the narrative and bibliographic dimensions of an online guide?
- How do we integrate electronic and print publications in the subject hierarchy?
- How do we design the *Guide* for 24/7 reference, and what does it mean for the *Guide* to participate in the network of online sources?
- What counts as a reference work these days?
- How do we restore the *Guide* to the library and information science (LIS) curriculum as more than a bibliography and other than as a monument lamented for its being out of date?

The *Guide* is 106 years old, and it sits, now as ever, at the

intersection of the literatures of reference bibliography, reference service, and library instruction. If you look at the 1902 edition of the *Guide*, you will see citations in the first chapter to predecessor lists of reference titles from such librarians as Ernest Cushing Richardson and Ainsworth Rand Spofford, whose work as bibliographers is barely distinguishable from the literatures of user services and library instruction. The early list makers and the *Guide*'s Alice Bertha Kroeger, following suit, are members of a cohort of librarians who assert the necessity of mediating and interpreting the library for users and the centrality of a reference collection to that role of mediation.³ They want in these assertions to establish the parameters for the professional domain of librarianship while simultaneously arguing for the publication infrastructure needed to sustain services through the collection, a publication infrastructure that, in turn, grows from and shapes the research and educational mission of libraries.

It is at this nexus where the *Guide* finds its place today in the online world. Before I come to that, though, let's discuss some answers we have given, at least tentatively, to the questions above as we publish the new *Guide* on the Web.

ORGANIZATION

In many cases, the editorial team has adjusted the internal structure of the topical categories, shifted topics from one category to another, and changed some headings, but the general organization of divisions and disciplinary categories and the heading vocabulary remain substantially those of recent editions. We have added, however, a new division for five interdisciplinary fields—Cognitive Science, Cultural Studies, Environmental Studies, Gender Studies, and Media and Communication Studies—which in the last fifteen to twenty years have developed reference literatures that do not fit comfortably into disciplinary categories in the social sciences or humanities and reflect familiar designations for programs and courses in higher education.

We have also added new categories or subcategories. “Dictionaries,” for example, has a new subsection for translation engines because of the use readers make of them for some dictionary functions. Two new categories are “The Web as Reference Tool” and “Online Reference Libraries.” “The Web as Reference Tool” acknowledges that the culture of information seeking has changed forever with the advent of the Web and the search engines that index it. In “The Web as Reference Tool,” therefore, we discuss reference tools that can exist only on the Web. “Online Reference Libraries” treats large groups of online reference works that can be searched simultaneously, often with an interface that offers considerable browsing capacity and research guidance; it also includes a subsection for online directories to online reference sources.

Now that it is on the Web, the *Guide* can also respond to one of its longest-standing criticisms, namely, that it is out of date by the time it is published. On the Web, everything is forever beta, which means that the editorial team will be constantly revising the *Guide*'s narrative and bibliographic

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content and the disciplinary structure as advisable. We foresee further changes to the organization of topics covered and to the increasing predominance in the bibliography of online sources. Not only do we foresee such changes, but we hope the interactive capacities of this new edition will encourage discussion among librarians and between readers and the project team about what those changes should be.

CHOOSING ENTRIES

The reference community has struggled mightily over the years to arrive at a sufficiently inclusive definition of “reference work.” No definition has ever proved entirely satisfactory, and most authorities, like the current *Guide* editorial staff, have adopted (after a good deal of mooting and arm waving) the commonsensical position of last resort that “you know one when you see one.” Contributing editors have used their judgment and the range of works described by the several useful definitions of “reference work” to select those titles that have proved themselves in the research environment according to disciplinary patterns of use and publication.

The *Guide*’s main purpose is to provide the foundation for reference and information services in today’s higher education research settings, which means that the new *Guide* emphasizes titles recently published and currently in use. Although publishing and research patterns in particular fields will determine precisely what “recently published” and “currently in use” mean in given categories, previous editions of the *Guide* will serve when readers wish to consult many older works. Since the eleventh edition included titles with publication dates into 1993, compilers for this edition have taken care to thoroughly review the roster of entries and to select works published since then, especially the new kinds of reference works made possible by online publication. In the past, titles in printed form have necessarily dominated the *Guide*, but the availability of online and other electronic works today challenges that dominance and, in some cases (e.g., indexes to journals), has relegated printed publications to the storage facility or dumpster.

In this edition, therefore, we have not only favored titles published since the eleventh edition but have followed our users to the “search box.” In general, the *Guide* has preferred to enter online sources that have replaced printed sources for most librarians under most circumstances, to treat in annotations the relationships between online and print versions of sources, and to integrate print and online sources in subsections as appropriate. The reader will see our answers to the question, what is a reference source? in finding *JSTOR* among the periodical indexes along with such “traditional” reference sources as periodical indexes from H. W. Wilson that have shifted into full-text aggregations. Readers will also find entries for *Early English Books Online*, *Gallica*, and other large archives of digitized print publications that can indeed be used as indexes and reference works because of their searching capability.

As has always been the case, the *Guide* prefers to enter, ir-

respective of format, sources from governments, professional societies, commercial publishers, and other organizations that have a history of publishing such sources. The accuracy and completeness of the work, its currency, how well it carries out its stated intention, and the reputation and experience of the editor, compiler, and publisher are the primary factors that determine inclusion in the *Guide*. In terms of free websites or of sites not produced under traditional auspices, contributing editors have used their judgment as informed by their knowledge of the field. On the whole, the *Guide* has preferred free meta-sites, directory sites, or portals that have gained a reputation over the years for offering well-designed and well-maintained, growing, current, and well-edited access to sources.

INTRODUCING CATEGORIES AND ANNOTATING ENTRIES

As the bibliographic content of the *Guide* grew over recent editions and as textbooks and other sectors of the reference literature developed, sectional headnotes and such educational content as introduced editions up to Sheehy’s tenth ceased to be included. Relieved of some space constraints by online publication and hoping as we do to raise the profile of the *Guide* in teaching and training venues, we will be providing “editor’s guides” to the disciplinary categories. These guides are designed to discuss the general shape or content norms of the literature or those general characteristics of the literature that annotations cannot include. Since this is the first edition of the *Guide* to appear since the mid-1990s, the editor’s guides also discuss changes to publishing or research patterns occasioned by the move from an all-print to a hybrid environment of print and electronic sources.

The *Guide* is a working bibliography, not a reviewing medium. As such, it annotates titles primarily to enable readers to see quickly which sources are available and what each contains. From the brief, telegraphically written annotation, readers who have not previously examined a given work or who only dimly remember it should be able to visualize its scale and arrangement and, from among similar works, choose the one to use first.

In composing annotations, editors have been conscious of the benefits of comparing, contrasting, and otherwise relating or evaluating sources as well as of describing them, especially in cases when a number of similar works are entered. Annotations sketch as briefly as they can the essential features of the publication, discussing as necessary the work’s intention, coverage, content, arrangement, features that facilitate use, or the presence and quality of such linking and mapping elements as indexes, appendixes, and bibliographies.

Keeping in mind that using keywords is a prominent feature of search strategies, editors have tried to enrich annotations with language that describes the various dimensions of a work’s content, especially if the title is not in English. In annotating a source issued in different formats, editors discuss only content differences between and among them; in the case of

sources offered by different vendors with different interfaces, they consider content differences where they exist and do not comment on a source's interface, navigational functions, or system requirements unless they have very important consequences for the way users interact with the content.

INTERACTIVITY

In its first eleven editions, the *Guide* increasingly became a community project, with acknowledgement pages and credits on the table of contents revealing how important the network of reference libraries and librarians has always been to the compilation of the *Guide*. I have been privileged over the last few years to speak with more than a dozen library and information science (LIS) reference courses and library groups about the *Guide* and about questions of education for reference librarianship. The RUSA/CODES Reference Publishing Advisory Committee has sponsored public meetings about the *Guide*. I have spoken with Association for Library and Information Science Education (ALISE) members about how they use it in their daily work of teaching, and I met with the New Members Round Table at ALA Annual Conference in 2008 to discuss their experience of LIS reference courses as well as to make a pitch for working on the *Guide* as a professional development opportunity. Through the good offices of ALA, RUSA and ALISE will hold a joint discussion session at the Midwinter Meeting in 2009 about teaching and training for reference service and how the *Guide* website might play appropriate curricular and reference desk roles therein.

I cite these events because many interests come into play in developing reference service. I hope that we can institutionalize the important role the reference community has played in shaping the design and content of the new edition with the communication (e-mail and export of entries), list-making, and comment features of the new edition. The *Guide*'s interactive features for lists and notes afford possibilities for LIS reference course exercises, reference desk training, and reference department activities such as collection weeding.

The ability to export records will make the compilation of local instructional materials and subject portals easier. In the interest of developing a community around the *Guide* of those interested in reference and of making the *Guide* itself as useful as possible, we encourage readers to register comments. We hope these comments will note useful features or content not mentioned in annotations, discuss the relationships among sources, cite sources that should be considered as candidates for entry, and suggest revisions to the browsing taxonomy as well as topics that should be added or dropped.

TEACHING AND TRAINING

As the nexus of several literatures, then, the new edition would like to harness the energy of the reference community in its ongoing development and its return to its roots as an educational text for reference librarians. We hope that the restoration of kinds of content that had been deemphasized

in the printed *Guide* by the expansion of the bibliography and the publication of reference education and training textbooks is only the first step in bringing the *Guide* back to the classroom and reference desk as more than a list of sources. We plan eventually to create content around the *Guide*'s vital bibliographic dimension that will be useful for training LIS students and reference desk staff not only in the repertory of sources they should be familiar with but in how those sources speak to the processes of reference service and the kinds of work that users are doing.

From conversation with librarians, educators, and *Guide* editors, we see numerous possibilities for future development of the *Guide* in that we might

- link to reviews, sample content, editorial matter, and tables of contents;
- link to historical or primary documents about the development of reference services such as those listed in Kroeger's first chapter;
- create charts, tables, and graphs that would assist browsing by tabulating differences among like sources or showing a chronological succession of sources (since it is easier to browse on a printed page than it is from a list of short-entry hits, such graphical means would help readers see source relationships and contrasts more easily);
- create surveys of the history and composition of the reference literature that are deeper than those we can write in editor's guides;
- commission essays on the state of scholarship in disciplines and on how research is done in given academic fields;
- allow the *Guide* database to be searched along with other bibliographies that ALA produces or could partner with other publishers to provide access to;
- gather from libraries or educators reference course syllabi and other teaching documents, training program documents for new reference librarians, guidelines for reference service, librarian competency guidelines, and standards for assessing reference librarian performance, etc.;
- compile tips or case studies on using the *Guide* and other works in reference service, training, and LIS classes;
- create or partner to offer textbook content, perhaps in the form of video or audio (a quick take on the reference interview, use of certain sources, how to train staff to work with certain topics or questions, etc.), perhaps short videos made by teams of LIS students and reference librarians;
- create essays on trends in publishing and in reference services and collections;
- create materials on evaluation of reference sources;
- link to "best lists" from RUSA and elsewhere;
- feature works on the *Guide* home page, perhaps pulled at random from suggestions by editors or by counting clicks for most-used sources;
- take on international editors who can create specialized content for given countries and regions; and

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- hold “contests,” conduct surveys, or compile lists and discussions of (1) reference works based on input from librarians about their “desert island” source, (2) the most valuable things a reference librarian needs to know or “things you have learned on the job about reference services and questions,” (3) reference works librarians would like to see published in areas not served well by current publications, and (4) “the most unusual reference work you have ever seen/used.”

I have been developing this list for awhile now, and I was thinking about it for a meeting when, in this journal, Denice Adkins and Sanda Erdelez (School of Information Science and Learning Technologies, University of Missouri–Columbia), published “An Exploratory Survey of Reference Source Instruction in LIS Courses.”⁴ In their article, they sketch desiderata for a tool with which to teach reference sources. From their survey of courses they conclude that they would like to find ways to present to students the sources they should know according to such successful course strategies as, “students’ classroom presentation of sources, hands-on assignments, and fieldwork that allows them to work with sources.”⁵ They describe the need for “an instruction tool” that would offer means for access to and comparison of sources, instruction in how to use specific sources, and video clips of reference interviews for students to use as case studies.⁶ I submit that the *Guide* website could become this tool, collaboratively built by *Guide* editors, LIS educators, and library practitioners.

CONCLUSION

The exponential increase in the amount of information available and the dominance of search in our thinking about finding information place an ever greater premium on getting quickly to information that is reliable and usable. This is where the new *Guide* is ideally situated for twenty-first-century reference.

Online catalogs, wonderful though they are, do not help users readily identify reference works, nor can they identify the most appropriate sources for a given need. Moreover, miraculous as search is for its needle-in-a-haystack retrieval capacity, it does not create the context for learning that a browseable, topically organized, selective, and annotated library of proven reference sources can. Because the *Guide* creates a network of quality sources and teaches the structure of disciplinary knowledge, it gains value in the new world of information by deploying the expertise of its compilers in the online information network, establishing a repertory of

trusted, go-to sources, calling attention to sources that librarians might miss as they search the Web or a library catalog, and offering guidance in the form of introductory essays and annotations. By these means, librarians and LIS students not only can find their way through the maze of possible sources, but they can develop their local collection and learn about topics they are not familiar with as they work with users.

The *Guide* breaks new ground in terms of the sources it lists and the medium in which it is published, but it also very consciously incorporates the traditions established by its predecessors, traditions appropriate to the era of electronic publication. As all editions attest, beginning with Alice Bertha Kroeger’s first in 1902 through Robert Balay’s eleventh in 1996, the *Guide* has always been a portal to reference literature and has depended on participation by reference librarians and others concerned with reference librarianship education and practice. As a gateway, therefore, and as a communally built resource, the old *Guide* finds itself in its latest incarnation to be as modern as Web 2.0. With its searchable, browseable, internally and externally linked database, its distributed compilation and editing, and its interactive features, the online *Guide* is at once a new portal and communal publication and the same one it has always been.

I hope that advice from members of RUSA, ALISE, and other sectors of the reference community will play an important role in developing the content and organization of the *Guide*. I also hope that, through their online interactions with it, the *Guide* will establish itself as a focal point for the several communities of publishers, practitioners, students, and educators who work together to shape the future of reference service.

References and Notes

1. Robert H. Kieft, “When Reference Works Are Not Books: The New Edition of the *Guide to Reference Books*,” *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 41, no. 4 (Summer 2002): 330–34.
2. I have been asked to contribute this guest editorial at the kind invitation of Diane Zabel, *RUSQ* Editor. Some of this material appears in slightly different form in the *Guide to Reference*.
3. Alice Bertha Kroeger, “Books and Articles on Reference Books and Reference Work,” *Guide to the Study and Use of Reference Books: A Manual for Librarians, Teachers and Students* (Chicago: ALA, 1902): 6–8.
4. Denice Adkins and Sanda Erdelez, “An Exploratory Survey of Reference Source Instruction in LIS Courses,” *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 46, no. 2 (Winter 2006): 50–60.
5. *Ibid.*, 58.
6. *Ibid.*

ERRATUM

The feature article by Cynthia L. Gregory (“But I Want a Real Book”: An Investigation of Undergraduates’ Usage and Attitudes toward Electronic Books”) in the Spring 2008 issue (Volume 47, No. 3) contains an error on page 272. The title of table 5 should read: “Reasons 66 Percent Preferred a Print Book.”

The editor apologizes for the error.