ON WHAT POINTS DO REFERENCE PATRONS AND REFERENCE LIBRARIANS
AGREE IN EVALUATING REFERENCE WORKS?

by
Kevin O'Kelly

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Approved by:

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The perspective of the patron is conspicuously absent from the literature of reference work evaluation. However, as demonstrated by the success of reference works on the commercial market, the general public has some interest in reference works. This exploratory study reports the results of reference patrons being asked to examine and evaluate reference works recommended by a mixture of public and academic librarians. The results indicate that while patrons do have strong opinions about reference works, they often have difficulty grasping the potential usefulness of many sources. The study results suggest the need for greater communication between reference patrons and reference librarians.

Headings

Reference books—evaluation

Reference books—patron opinions

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Introduction

Discussion, review and evaluation of reference sources tend to be done by professional librarians. Curiously, for the literature of a profession devoted to public service, the participants in these discussions and evaluations seldom explicitly mention the opinions and desires of library patrons. All of the studies or other publications that I have read that present any evaluation of reference works, present them entirely from the viewpoint of librarians.

Certainly librarians with substantial practical experience have a great deal of insight into patron preferences. But perhaps we miss crucial information when the patron's wishes and reactions enter the evaluation process not, as we encounter patrons, directly and face-to-face, but filtered through the consciousness and memory of librarians.

There is, I think a belief shared by many librarians that patrons have little or no interest in reference works—a belief stated in its most extreme form by Bob Balay of *Choice*, who once wrote that "the people by whom reference books are beloved and to whom they appeal are librarians" (24). And Balay has a point: for example, in general-interest periodicals with book review sections, reference books are seldom, if ever, examined. Furthermore, the reference sections of bookstores seldom contain more than dictionaries, atlases, and how-to books.

On the other hand, the public clearly has an interest in certain types of reference works—enough to spend money on them. Publishers and booksellers consider personal finance guides, college guides, personal health references, and guides to buying and using computers all to be solid money-makers. *The New York Public Library Desk Reference* has also been a consistent seller since its first appearance in 1989. In 1998 Amazon.com reported an increase of over thirty percent in reference sales—a greater increase than for the company as a whole (Mantell 42)?

The fact that many librarians might dismiss many of the reference books on the trade market as unreliable or ill-conceived simply reinforces my point. Much of the public appears to want reference books, and if we as a profession have a better sense of what patrons want, we would be in a position to guide them to make better-informed choices.

This inquiry is grounded on the assumption that any complete evaluative discussion of reference works should include the views from both sides of the reference desk. And a crucial step toward developing a critical framework for evaluation of reference works is the discovery of points on which both librarians and patrons agree.

Literature Review

In 1759 a paradigmatic moment in the history of reference books took place: Pope Clement XIII placed Denis Diderot's *Encyclopédie* on the Index of Forbidden Books— early evidence that the evaluation of reference books has often been characterized by sharp disagreement. Studies on the subject range from the apparently objective (e.g., Michael Hopkins' "Ranking the Reference Books: Methodologies for Identifying 'Key' Reference Sources") to the blatantly subjective (such as "Personal Choice," (also known as "Desert Island," a reference books column that ran in *Reference Services Review* from 1982 to 1987). A 1989 *RQ* article by David Isaacson questioned the long-held assumption that a reference work is simply a "container of information" and argued that personal expression on the part of a reference author can be as important as objectivity (485). Indeed, one of the characteristics that endears a reference work to many users is, in addition to its reliability, is a distinctive voice. For example, the users of works as varied as the *Dictionary of National Biography*, the *Almanac of American Politics*, and even the *Chicago Manual of Style* all find in these works not only facts but also the work of an author or authors with distinctive personalities and intellects.

These diverse approaches to the evaluation of reference materials all have something in common, a characteristic they arguably share with the suppression of the *Encyclopédie:* a priestly exclusivity, undergirded by the assumption that, patrons nothwithstanding, the only opinions that matter are those of the professionals. For example, Hopkins constructs his entire schema for evaluating reference works without direct reference to actual reference work. In Hopkins opinion, the key reference works are ones mentioned most often in introductory reference class textbooks (84). Of course,

patron needs obviously played an indirect role in the very process of inclusion in reference textbooks. Some library science faculty have also been practicing librarians, and doubtlessly a great deal of collective experience is in play in the preparation of works such as introductory reference textbooks.

However, an examination of the four reference works Hopkins chose for his study reveals a pervasive professional self-referentiality. A concern for patron usefulness was implicit in the chapter introductions of Cheney and Williams' *Fundamental Reference Sources*, but only William A. Katz's *Basic Information Sources* specifically emphasizes the importance of proven usefulness to patrons (24-25). Implicit and occasional explicit references to patron information needs occur throughout Agnes Hede's *Reference Readiness: A Manual for Librarians and Students,* but far too many of the reference recommendations Hede makes are buttressed not by references to actual use but by glowing quotes from Constance Winchell's *Guide to Reference Books*. Taylor and Powell, in *Basic Reference Sources: A Self-Study Manual*, make no explicit claims as to the general usefulness of the sources they cover: "the specific titles covered in this manual are not meant to suggest a definitive list. Some of the titles were obvious choices; others were included because they lent themselves well to this type of treatment" (xvi).

Studies that consider patron use patterns discussed in Hopkins'article highlight the fundamental confusion that characterizes many professional's thoughts on reference usefulness. One of the studies he examined involved taking a "representative" list of reference sources and counting their citations in the *Science*, *Social Science*, and *Arts and Humanities* citation indices—a study with a comparatively direct (although not necessarily complete) reflection of patron use. But Hopkins notes a number of problems with this approach. The author of the study, Coren, looked for only a small number of sources—a necessity given the limitations of manual searching. Another problem Hopkins noted is an inherent selectivity in citation. The location of statistics or other data for a sociology article is certainly reference work, but for scholarly research, only one of

the many reasons prompting people to consult books. This study certainly takes no account, as Hopkins pointed out, of all the myriad reasons library patrons need information—an address for personal correspondence, first-aid information for a household mishap—that need never result in a citation. Thus, the absence of direct patron input in evaluation of reference materials is caused by a combination of inherent difficulties in soliciting patron input and a certain proprietary attitude towards reference materials.

On the other hand, a few professionals advocate an approach that includes the patron to at least some degree. Chicago librarian Mary Ellen Quinn exemplified this perspective when she declared "no matter how well made, a reference book has no value if it just sits on the shelf" ("Reference" 1532). Quinn was encapsulating a viewpoint expressed almost ten years earlier in the *Wilson Library Bulletin* article "Field Tested Reference Books." The authors asked librarians to name references of "proven, not predicted, value in a variety of library settings."

Interestingly, even the authors of the *Bulletin* article asked librarians to name sources "that *they* feel have been of notable value to their patrons" (37). This article provides some clues as to what reference work characteristics librarians working in public service prize—to be discussed further in the following section. For example, "value" in the context of the article, means the capacity to provide an accurate answer to a patron question.

However, no one thought to ask the *patrons* in these libraries what *they* felt had been of value. Even in professional literature that takes a self-consciously pragmatic approach to reference work evaluation, the professionals appear to ignore the blunt reality that a reference desk has two sides.

Criteria for Evaluating Reference Works: Theory

Peculiarly, for a profession devoted to the organization and classification of information, the leading textbooks lack any agreed-upon vocabulary for the evaluation of reference works. Even in cases when terms are common to different textbooks, they often have significantly variant definitions.

In *Reference and Information Services*, Bopp and Smith identify eight criteria for evaluating reference sources from a librarian's perspective (293). They use *format* to mean anything from the distinction between print and CD-ROM or microform to the presence or absence of illustrations. They define *scope* as "purpose, coverage, currentness." *Relationship to similar works* involves the work's relationship to sources already in the collection. For example, does it fill an empty niche in the library, or supplement an existing work, or address a different audience? The arguably more subjective *authority* is based on the reputation of those who published, wrote, contributed to, or edited the work. *Treatment* is (to my mind) an ill-chosen term that covers everything from intended audience to accuracy. *Arrangement*, which could easily be confused with format, in my view, covers both the organizing principles of the book (e. g., alphabetical, chronological) and the presence of access features (such as indexes and cross-references). *Special Features* (which could arguably be part of format) applies largely to electronic matters--both electronic supplements to print sources (CD-ROM) and features of electronic sources themselves (database features, documentation, customer support). *Cost* is self-explanatory (296-300).

William Katz's evaluative criteria bear considerable overlap with Bopp and Smith. However, his terms are generally clearer. He states four evaluative criteria for

reference works in general, adding additional criteria for specific categories of reference works. His four general criteria are *purpose*, *authority*, *scope* and *audience*. When evaluating *purpose*, a librarian investigates whether the author fulfilled the stated purpose of the work. When establishing the *authority* of the work, a librarian asks three questions: 1) is the author qualified to write an accurate work on this subject? 2) what is the publisher's reputation for producing trustworthy titles? and 3) does the book appear to be an objective work on its subject? Katz uses his third term, *scope*, in a confusing double sense. In the first sense he uses scope to describe the work itself--specifically the author's success in achieving the degree of comprehensiveness claimed, thus creating an overlap with purpose. He also uses the term for the scope of the work as compared to that of similar works in the collection. In other words, would this individual work, by virtue of its scope, add to the scope of the collection? His fourth criterion, *audience*, refers to determining whether the intended audience for the work under examination are laity or professionals (25-28). In addition to these criteria, which he classified separately because they all relate to content, he added the criteria of *cost* and *format*—the latter referring to arrangement as it facilitates use.

When he comes to naming specific points of evaluation for ready-reference works, Katz reiterates his earlier emphasis on format, subdividing into arrangement (again, meaning arrangement as it facilitates use) and illustrations (the latter to be searched for and evaluated as appropriate). Katz also emphasizes currency of information as an important criteria for ready-references—a clear reflection of an emphasis on reference work as the provision of accurate facts. However, to argue that currency is more important for ready-reference than other reference works is highly dubious.

The approaches outlined above are appropriate for adding to a reference collection—or for compiling lists such as *American Libraries'* "Best Reference Books of the Year." In their 1991 *Wilson Library Bulletin* article "Field-Tested Reference Books: A Survey of What Has Worked Best," Catherine Alloway, Celia Bouchard, Brenda

McDonald and Lori Smith took—as the title of the article implies—a somewhat different approach. They mentioned approvingly such criteria as "comprehensiveness," "accuracy," and above all "user-friendliness" (which they did not define). Rather than evaluating a given reference work before having seen used it in a library, the evaluations ran in the opposite direction: What reference works already in libraries have been the most helpful in answering questions? I took a similar approach in this project when I asked three local librarians to recommend reference titles on the basis of their usefulness to their patrons.

Methodology

This research is intended to establish a starting point for discovering what perspectives or opinions librarians and patrons share in the evaluation of reference sources. The project is therefore an exploratory inquiry of small scope.

The first step in this process was the solicitation of volunteers--both reference librarians and patrons. I contacted three reference librarians—one each at the Chapel Hill Public Library, Davis Library at UNC-Chapel Hill, and Durham County Public Library. I asked them to identify between eight and ten ready reference works they felt were the most useful to most of their patrons, asking them to be as specific as possible about what qualities they felt positively distinguished these reference works. Then I selected the sources named by all three reference librarians, as well as those sources that got a majority vote.

The resulting pool of reference sources was quite small—five sources—which had two advantages. One was that a large selection of sources would have deterred patron volunteer participation (just as requesting a longer list of reference recommendations from librarians would have made them more reluctant to participate). The second advantage was that patron examinations of reference works were likely to be more thorough with a small selection than with a large one.

To solicit patron volunteers, I simply asked people. Some of them I knew quite well, some barely at all. Although all had at least a college degree, they represented a variety of educational backgrounds and occupations. However, I had seen all of them in either Davis Library or the Chapel Hill Public and knew that in some sense they were all library patrons. I approached them when seeing them in Davis Library or in the Chapel Hill Public. I told them I was researching patron opinions of reference works and would

welcome their help—in the form of looking over a few reference works and answering some written questions. I assembled the reference works chosen by reference librarians on a table in Davis Library. I gave each patron volunteer written instructions asking him or her to examine the works, placing each in one of three categories: 1) most useful, 2) least useful and 3) moderately useful. They then filled out a questionnaire asking them what made them place a book in one category as opposed to another.

With both librarians and patrons, I took a general grounded theory approach as outlined by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss—collecting data before forming theories (1, 28-29). The point was to find out what librarians and patrons each think, what reference book traits they value, with as little prompting from me as possible—before forming any theories. One of my purposes after all, was to discover what patrons actually thought without the mediation of a librarian's consciousness or criteria. Another was to see if patrons would articulate criteria and values regarding reference works, and how those criteria and values differed from those of professional librarians.

By the twelfth questionnaire and interview, no new selection patterns or statements of desired criteria emerged, so I began examing the results to see where patrons and librarians agreed, and where they disagreed.

Results

Examining the results of my survey of reference librarians, I found the two desiderata common to all three librarians were *ease of use* or *format* and *scope of information*. The first quality was identified in several ways by librarians. For example, one noted that the *Statistical Abstract of the United States* had "natural language" indexing. Another noted that the *World Book Encyclopedia* has explanations that are "simple and easy to understand" and "illustrations, maps and graphs." The second quality was identified invariably as "covering a broad subject area" and "answering lots of questions."

However, the oft-noted air of professional self-reference crept in with one librarian's addition of *authority,* which she used to mean "listed in a recognized compilation of reference sources such as ALA's *Guide to Reference Books* or favorably reviewed in a standard review source, such as *Booklist*." She also specifically mentioned *currency*, as well as pointing out with approval which reference tools led you beyond themselves: for example, the *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, since it mentioned which government agency compiled which statistics.

The results of my survey were in accord with other observations, which generally find a reference book equivalent to Bradford's Law of Scattering to be in operation: a relatively small number of reference works get a great deal of use. When it comes to reference books, librarians appear to be in a similar position as Potter Stewart regarding pornography—they might not how to describe a good reference work, but they know a good one when they see it.

All three librarians included the *World Almanac* and the *Statistical Abstract of the United States* on their lists. Two out of three librarians recommended *the*

Encyclopedia of World Biography, *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*, the *World Book Encyclopedia*, the *Harvard Medical School Family Health Guide*, and the *Encyclopedia of Associations*. These works are of such broad scope as to be naturally useful to a wide variety of patrons.

Significantly, even when librarians did not agree on specific sources, they were in agreement on the need for categories of ready-reference works. Two out of three recommended "a biographical reference" and "an encyclopedia;" two out of three also recommended having a "business directory," a "government reference" (such as the *Congressional Quarterly's Washington Information Directory*) and a standard dictionary. Similar guiding principles often led to the recommendation of different reference works. For example, those librarians who recommended *World Book Encyclopedia* did so on the grounds of ease of use and clarity. The librarian who preferred *Encyclopaedia Britannica* stressed depth and thoroughness but also emphasized the ease of use made possible by comprehensive and specific indexing. And obviously, dictionaries share common formats and content. One librarian recommended the *Random House Unabridged*; another the *American Heritage Dictionary*. In both cases they described their recommendations as a matter of "personal preference," in spite of the fact that these dictionaries have different features. For example, the *Random House Unabridged* contains appendices completely absent from the *AHD*—a style manual, a mini-atlas, and a key to common signs and symbols. On the other hand, *AHD* definitions include notes on regional variations in American English. The *AHD* also has far more substantial and instructive illustrations than *Random House*

Many of the variations were attributable to differences in service populations of the respective libraries. Chapel Hill Public serves a largely white and affluent community. The Durham County Public serves a largely African-American, middle and working-class population. Thus a reference librarian at Durham County Public recommended Gale's *African-American Almanac*. Another of her

recommendations was the *Times Atlas of the World*--which is perhaps useful for school assignments that require reference to maps. The director of reference at Davis Library recommended the *Rand-McNally Road Atlas* for its practical use in planning trips--reasoning that prompted a reference librarian at the Chapel Hill Public to suggest not an atlas but *World Travel Guide*.

The strongest differences, among librarians, did not, as one might suspect, follow the public-academic library division. In terms of both categories of references as well as specific reference titles, I found the reference librarians at Davis Library and Durham County to be in accord with each other more often than either was the reference librarian at the Chapel Hill Public. I attribute these differences primarily to institutional culture. University cultures tend to be more inclusive and liberal than those of the towns in which they are located. Furthermore, Davis Library has a mission to serve the population of a largely poor state—thus giving it more in common with a library such as Durham County, with a relatively poor population, than with Chapel Hill Public, serving a community that defines itself as white-collar and affluent.

For purposes of preparing a selection of reference works to show patron participants, I selected the unanimous choices (*World Almanac* and *Statistical Abstract of the United States*) and from the two-out-of-three list, *Familiar Quotations*, *World Book Encyclopedia*, and the *Encyclopedia of Associations*. I substituted Merriam-Webster's *Biographical Dictionary* for the *World Encyclopedia of Biography* (the two-out-of-three example for a biographical source) on the grounds that the *Encyclopedia of World Biography* was not in the library where I was conducting the study, and all three librarians stressed the importance of having a biographical reference of *some sort*.

Patron Responses

I assembled the reference works on a table where the patron volunteers could examine them without distraction. I did not introduce or explain the works in any way. The time volunteers took to examine the works and write comments ranged from approximately twelve minutes to forty-five.

Patron evaluations of the selected texts fell into clearly consistent patterns. *World Almanac* and *Statistical Abstract of the United States* were endorsed by a clear majority of patrons. Both were categorized as "most useful" by a little over half of patrons surveyed, while nearly a quarter found them "moderately useful."

Of the works endorsed by two out of the three librarians, only two of the four fared at all well in patron evaluations: *Merriam-Webster's Biographical Dictionary* and *World Book Encyclopedia*. A majority ranked the *Encyclopedia of Associations* and *Familiar Quotations* "least useful."

	World Almanac	World Book Encyclopedia	Statistical Abstract (USA)	Encyclopedia of Associations	Biographical Dictionary	Familiar Quot.
Most Useful	7	7	7	1	7	3
Moderately Useful	3	1	3	4	4	3
Least Useful	2	5	3	7	2	7

Comparison of Patron Reactions to Librarian Recommendations

In the following tables, I compare the librarians' specific reasons for recommending a reference to patron reactions to that work. I organized patron reactions and comments by their correspondence to librarian recommendations. For example, if a librarian recommended a work on the grounds of its user-friendliness, patron opinions as to its user-friendliness (or lack thereof) are in the opposite column.

World Almanac	
Patrons' Reactions	Librarians' Commendations
	Currency
	Uniqueness of information
Negative: "so broad it's superficial" "overwhelming" "random" "so broad it hardly seems to have a subject" **Positive:** "condensed and factual" "great variety" "comprehensive" "easy to use" "amount of information makes it a potential replacement for the other references" "has things one might need" "great breadth of concise material"	Scope of information
Negative: Not well organized **Positive:** "Familiar" "direct and familiar" "easily browseable" "specific information accessible by a good index" "easily readable and clear"	Ease of use

World Book Encyclopedia	
Patrons' Reactions	Librarians' Commendations
Positive: "Lots of facts" Great variety of information "useful in general" "comprehensive" "far-reaching subject matter"	Broad scope
Positive: "direct and familiar" "familiar" "familiar" "easy to use:" "easy and quick to use" "easy to use"	Easy to use
Positive: "reasonable depth" "detailed descriptions and diagrams" **Negative:** "Would be better if it cited a reference or two" "I just don't like it" "superficial" "offers little in the way of detailed treatment of topics" "would probably look at the Internet first" "I prefer the micro/macro format of Britannica" "no further readings list"	

Statistical Abstract	
Patrons' Reactions	Librarians' Commendations
Negative: "presents questions about reliability"	Authority
Positive: "useful because of breadth of material and conciseness" "has things one might be curious about" **Negative:** "overwhelming, difficult to digest" "data too varied" "a little overwhelming"	Broad scope
Positive: "good indexing, table of contents, and cross referencing" "specific information accessed by an appropriate index" "fast" "condensed, factual information in easily browsable form" "good for a snapshot statistic" "logically arranged" **Negative:** "no clear organization of topics" "difficult to use" "not organized into obvious topics"	Ease of use
Positive: "good description of data and sources" "gave sources for its figures"	Leads to further sources
Negative: "Could be replaced by World Book or World Almanac"	

Encyclopedia of Associations	
Patrons' Reactions	Librarians' Commendations
Negative: "focus too narrow" "categories seem very limited" "did not cover a broad spectrum of information" "narrow" "narrow in focus" "far too specific"	Broad scope
Positive: Explanation of organization Clear key of symbols and acronyms "seems good for a single dollop of information" **Negative:** "would prefer using it online" "no explanations of acronyms"	Ease of use
	Desirable level of detail
Positive: "seems practical" "would be helpful when needed" **Negative:** Inaccurate "can't imagine using it" "interests me least"	

Merriam-Webster Biographical Dictionary	
Patrons' Reactions	Librarians' Commendations
	Currency
Positive: "easy and quick to use" "easy to use and well-organized" "easy to use" "good for quick, visual searching"	Ease of use
Positive: "gave enough specific information to aid further research" **Negative:** "there are better sources for this type of information" "not the sorts of things I tend to look up" "could potentially be replaced by World Book" "fun, but difficult to imagine anyone using it seriously"	Useful type of source
Positive: "Standard" **Negative:** "lacking in depth" "essential information in entries, but I would probably need more"	

Familiar Quotations	
Patrons' Reactions	Librarians' Commendations
Negative: |"the topic isn't useful" "I rarely need quotations" "fun but impossible to take seriously" "I rarely need this type of information" "I wouldn't use this" "less likely to be of use"	Useful type of source
	Updated periodically
	Best of its kind
Positive: "easy to use" "impressive indexing" **Negative:** "Hard to use" "not well organized" "narrow in focus"	

The specific criteria patrons value in a reference work often matched those valued by librarians. The most valued criteria was *user-friendly format* (10 out of 13). Many of the patrons stated this outright; two mentioned approvingly specific features such as indexes and cross-referencing. However it was not always clear what features patrons found user-friendly. For example, while the majority of users found *World Book Encyclopedia* easy to use, one mentioned specifically that it did not have an index. In fact, *World Book Encyclopedia* does have an index. Even if it didn't, a lack of an index is a puzzling criticism of a work organized alphabetically. Five patrons found said they found *Statistical Abstract* easy to use; three said explicitly they did not. Of the patrons who found *Statistical Abstract* difficult to use, one said—"there was so much information it was overwhelming." One said the indexing was very poor—the exact feature another

patron singled out for praise. Another said that *Statistical Abstract* lacked "clear organization of topics."

However, I think *familiarity* is a significant issue in determining what makes a resource user-friendly (as one patron stated specifically). The very same patron who criticized *World Book* for lacking an index was the one who praised the indexing of *Statistical Abstract of the United States*. He also singled out for praise the acronym and code keys in the *Encyclopedia of Associations*. Not surprisingly, the same patron who criticized *Statistical Abstract* for being poorly indexed also criticized *Encyclopedia of Associations* for not defining its acronyms. To me this suggests that *Statistical Abstract* and *Encyclopedia of Associations* share certain formats or accommodate similar information seeking behaviors—perhaps people who are accustomed to encountering abbreviations and codes. After all, the use of the *Statistical Abstract* index is an exercise in translation, referring users who look up common terms to their equivalents in Federal Government terminology.

The positive reaction to familiarity perhaps also explains (to a degree) the popularity of *Familiar Quotations* among reference librarians, in contrast to the patron responses. One specifically said *Familiar Quotations* was "difficult to use." And a slight majority (seven to six) placed *Familiar Quotations* in the "least useful" category (primarily because of its limited subject matter).

Misconceptions as to the ease of use of the Internet (and as to the consistent accuracy of the information found on it) also played a role in patron's reactions to resources. Two patrons mentioned that they would prefer the *Encyclopedia of Associations* in an online format. A third said that while he found *World Book* useful, he would probably look for the sort of information it offers "on the Internet first."

The second most popular criterion among patrons was *broad scope.* Nine out of thirteen said they valued broad scope in a reference source. One patron said explicitly it was the primary quality he sought. Another mentioned it first.

A large proportion of patrons—eight out of the thirteen—mentioned *depth* as a desired quality in a reference. This preference explains why two patrons who said they valued scope nevertheless ranked *World Book* in the "least useful" category. Two also said specifically that when needing an encyclopedia, they much preferred *Britannica*. A perceived superficiality of *World Book* also perhaps lurks behind comments such as "I don't like *World Book*—it reminds me of elementary school," while another said that *World Book* seems useful but referred to it as "the trusty old war-horse of elementary school assignments." However, another patron who valued both scope and depth ranked *World* very highly.

Two mentioned a feature that I consider one sort of depth—the presence of bibliographies or source attributions. They said they liked sources that lead them to other sources. Of course, this preference could also reflect a desire for authority or accuracy in a source.

One aspect of this examination of patron and librarian choices has been a fairly consistent reduction in the number of evaluation criteria. In part, this is a reflection of the progression from the realm of pure possibility represented by the reference textbook to the reality of an existing library situation—where questions such as authority and cost are presumed to have been settled.

But four patrons mentioned authority or a concern for accuracy as a primary factor in their decisions. One who questioned the accuracy of the *Encyclopedia of Associations* said he liked the *World Book Encyclopedia* because it was "a standard." Another specifically praised *World Almanac* and *Statistical Abstract* for their "authority and accuracy." Another said that she would use the information in *Statistical Abstract* with "limited confidence," giving little reason other than that she was troubled that *Statistical Abstract* listed multiple sources for each table.

Conclusions: Implications for Reference Work and Recommendations for Further Study

In general, the librarians sampled often had a good grasp of what their patrons wanted and needed in reference works—with certain qualifications. The two works unanimously selected by librarians, *Statistical Abstract of the United States* and *World Almanac* were endorsed by a majority of the patron sample. In spite of some negative comments, they were nevertheless voted into the "most useful category." Adding the votes for placing those works in the "useful category," these works were endorsed by approximately two-thirds of the sample. Two of the four works endorsed by two out of three librarians were endorsed as "most useful" by a slight majority of patrons. When one adds the votes for "moderate usefulness," it is apparent these works met with overall patron approval.

Of course, the areas of patron-librarian disagreement are the most suggestive of directions for further research. For example, previous familiarity with a format appears to be a crucial factor in patron reactions, as evidenced by some of the negative reactions (even though they were a minority) to works such as the *World Almanac* and the *Statistical Abstract.* Even though the first, as an almanac, is designed for mass use, enough patrons found it "overwhelming" or "difficult to use," suggesting that a significant minority of patrons might be unfamiliar with the format. It might also explain the difficult some patrons had with the *Statistical Abstract:* some of the

relatively detailed comments ("good indexing and cross referencing") suggest that the patrons who spent the most time examining it were the ones most likely to endorse it. This conclusion is reinforced by the number of positive comments paired with words such as "familiar" or "standard."

Furthermore, a couple of patrons had similar reactions to works similarly organized. As I described in the previous section, the same patron who criticized *World Book* for lacking an index praised the indexing of *Statistical Abstract of the United States*. He also approved of the acronym and code keys in *Encyclopedia of Associations*. It is possible that he simply took a superficial look at *World Book* and dismissed it, but when examining *Abstract* and *Encyclopedia of Associations* immediately recognized them as works that called for his evident habit of deciphering abbreviations and codes (effective use of the *Statistical Abstract's* index depends on a certain patience with, and willingness to learn, Federal Government subject headings).

Furthermore, the same patron who criticized the *Abstract* for being poorly indexed also criticized the *Encyclopedia of Associations* for not defining its acronyms.

It seems likely that, whatever, the merits of a source, however well explained and organized, the first few seconds when a patron leafs through it are decisive in determining their opinions of it. Many of the negative comments on specific sources indicated that patrons simply hadn't examined them thoroughly—yet these same patrons made fairly detailed comments on sources they recommended highly. This pattern suggests that a positive initial impression of a work led patrons on to further examination.

The overall importance of familiarity with the format of a source is further indicated by the remarks of some patrons that they would "look on the Internet" for some

of the information in the printed works they were asked to examine. These remarks also suggest a need for patron education about the reliability of information on the Internet. I am willing to attribute the overall rejection of *Familiar Quotations* and the *Encyclopedia of Associations* to patron difficulty in imagining their usefulness.

The results of this study indicate clear needs for greater communication between librarians and patrons, especially for 1) further patron education on the use (and potential usefulness) of various types of printed sources; 2) more instruction about the reliability of information found on the internet; and 3) a greater willingness for both patrons and librarians to second-guess their assumptions—in other words, patrons need to be less quick to dismiss a source as useless; and more librarians need to realize that that the usefulness of specific sources is not self-evident.

Further research in this area should follow two directions: 1) a structured examination that requires greater patron engagement with the reference works—for example, a questionnaire that asks them to look up something specific in each work; or 2) the direction of greater engagement of the patron and the librarian with each other. For example, a librarian could deliver a written or oral explanation of the potential usefulness of each work. Either direction would be fruitful, because while it is apparent that patrons can and do articulate opinions about reference materials, they are not always capable of envisioning specific information needs (for example, few of these patrons imagined that an association could be a source of information). Patrons clearly have strong reactions to reference works—perhaps as strong as those of librarians. It is time for patrons and librarians to begin sharing those reactions with each other.

Appendix A.: Questions for Librarians.

1. What 10-12 ready-reference sources do you think are most useful for patrons (in the most general sense)?

2. Please state your selection criteria, and how those sources met that criteria.

Appendix B: Questions for Patrons

Please examine the following reference sources at the table nearby. In the case of multi-volume reference works, one representative volume from the set has been chosen as an example; in the case of some works published in revised editions annually, a representative edition from a recent year has been chosen as a stand-in.

Please sort these references into the following three categories: 1) most useful, 2) least useful and 3) moderately useful.

What made you place individual references in one category as opposed to the others? Please be as specific as possible, specifying both individual references, and the individual characteristics of each that make it more or less useful than others.

Were there any references that you placed in a specific category solely because of their subject matter?

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