Buy One, Get One e—or Has Print Finally Become Never, No More in Reference Collections?

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Recommended Citation
Lewis, L. & Wilkerson, F. (2004) "Buy One, Get One e—or Has Print Finally Become Never, No More in Reference Collections?" [Interview with Jennifer Duncan et. al.]. Against the Grain, 16(4).
Buy One, Get One e — or Has Print Finally Become Never, No More In Reference Collections?

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Since 1997 this keynote column in the reference issue of Against the Grain has asked librarians and publishers questions about reference publishing trends. In reference publishing, the first electronic resources were journal indexes. Now reference tools such as handbooks, dictionaries, and encyclopedias are available electronically. New electronic resources frequently combine features of dictionaries, indexes, full-text articles and links to media; the distinctions between types of reference tools is blurring. Many library users have never used print indexes, and they expect all reference materials to be online. These library users would find using a paper index to be as outmoded as being asked to use a phonograph-record player.

In this article, the rapidly changing world of reference databases — such as the numerous statistical sources, the collections of electronic books, and the database indexes to subjects — is explored. To address these issues the authors conducted an interview-style “joint discussion” among six librarians from five Universities. Their insights follow.

1) How would you define a library reference database? How do you discover what databases are on the market? In selecting databases, what tools are most helpful? Reviews? Database demonstrations? Trials? Word of mouth?

Stephen Bosch, Materials Budget, Procurement and Licensing Librarian, University of Arizona Library, Tucson, AZ: “A database is a collection of bibliographic or statistical data that is organized into a product with a single user interface that may or may not also contain full text. Generally we rely on contact with vendors, reviews, advertisements, etc. For larger products, vendor contact is the most important. Reviewing the content of the product, coverage, assessing price, and trials are the main components we use to select database.”

James Burgett, Collection Development Coordinator, with Mary Vass, Team Leader for Reference and Information Services, University of Kentucky, Lexington, Kentucky: “In general, reference databases, like handbooks or dictionaries, provide factual information which can be used to answer a specific question or to verify factual information, such as the content of a citation. Bibliographic databases fall into this category, but these days even full-text journal collections may be used for ‘reference’ purposes. Professional publications, industry literature, fliers from database vendors, visits from company reps, exhibits at professional conferences, information from listservs and discussion lists, or often directly from other librarians who’ve been to a demonstration or read an article represent avenues for discovering new databases or improvements to existing ones. Reviews are helpful, if available, but often reviews can be contradictory and reflect the biases of the reviewer. Demonstrations are a bit more helpful because you can experience the product firsthand, and also ask questions. Trials are essential for testing the full potential of a database, for assessing its strengths and pinpointing its weaknesses. Because reference databases are intended to help find information to answer a factual question, a trial makes it possible to test it under ‘real life’ conditions, evaluate the interface, and probe the depth of its contents. Word of mouth can be very effective in identifying new resources, especially if the report comes from a colleague in a similar situation or someone who knows your needs.”

Lynn Chmelir, Assistant Director for Collections and Technical Services’ Washington State University, Pullman, Washington: “I still see differences among online abstracting and indexing services, online reference sources, and online databases with data like ICPSR (Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research). Yet on our library homepage there is a listing for Databases A-Z that includes all these types of electronic resources and it throws in entries for journal packages like ScienceDirect to boot! It is understandable why the distinctions are blurring for our users! At Washington State University, selection activity is widely distributed among some 25 selectors. They all closely monitor publications in their liaison areas and discover databases in a variety of ways. All these tools are used under different circumstances. Often publishers’ representatives or our consortial partners will call new databases to our attention.”

Jennifer Duncan, Electronic Resources Librarian, Utah State University, Logan, Utah: “A library reference database is simply a reference work in machine-readable format. The basic notion of a reference tool, a resource that we consult in order to locate brief factual information or to guide us to additional material relating to a specific topic, has not changed. However, the rise of the electronic environment has invited us to include items in the reference collection that previously would not have been placed there. In the past, reference works were often designated in order that they could be collocated for convenient access by librarians and so that they would always be there when necessary as reference items generally do not circulate. In an electronic collection, however, the hyperlinking structure of the Web allows us to locate materials in multiple areas of our sites. For example, according to traditional library organization, JSTOR would be classified as a journal collection — the corresponding print volumes are housed as bound journals in both our Science & Technology Library and our Humanities & Social Sciences Library. While we still make the individual titles within the JSTOR packages available through our e-journal lists, we also include JSTOR in our electronic reference collection because the interface provides a way to search across several journals by discipline, in essence providing us with at least limited indexing for areas that we are unable to cover with our own databases such as Asian Studies or Archaeology. Even though our budget does not allow us to add electronic products to our collection as frequently as we would like, I think it is very important for both myself and our selectors to maintain a good sense of what is available on the market. This awareness helps in constantly re-evaluating the existing electronic collection as well as setting priorities for when new money does become available. In terms of finding out what is on the market, I make a concerted effort to spend time at the exhibits at ALA and to build relationships with our sales reps. This way, even though my email and postal mail boxes are often overflowing, I am constantly being reminded of new products. Additionally, particularly when I am looking for a database to fulfill a specific niche, I often browse the Webpages of some of the bigger, more affluent libraries with a specialty in the area in which I’m searching in order to get ideas. Of course, the Gale Directory of Databases is always helpful. Finally, meeting with new faculty is an excellent way to find out what our researchers actually want to use and need for us to consider for purchase. We take this for granted in terms of finding out about research interests in order to make modifications to approval plans; however, we should also remember to take databases into account during this process. New faculty often come from a large university with many more electronic resources than we have access to locally, and they can have some excellent ideas. Particularly in areas with which I am not as familiar, faculty can be a great source of information. I think that each individual library
serves such an idiosyncratic community that it is impossible to really fully rely on reviews or word of mouth in order to make decisions. Of course—these sources do find out about potential problems and pitfalls with a product; however, conducting a trial seems to be the only way of really figuring out how a specific database will fit your collection and whether it will meet the anticipated need. I find that a longer trial—90 days at least—is most helpful for really encouraging Reference Librarians to make use of the product, hopefully with users who have real questions as opposed to conducting canned searches.

Edward Shreeves, Director of Collections & Information Resources, University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa: “Library reference database is not a term we would naturally use, so it would be difficult to define it. If I had to guess, I would think it might refer to electronic resources that perform the functions of reference tools found in a typical reference collection—A&I services, encyclopedias, dictionaries, directories, etc. But the accessibility of electronic information makes a distinction between this kind of resource and the electronic version of something that may reside in the stacks, or that has no print counterpart, meaningless. We discover what’s on the market through publisher/vendor promotions, word of mouth, online discussion groups, and the like. The most useful tools for decision making are trials, and the hands-on evaluation they provide, word of mouth (especially from current users, if any), and demos—rarely reviews.

2) What are your criteria when selecting electronic databases? What are you looking for? Who makes the choice? What role do faculty and patrons play?

Stephen Bosch: “Faculty/patrons participate in trials and can provide feedback. Decisions follow the money. If a selector is using their money they decide. If a team is using team funds, the team decides. If library wide funds are used, the library CD committee decides. As far as selection criteria go, they are listed in our Policy for Selection and Acquiring Electronic Products and include issues like collection needs, cost consideration, product quality, and service and technical concerns. The full details are on our Website at www.library.edu/library/teams/irdp/elecpubre1.htm."

James Burgett with Mary Vass: “A major consideration in selecting a particular database is whether it provides unique information to which we don’t already have access at all, or whether it provides electronic access to familiar resources which we have in paper. On our campus, bibliographers/selectors in subject areas identify and acquire the databases that are subject specific. In addition, a collection development team funds some databases that cut across numerous subject areas and have system-wide appeal. The reference team uses a portion of its allocation to purchase some general reference databases, such as directories and dictionaries, particularly those which duplicate paper resources already in the reference collection. The reference team also seeks funding centrally for databases that are interdisciplinary in nature or are particularly appropriate for undergraduates. Faculty and patrons often suggest new databases, especially subject-oriented resources. Generally, faculty are consulted when subject-specific databases for their disciplines are being considered, and they may participate in evaluating the product during a campus trial.”

Lynn Chmelir: “Electronic databases are selected using the same criteria as other publications. Our collection policies, which are all currently under revision, are at http://www.wsulibs.wsu.edu/cdc/list.html.

We are looking for good products that are fairly priced to support the teaching, learning, and research at WSU. We try to avoid too much overlap and to leverage our other electronic resources. Library faculty who have liaison assignments are responsible for making subject decisions and they must live within their budgeted allocations. When interdisciplinary resources are considered, they often agree how to share costs. We make every effort to honor faculty requests, but usually they rely on the librarians to have anticipated their needs. In earlier days, there was more consultation; the collection of database hasn’t changed much recently. We are especially careful to check with faculty when we need to cancel a title. We get few requests from students.

Jennifer Duncan: “Primarily we are looking at the content and scope of coverage—how well does this particular database meet a defined need for our user community? If full text is an option, this is a priority for us. Of course, we prefer some interfaces to others and there is one particular interface that we will try to avoid; however, our goal is to make sure that the A&I is available to our researchers. Unfortunately, the ultimate consideration for us when acquiring a database is generally the price rather than full text availability or interface. Our budget situation dictates this and we try to use our Interlibrary Services to fill in the gaps when we are unable to afford the full text option. While an individual selector almost always initiates the suggestion to purchase a new database, the actual decision to acquire it is definitely a group endeavor. In our library, selectors are grouped into either the Humanities & Social Sciences or Science & Technology selector committee. These two groups meet monthly and are authorized to approve up to $5000 annually in ongoing money for the procurement of new electronic databases, provided they can identify a corresponding budget line to cut. Proposals over the $5000 limit are bumped up to our Collections Development Advisory Council (CDAC), which also meets monthly and includes the chairs of the Humanities/Socials Sciences and Science/Technology selector committees. These two groups meet monthly and are authorized to approve up to $5000 annually in ongoing money for the procurement of new electronic databases, provided they can identify a corresponding budget line to cut. Proposals over the $5000 limit are bumped up to our Collections Development Advisory Council (CDAC), which also meets monthly and includes the chairs of the Humanities/Socials Sciences and Science/Technology selector committees. CDAC can also initiate purchases on its own. No database purchase over $5000 is completed without the approval of CDAC. As I am sure many acquisitions folks will agree, it is very difficult to get patrons and faculty to provide input about the collections—electronic or print. Our trials are publicly available on our database pages, and I encourage reference librarians to try to use these products with patrons while we have access to them in order to solicit on-the-spot feedback. While we do try to publicize our database trials to the academic departments by way of the subject liaisons, feedback is often minimal. Since creating an electronic database evaluation form, I have seen input from other librarians go up dramatically; however, only a few faculty have bothered to complete the evaluations. Faculty are busy folks, so if any of them do take the time to communicate with me about a specific product, I take their input extremely seriously even if it comes only as a brief note; particularly if a faculty member comes to me and asks about a product to which we do not currently have access, I try to use this exchange as a public relations opportunity. Faculty members are often amazed at how quickly a trial can be established and are often pleased to have access to the database if only for a month or so, even if we can’t afford an ongoing subscription. It is often faculty who will drive database usage—either through heavy use for their own projects or through steering their students to specific electronic products. Therefore, it is essential to continue to try to find new ways to reach out to them.”

Edward Shreeves: “Our primary criteria are the same as for “traditional” resources—relevance to teaching and research at the institution. Secondary issues include functionality of the interface, user friendliness, overlap with other resources, user demand, technical requirements, license restrictions. At lower price levels choices are made by individual selectors, though licenses are centrally managed. At higher price levels, selections are often made by an advisory committee on collections, sometimes involving lobbying or a recommendation from one or more subject specialists.

3) What is your overall materials budget? How much goes into electronic databases? Does the percentage of money dedicated to databases continue to go up?

Stephen Bosch: “Our overall budget is $9.3 million of which $2.9 million goes to electronics. We cannot tell exactly what goes to databases.”

James Burgett with Mary Vass: “Total materials expenditures system-wide for 2003 was close to 9.5 million dollars. Unavoidably, the percentage of the budget invested in electronic resources continues to rise. Up to this point, digital products have placed an additional demand on the budget. But I’m beginning to wonder, at least with respect to electronic journals, if we aren’t approaching a watershed point at which electronic products will simply replace print counterparts in many libraries, and the competition for funds between the two formats will become less intense. That doesn’t necessarily spell relief for stressed budgets, however, given the fact that electronic products generally come with higher price tags and have strings attached in the form of bundled packages and aggregator or publisher ‘all or nothing’ deals.”

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<http://www.against-the-grain.com>
4) Does the theory of developing balanced
collections apply to electronic databases? Do
you strive for parity among broad subject
categories i.e., the sciences, social sciences,
and humanities? If so, how? Do you have
a formula?

Stephen Bosch: “No, the theory does not
apply since the market is skewed to STM (sci-
ence, technology and medicine) and business
in the first place. E-publishing lags behind
in the humanities.”

James Burgett with Mary Vass: “Elec-
tronic resources are information products, and
therefore have the same function as mono-
graphs and print serials. A balanced collection
is as important here as in the traditional col-
lection. Primarily, selection and acquisition of
resources need to be sensitive to the type and
format of resources generally preferred by a
specific user community. Obviously, the STM
disciplines have a head start in developing
and marketing electronic products, and those
subject areas tend to purchase more electronic
products than do the humanities, social sci-
ences, and fine arts, all of which are still in a
print-preferred stage, although that is rapidly
changing. Parity in purchasing electronic
products for each subject area may be a goal,
but the fact is that there is not yet parity in the
marketplace, with equal numbers of electronic
resources available to all disciplines. The
practical compromise is to try to assure that
core resources, whether print or electronic, are
available for each discipline. There seems to
be no formula for this, balance being forged
with constant tinkering and adjustment over
time. As for the reference database collection,
we do try to balance products to create good
subject coverage, and would be particularly
interested in new databases covering 2005
areas for which coverage has been lacking. For
example, we were particularly glad to obtain
a new online communications database from
EBSCO recently, because specialized cover-
age had been lacking in the past.”

Lynn Chmelir: “At WSU, electronic
access has been warmly welcomed by libra-
rians and our users. Although we don’t have
an explicit plan to maintain databases in all
disciplines, in fact we do. Just last year we
noticed a gap in coverage for criminal justice
and were able to redirect funds to cover it.
Our unit budgets were set some years ago
and increases and decreases have been shared
proportionally. The percentage spent on
databases in a fund code is determined by its
selector’s perceived value. We do use usage
data in making decisions.”

Jennifer Duncan: “While we do not have
a real formula for balance, we do try to make
sure that every area receives some level of
coverage in our electronic collections. The
subject selectors are responsible for making
sure that the essential needs of their assigned
departments are met; however, because the
strengths of our university lie in Agriculture,
the Sciences and Engineering, and this is
where the vast majority of our research dol-
ars flow, we do tend to place an emphasis on
supporting these areas. Inconveniently,
electronic products in these areas are quite
expensive, and as a result, our budget does
end up being unbalanced in favor of the sci-
ences. The College of Business also benefits
from more resources than the other disciplines.
We have accepted this unbalance because our
Business School has a very large enrollment
and actually has more graduate students than
any other college. Once again, business prod-
ucts are extremely expensive and therefore
consume a large proportion of the electronic
product budget. We are conscientious about
maintaining a core collection for the Humani-
ties and Social Sciences; however graduate
programs among these disciplines are not as
substantial, so we cannot generally advocate
for the purchase of electronic products in
these areas. Generally, large purchases in
the humanities are geared toward products that
will receive much interdisciplinary use such
as a backfile purchase of the Historical New
York Times or the EEBO (Early English
Books Online) collection.”

Edward Shreeves: “No formula, but we
do seek to maintain a balance in resource al-
location among broad disciplinary areas that
includes electronic information along with
print. The level of spending for electronic
information may vary from discipline to disci-
pline, depending on its readiness, acceptance,
demand for digital information.”

5) Consortial purchasing of databases has
saved libraries money. Have you been able to
redirect these savings? Have you been able to
keep it for other databases/materials?

Stephen Bosch: “Without consortial
purchases we would not be able to offer any-
where near the amount of resources. We don’t
re-direct savings to non-electronic resources,
but invest in more e resources.”

James Burgett with Mary Vass: “Sav-
ings from consortial purchases have remained
in the general budget or in a specific subject
area. Money saved has been applied to other
purchases, not necessarily always an electronic
product.”

Lynn Chmelir: “Any savings remains
unspent in the fund code and can be used by the
selector for other resources. It is quite difficult
to try to calculate these savings although they
are substantial. It’s really wonderful when we
can save by renewing a direct subscription
via a consortial agreement! We never have a
problem spending all our money!”

Jennifer Duncan: “We are extremely
thankful for the good work of the Utah
Academic Library Consortium (UALC).
Through UALC, we have been able to have
access to a wealth of databases that we never
could have afforded had we been going it
alone. Through Utah Pioneer (Utah State
Library initiative for public schools, public li-
braries, and academic institutions), we are also
able to gain access to our primary aggregator,
which would otherwise consume the lion’s
share of our electronic budget. This year, the
re-negotiation of the Pioneer and the UALC
slates of databases added several new files to
the statewide package for which we had been
paying locally. The end result is that, while we
did lose access to a few low-use databases, we
came out ahead over $20,000. We anticipate
using this money to pickup a few of the lost
UALC titles as well as some new databases
and electronic journals that selectors and fac-
ulty had been wanting. Because our statewide
consortium picks up many general databases,
we are able to use our funds for the specialized
products that really fit with the curricular and
research needs of our institution.”

Edward Shreeves: “Certainly any
money saved has been used for other infor-
mation products, not necessarily for other
databases.”

6) Do you think the move to electronic
databases should cause the wholesale discar-
riage of print indexes? Has this happened in
your library?

Stephen Bosch: “Locally, we are now
beginning to drop print subscriptions and ac-
tually remove print from the shelves. Others
may not be so quick to do this.”

James Burgett with Mary Vass: “Print
indexes replaced by electronic surrogates tend
to languish on the shelf, no longer consulted by
even the professional librarians. They take up
space and require some level of maintenance.
Still, this does not justify the wholesale dis-
carding of these valuable resources. In the best
of all possible library worlds, there would be a
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nationally or at least regionally coordinated ef- fort to develop repositories or archives of such print materials, much as CRL is doing with JSTOR journals. Having these print indexes housed in distributed collections across the country would insure the continued preservation of the information they contain, yet free many libraries, sorely strapped for shelf and storage space, to remove them from the active collection without regret or guilt, as they rely increasingly on the electronic access to that information. As a fairly conservative land- grant institution, we have been very reluctant to discard print. Primarily, we have put into storage print indexes that are duplicated by online resources and are planning to explore opportunities to do some sharing of archival copies with consortial partners in the Information Alliance, consisting of U. of KY, U. of Tennessee, and Vanderbilt University.

Lynn Chmelir: “I am a little surprised at the reluctance to cancel print indexes. Many paper runs have been removed from prime reference shelving locations, but they have not been discarded.”

Jennifer Duncan: “At the present time, many electronic databases cannot replace the backfiles of their print equivalents simply because the electronic products do not generally replicate the content of the print. However, this pattern does seem to be changing as vendors add retrospective content either as an add-on to existing subscriptions, or, more often, as an additional product for which there is, of course, an additional charge. Even so, a host of factors would prevent our library from discarding the backfiles wholesale (although we have canceled many ongoing print subscriptions in favor of the electronic). First and foremost, until there is an archival solution for the electronic content of these databases, we consider the print backfiles as our insurance that the content will remain available to our users. Databases are in the crosshairs here at USU as we are in a constant budget crunch. By referring users to the print, we can often get something that has been identified as useful from somewhere else, but you need to know it exists first. Online reference materials get a lot of use, but we would sacrifice something that has been identified as useful elsewhere. 7) If you were in a budget crunch would databases be on your hit list? Which databases, or types of databases, would be on your hit list?

Stephen Bosch: “We would be looking for products that contained significant overlap with other products, and would look to protect full-text content over simple index tools.”

James Burgett with Mary Vass: “That’s precisely the situation this fiscal year. And yes, electronic databases are on the hit list. Generally, targets for cancellation are those that duplicate others which we own. We compare the similar resources, try to determine as accurately as possible where the trade-offs are, and come to a compromise decision that retains the better or best of comparable products — based on campus needs. This applies to all subject areas, including reference resources. Usage statistics play a major role in the decision-making process, although other factors, such as uniqueness of the information, ease-of-use, reliability, longevity, etc., are considered as well.”

Lynn Chmelir: “No, not really. A & I databases provide citations to resources that we may or may not own. We can always get something that has been identified as useful from somewhere else, but you need to know it exists first. Online reference materials get a lot of use, but we would sacrifice something that has been identified as useful elsewhere. 8) In looking at databases that index journals, does overlap play a role in dropping database subscriptions? Do you use products like Serials Solutions to discover where there is overlap among databases? What other methods do you use? Do use statistics play into such decisions?

Stephen Bosch: “Overlap would be very important. We do look at Serials Solutions data; we also load file lists and do our own analysis.”

James Burgett with Mary Vass: “Depth and breadth of coverage of the journal list are crucial to making a choice between two comparable products. Overlap and duplication can be deciding factors in retaining or canceling databases. Of course, there are always trade-offs since no two products are exactly alike. Again, the principles that apply to selecting print serials and monographs also govern the acquisition and retention of databases. Although we haven’t applied collection description tools, such as Conspectus categories and levels, specifically to databases, I suspect that we are all basing decisions on what level of coverage in a specific subject area is needed on our respective campuses. Without this balance, needs versus funds would be at odds at any level. Without usage statistics, there are no guidelines to determine where to cut. If usage statistics are available, we would look at the overwhelming array of products versus the limited financial resources available. We have not used commercial products like Serials Solutions for comparing overlap, but have tended to rely on vendor-supplied spreadsheets, as well as on focused, in-house studies that go beyond title overlap comparisons. We try to take a comprehensive look at the products being compared, and evaluate ‘eye appeal’ (interface), ease of navigation, reliability of the product, promptness of tech support, downtime, etc. Certainly, usage statistics are very important, and they are becoming even more useful now that efforts like COUNTER are making them more reliable, more accurate, or at least more consistent.”

Lynn Chmelir: “Yes. We don’t have a service at present. Individual selectors make comparisons and often they share their work with disciplinary colleagues at other institutions. We are getting better at collecting use

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statistics for databases and would use them if crunch time comes.”

**Jennifer Duncan:** “Overlap does play a small roll in our decision making process. However, examining overlap really only works if you examine the report title by title. Thus, preparing an overlap analysis can be quite a time commitment, although it is definitely worth doing. Many times the unique titles, the ones that we are paying premium dollars for, are things that we don’t care about at all. As Ken Frazier has recently suggested, it is possible that students are chocking on the number of database and full text options that we are giving them. While he was referring to the ‘Big Deal,’ I think this argument also holds up vis-à-vis the huge aggregator products that promise quantities of content that may or may not be useful to the support of the curricular and research mission at a given institution. Thus, and this is stating the obvious, ‘more’ unique titles doesn’t necessarily mean ‘useful’ unique titles. I have recently used the new Serials Solutions tool to compare overlap between two products and I found it to be an enormous time-saver. I highly recommend it to anyone who has an overlap analysis project. We do use statistics but are always careful to take them with a grain of salt. Until we are prepared an overlap analysis can be quite a time commitment, although it is definitely worth doing. Many times the unique titles, the ones that we are paying premium dollars for, are things that we don’t care about at all. As Ken Frazier has recently suggested, it is possible that students are choking on the number of database and full text options that we are giving them. While he was referring to the ‘Big Deal,’ I think this argument also holds up vis-à-vis the huge aggregator products that promise quantities of content that may or may not be useful to the support of the curricular and research mission at a given institution. 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