Chapter 2
The Impact of Electronic Reference Content and Discovery on Publishers

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ABSTRACT

The introduction of electronic reference sources has changed the landscape for publishers of traditional, vetted reference content. Sharing content, simultaneous use, pricing electronic content for a fair reward, accountability for product use, patron-driven selection of content, and the importance of content discovery are several of the issues and challenges that publishers are grappling with. These issues and challenges are presented from a publisher's perspective and serve as an introduction to the myriad issues with electronic reference discovery and context.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to give librarians a view of reference from a publisher's perspective, with special emphasis on how discovery impacts publishing companies. Which is to say, the chapter offers a fairly general description of the reference landscape, especially how it has and will continue to change, grow, and of course,

in part, shrink. These changes impact libraries, librarians, patrons, students and teachers, and as such, cause much discussion. Here though, the focus is on the business of reference from the publishing side of things. The hope is that with an understanding of some of the challenges the business poses, publishers may help librarians make better, more informed choices.

Specifically, questions surrounding the discoverability of content impact publishers in ways that are different from the impact on libraries. The

influences involved aren't immediately obvious to those who operate outside the business of making and selling reference. So, some sort of brief overview of the business will be helpful as context. Thereafter, there will be some attempt to comment intelligently as to how a) discoverability impacts publishers, and b) how publishers impact discoverability.

The core caveat here is that this is one reference publisher's observations. They bubble out of experiences with print reference, database and e-book publishing, direct selling, and licensing. There is some diversity to this experience, but – like all experience – it is limited. Still, to a certain extent, every publisher is walking in roughly the same direction: toward broader, more effective use of each publisher's content. All this is because broader and more effective use drives the sale of our products.

Put another way, the reference biome is diverse, with product types and distribution channels galore. What's more, the proliferation of electronic formats (for want of a better word) only adds to the diversity. This multiplicity of formats is a complicating factor in collection development efforts of every kind. It is also downright vexing to publishers for a wide variety of reasons.

SHARING

Libraries are about sharing, an admirable tradition whether we're talking about siblings or communities. In times when libraries' primary function was to collect and then make printed things generally available, a great deal of use was gained from sharing a single thing: the printed reference book. These tomes were costly and thus, not usually purchased by consumers, but useful and therefore perfect for collective access. However, the physical nature of the product and the subject matter involved acted as a perfect anchor. One person, in one place could read one volume at a time. (There were and are exceptions to this – inter-

library lending, for instance, but the single-format, single-location, single-user model ruled.)

Today content is distributed to libraries in a wide number of formats. Print continues to hang in there, but database and e-book distribution grow daily and in ways that are more dizzying than meets the eye, and getting dizzier. The idea of "re-purposing" content, of using it in a number of products, has become the norm. As a result, publishers routinely publish the same content in print, online in databases, and in e-book form. So, from a product-design standpoint, there are multiple packages for the same content.

Librarians are aware of this re-purposed content. They see the same material in print and electronic products, both database and e-book, and wonder at the array of prices and terms of access that shower from every publishing house. If fact, virtually every reference publisher has heard the complaint that all this diversity is merely a way to trick libraries into buying the same content twice. This writer isn't going to speak for the entire industry on this matter. However, the intent of most of us is to a) make our content available in whatever form libraries wish to purchase it, and b) try not to bet on any one horse (format, delivery method, discoverability strategy, etc.) because there is no telling how many of the steeds will actually finish the race, much less win it.

To further confound things, non-exclusive distribution rights to content often are licensed to multiple database aggregators. (Full disclosure: Salem Press, the writer's employer, is owned by EBSCO Publishing, a leading database aggregator.) Even more commonly, e-books are distributed either by the publisher directly to libraries or *via* e-book distributors such as NetLibrary, ebrary, Gale Virtual Reference Library, et cetera. This means that the several electronic versions of any given content are available in multiple formats from several sources.

So that you not think this complexity is solely the result of electronic publishing, there are distribution mazes for print, too. Libraries

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