

## Chapter 14

# Indexing Scholarly Reference: Helping Researchers do Less

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### ABSTRACT

*The diminished interaction between novice or non-specialist researcher and trained librarian has its root cause as much in increased financial pressures on libraries as it does with the simultaneous promotion of single search discovery systems being developed for academic and public libraries systems. Nevertheless, the historical context of the role of specialist finding aids in research, and additionally, the renewed appreciation for the value of specialized subject encyclopedias to facilitate solid research, can provide needed context. The application of new technologies to unlock and apply the content of specialized encyclopedias offers a familiar, yet newly-configured approach to discovery and scholarly search. Rather than exposing the novice to an increasing amount of materials they may not be ready to absorb, a renewed attention to this genre within libraries holds the promise of allowing researchers to actually achieve more by researching less.*

### INTRODUCTION

*“But it is not the offensiveness to us indexers of such a suggestion that I would make most prominent or ask your space to point out. It is rather the fact that it voices one of the rankest literary heresies of the age—namely, the idea that*

*anybody can make an index if he only knows the alphabet.”<sup>1</sup> (Fletcher, 1883, p.73)*

The quotation above is taken from correspondence between scholars, librarians and “men of letters” played out in the pages of *The Nation* in 1883. The episode which fostered this discussion was the publication of Dr. William Frederick Poole’s ground-breaking *Index to Periodical Literature*.

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The value of Poole's *Index* was a matter of intense debate among scholar-librarians at the time, but it was immediately popular among working librarians. Its publication triggered the production of subsequent finding aids, including William Thomas Stead's *Index to Periodicals* in 1901 (which introduced the first 'subject headings' to periodicals citations) and, soon thereafter, the first iteration of the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*.

The intense discussions regarding the value of the ground-breaking activity of Poole, Stead, and others presages contemporary discussions of the role of finding aids within library information architecture. The issues addressed in the present volume might be said to be traceable as far back as the invention of indexes themselves within the monastic scriptoria of Western Europe during the Middle Ages.

It offers clues as to the path forward, and insight into contemporary activities among information providers seeking to maximize the opportunities now presented through the massive digitization of scholarly materials. It further reveals that parties active the present information industry participate in a continuum of discussion concerning appropriate mechanisms for access to research materials, particularly those mechanisms appropriate for the novice or non-specialist researcher. Guiding the novice or non-specialist has historically been handled through the application of specialized reference works, and now in new clothing, e-reference.

What can be offered technologically to bridge the space between the traditional practice of introductory reference and the advance of vast aggregation systems linking to terabytes of full text documents? What can technology do to incorporate the accumulated wisdom of more traditional research methodologies, while still make the most of the speed and scope of Web-based queries?

As the quotation above suggests, a thread which echoes the scholarly debate of years past with those of the present is, at least in part, the

re-evaluation of the role of *scholarly indexing*. This issue is set in relief with the advent of full-text "string" searching. Put differently, the issue revolves around the role of *mediation* within the library setting. Can library staff responsible leave a researcher in a library without the assistance of a librarian or easy access to authoritative introductory material, and expect the researcher to leave with a satisfactory research experience? Can new information systems replace the traditional function of the authoritative reference work, or the reference librarian themselves?

E-reference anticipates a research landscape in which library users may have no need to set foot in a library at all, even less working directly with a trained librarian. In some quarters of public and academic library administration, this is viewed as *a fait accompli*, based not simply (though substantially) on library budget constraints, but also upon the growing evangelism for single search software solutions. The goal of these single search systems is to recast library resources in a manner similar to searching the Web itself, and, it is hoped, encourage the Web-savvy novice researcher to explore the special or unique contents of the library, rather than searching only outside the realm of a library's collection.

With this some historical context established, our goal now is to explore some options. We will narrow our focus now to the way in which e-reference in general, and scholarly reference in particular, serves to *prepare* the novice for more serious research. We will focus on one vital type of publication found in abundance in every serious library. As in the past, this one genre of materials is constructed specifically to aid the researcher to getting started confidently with new research.

This genre remains immensely valuable to librarian, scholar, novice researcher, or non-specialist. It is vastly underused. It is inherently multi-disciplinary. Indeed, in the absence of the mediation of a reference specialist, its use can reliably assist the non-specialist in moving through

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