

Chapter 15

Open Web Capture for Libraries: Reinventing Subject Encyclopedias for the Open Web

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ABSTRACT

One of the principle purposes of reference, especially subject encyclopedias, is to facilitate a new learner's approach to a field of study by providing context and vocabulary for the effective use of the rest of the library. Some have even referred to the subject encyclopedia as the "Rolls Royce of the Library" (East, 2010). With the economic pressures on libraries and the dramatic changes in usage patterns brought on by the shift from print to electronic content, subject encyclopedias must be re-invented if they are to embody their intended function. While print reference has been overshadowed by information on the Web, studies on student research habits show that the need for context, which reference provides, is higher than ever before. This chapter will argue for the contemporary relevance of the subject encyclopedia in response to student research needs in the information age and explore current and possible visions for the transformation of the subject encyclopedia to suit digital media and the open Web in particular.

INTRODUCTION

David Kronick, a librarian and information scientist in the 1970s, introduced the distinction between "primary" and "secondary" sources in academic work (McArthur, 1986). Others later

added "tertiary" to handle the differences between commentary ("secondary") and summary or overview sources. Most reference works, such as subject encyclopedias, subject dictionaries, or biographical dictionaries are either "secondary" or "tertiary." Entries in reference books are distinctive from other types of sources for a number of reasons: they are atomic, self-contained; they

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are, by design, easily digestible in a discrete amount of time; and they are often linked by cross-references to other entries and by citations to further resources, providing an excellent launch point for a learner's inquiry.

The transition from print to electronic content means that print subject encyclopedias have been overshadowed by the vast array of information available online. Most of us are familiar with a sense of being overwhelmed that is symptomatic of internet use. "Information overload" is a frequent frustration for anyone searching the open Web. Social networking expert Clay Shirky (2008) points out, however, that since the invention of the Gutenberg Press there has been more information available to any one person than he or she can possibly consume in a lifetime. Some even argue that information overload existed much earlier (Blair, 2010). In any case, this advent of indigestible amounts of information has forced society to develop various filtering methods to narrow the field of information to that most relevant to the learner. Shirky gives the example of a spam filter on an email client. He also points out that despite our efforts the spam keeps coming, forcing us to reconfigure our filters again and again. Confronted by the transmission of information that the Internet allows, traditional filtering methods are breaking down. What we are dealing with is not information overload, but what Shirky calls "filter failure." The solution to the problem of filter failure does not lie in merely tweaking the filters currently available, but in creating new structures specifically adapted to the Web (Shirky, 2008).

The subject encyclopedia acts as a kind of information filter. The traditional print encyclopedia facilitates learning for someone new to a field, who can browse through headings, as well as the expert, who can go directly to content with a high degree of specificity or learn about an unfamiliar portion of their field. A given entry is crafted by authors and editors to accommodate a prescribed audience level of depth and coverage, so that only the most important aspects of the topic are

covered. The electronic encyclopedia, although it can be browsed in the manner of a static e-book, is currently designed the way the rest of the Web is designed: to be searchable with keywords and linkable with links. This format does filter out entries that are less relevant to the inquiry term. However, it is likely to confuse the exploratory researcher, who does not yet know what she is searching for.

Subject encyclopedias are being re-envisioned and re-deployed for use on the free Web to the benefit of students and other end users. Subject encyclopedias have the potential to relieve confusion caused by "filter failure," information overload, and other difficulties that face researchers today. In order to accomplish this, these books need to be reconfigured and revitalized for a new online digital life. Electronic subject encyclopedias must retain their ability to supply a learner with appropriate levels of context and guidance for specific stages of inquiry while migrating to the open Web.

The rest of this chapter begins by discussing the state of subject encyclopedias and academic research in the digital age, highlighting student use of the open Web, especially Wikipedia, and drawing out the challenges presented to researchers during this process. The authors describe how subject encyclopedias can help address these challenges and propose some ways in which subject encyclopedias are being reinvented in order to do so. Examples of current models for this reinvention are identified, and the chapter concludes with an exploration of future development and research opportunities.

THE VALUE OF SUBJECT ENCYCLOPEDIAS

Twenty-five years ago, most academic research was carried out within the confines of the physical library, or with the use of print resources obtained directly from the library. The traditional value of subject encyclopedias is evident in their treatment

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