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# Reference 2.0: The Future of Shrinking Print Reference Collections Seems Destined for the Web

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# Reference 2.0

The future of shrinking print reference collections seems destined for the Web

by Paul Hellyer



**T**he reference collection at William & Mary Law Library, like most reference collections, occupies prime real estate. It's close to the entrance and just a few steps away from the reference desk and librarians' offices. According to library policy, only titles that are frequently used should be in the collection. But when the librarians recently weeded it, they couldn't help noticing that some volumes had gathered a layer of dust. Only a handful of reference titles seemed to be getting frequent use.

In response to this low usage, many titles have been pulled from the collection in recent years, but weeding reveals another problem—empty shelves. The acquisition of new titles hasn't kept pace with the number of discards, so with each weeding, the library's reference collection gets smaller. The librarians began to wonder if this collection of "frequently used" materials, which occupies such a visible place in the library, was going to disappear altogether.

The problem at William & Mary doesn't seem to be an isolated one. The author conducted an online survey last fall to gauge the state of reference collections at academic law libraries and gathered 75 responses. Fifty-five percent of respondents say that usage of their print reference collections has gone down during the past 5 to 10 years, while less than 10 percent say it went up. More than half say they expect the title count of their reference collections to decrease during the next 5 to 10 years, compared to 5 percent who say they expect it to increase. Slightly more than half report that their reference collections are getting smaller relative to their overall collections.

Studies at libraries outside the legal field have confirmed that print reference titles aren't getting a lot of use these days. A study published last year in *Public Libraries* reported that 81 percent of reference titles at a public library in Florida weren't used even once during the course of a year, while another study published in 2005 in the *Journal of Academic Librarianship* found that more than 90 percent of reference titles at a university library weren't used during the busiest four months of the year.

## **A large majority of respondents say that online sources were an important or very important reason for the declining usage of print reference collections.**

What happened to bring about this decline? In the survey conducted by the author last fall, a large majority of respondents say that online sources were an important or very important reason for the declining usage of print reference collections. Of course, online sources have drawn users away from books generally, but they seem to be having a particular impact on reference collections. Many patrons who are still willing to read a narrative text in print will demand greater convenience and currency when it comes to reference sources, making it harder for print reference sources to compete with their

online counterparts. After all, why get up from your desk to check a print reference source when a more current online version is at your fingertips?

## **Non-law academic libraries have already embraced the idea of online reference collections.**

Financial factors are also at work. Nearly 60 percent of survey respondents say that budgetary constraints were an important or very important reason for the declining size of their print reference collections. Rising prices for print publications, combined with new expenses for subscription databases, have forced many libraries to cancel some of their print reference titles. Because currency is so important for most reference sources, a good print reference collection can quickly wither away when libraries stop investing in updates and new titles.

Although it's too soon to give up on print reference collections, law libraries can play a constructive role in the transition to online sources by creating online reference collections. An online reference collection is a Web page with links to online equivalents of sources that can be found (or were once found) in print reference collections. Creating an online reference collection can help steer patrons towards reliable sources, while highlighting the strengths of a library's subscription databases.

Non-law academic libraries have already embraced the idea of online reference collections. Examples of these

*Report* rankings, only five have created online reference collections, most of which focus on non-legal sources. As a result, many law library patrons may be

unaware of the legal reference tools available to them in their libraries' subscription databases and may be over-relying on popular Web sites like Google and Wikipedia for their reference needs.

Creating an online legal reference collection is easy. To some extent, a print reference collection can serve as a guide, since many sources exist in both print and online formats. Browsing subscription databases and the Web can reveal additional sources. The goal isn't to link to every legal reference tool available; a short list of the most helpful sources can meet most users' needs without causing an information overload.

William & Mary Law Library recently launched an online reference collection featuring about 20 links to legal reference sources from the library's subscription databases, most of them from Lexis and Westlaw. Examples include *Black's Law Dictionary* on Westlaw, the Martindale-Hubbell directory on Lexis, *American Jurisprudence* on Westlaw, and *Bieber's Dictionary of Legal Abbreviations* on Lexis. Patrons looking for non-legal reference sources are offered a link to the main campus library's online reference collection.

The appearance of online reference collections doesn't mean the end of traditional print collections—at least not yet. In response to the author's survey, only one academic law library reports that it stopped maintaining a separate print reference collection, and most libraries report that some types of print reference sources are still being used at least once a week.

Legal dictionaries appear to be the most popular print reference source; more than 80 percent of respondents say that they are still being used at least weekly. General dictionaries and legal encyclopedias follow close behind, again with most respondents reporting at least weekly use. Libraries that keep legal forms, codes, and court rules in their reference collections also report that these items get relatively high use. Print reference collections may not be as important as they once were, but for the time being there are still good reasons for libraries to maintain them.

With all the hype about online sources, it's easy to forget that print sources still offer some advantages. For example, browsing is often more efficient in print than online, since people can usually flip through and skim paper pages faster than Web pages. Browsing in print is especially useful as compared to online retrieval when a user is unsure how to spell the word or name being searched—perhaps one reason why print dictionaries remain popular. Moreover, useful features found in print sources are sometimes omitted from their online counterparts. Patrons searching in legal encyclopedias are usually best served by an index, but most legal encyclopedias on Westlaw and Lexis don't have this feature. The omission of title pages, publication dates, and page numbers from online sources can frustrate users who need to cite the sources they use.

For some patrons, online reference sources may pose special problems. Patrons who aren't part of a law library's usual group of users (such as public patrons at a law school library) may be unable to access online reference sources that are in password-protected databases. This is a common problem since many online legal reference sources are found on Lexis and Westlaw. Furthermore, many patrons need to make copies of the sources they consult; if they don't have printing privileges at the library, they need to rely on print sources that they can take to a photocopier. Other patrons may be unfamiliar with online research and will require considerable librarian assistance if print alternatives are unavailable.

Despite the remaining advantages that print sources can offer, the relative strength of online legal reference is likely to become more pronounced over time. More patrons are becoming receptive to online research, and online publishers are steadily overcoming many of the remaining deficiencies in their databases by adding indexes, page images, better search engines, and other enhancements. The number of reference materials not available online is continually shrinking, and it's reasonable to assume that if an item is useful enough to be in a reference collection, someone is eventually going to make it available online. The growing presence of laptops and handheld devices in libraries gives patrons even less reason to use print reference sources.

In this period of declining usage of print sources, librarians need to carefully manage their print reference collections to keep them relevant and cost effective. Print reference collections will need to be regularly weeded, and titles that were

once considered essential may need to be reevaluated. One of the key rationales for having a reference collection is to segregate high-use items from the rest of the collection, so it makes little sense to keep unused titles in reference. But determining which titles get used isn't easy, since reference titles typically don't circulate. In published studies of reference collection usage, researchers have relied on reshelving statistics and recorded observations by librarians, but these techniques will probably be too time-consuming or impractical for most libraries.

For the most part, librarians will have to exercise their own judgment in deciding which reference titles to remove. A key consideration is whether a print title offers any advantage over online alternatives. If not, it's a good candidate for removal. The author's survey showed that general encyclopedias, bibliographies, periodical indexes, and Shepard's Citations were the least used types of print reference sources and the most likely to be removed due to low use. Of course, removing titles from a reference collection doesn't necessarily mean discarding them—another option is to simply move them to the stacks.

Moving or discarding reference titles can benefit a library in several ways.

- **Save money.** Most print reference titles require updating and/or frequent replacements; the money saved from cancellations can be reinvested in online databases or other resources that would better serve the library's patrons.

## pushing the limits— continued from page 15

animal kingdom. For now, at least.

In the meantime, considering the ambiguity of the *ADA* regarding service animals, a handy item to keep at the reference desk is "Commonly Asked Questions about Service Animals in Places of Business," available at [www.usdoj.gov/crt/drssec.php](http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/drssec.php).

Until the new regulations are passed, your best lawsuit-avoidance tactic is to paste that public relations smile on your face, offer good customer service to all patrons, and be prepared to admit Fido, Porky, or Polly. And perhaps keep some of those discarded loose-leaf pages around...they might come in handy. ■

*Barbara J. Stinson, M.S., is a reference librarian at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She is also a frequent speaker at library conferences and has published articles on library services for patrons with disabilities.*

- **Make the collection attractive.** By keeping a reference collection lean and relevant, librarians can make it more attractive to their patrons. It's easier for patrons to find useful reference books when they're not lost amid a crowd of unwanted materials.
- **Allow for flexibility.** By moving low-use items to the stacks, libraries can permit them to circulate, allowing for more flexibility on the rare occasions when patrons still need to use them.
- **Create more space.** Reducing the size of the collection can free up physical space in the library. This is particularly important since reference collections command coveted positions. Space that was once occupied by reference shelves might be perfect for computer kiosks, display cases, or a lounge area.

The declining use of print reference collections doesn't have to be viewed as a problem. As long as users' needs are being met, it should make no difference whether information is found in print or online. Librarians can take the opportunity to promote online reference sources, while smaller print collections can free up physical space and funding that can be put to new uses. ■

## Helpful Resources: Service Animals and the ADA

ADA Business Brief on Service Animals  
[www.ada.gov/svcanimb.htm](http://www.ada.gov/svcanimb.htm)

Disability Rights Section of the U.S.  
Department of Justice  
800/514-0301

Nondiscrimination on the Basis of Disability by Public Accommodations and in Commercial Facilities, 73 Fed. Reg. 34508-34557, Proposed June 17, 2008, to be codified at 28 C.F.R. 36.104

"Commonly Asked Questions about Service Animals in Places of Business"  
[www.usdoj.gov/crt/drssec.php](http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/drssec.php)