

Looking for Love in All the Wrong Places:
Accessing Sexual and Reproductive Health Information
via the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature*

Jennifer Burek Pierce^{a,*}

Debora Shaw^b

^aSchool of Library and Information Science, Indiana University, 755 W. Michigan Street,
Indianapolis, IN 46202

^bSchool of Library and Information Science, Indiana University, 1320 E. Tenth Street,
Bloomington, IN 47405

Abstract

The Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature (RGPL) has been described as a cultural barometer. It supports scholars of history and culture by providing access to ideas circulated via the mass media in earlier times, but its own coverage and indexing practices also reveal attitudes and values toward issues of the time. The Progressive Era (1900-1924) coincides with the founding and growth of the *RGPL*. Examining how the *Guide* directed readers' attention to matters of sexual and reproductive health in its first quarter century demonstrates changes in social attitudes

* Corresponding author. E-mail address jenpierc@iupui.edu

and has implications for scholarly work. The array of index terms required to locate information on this topic indicates both barriers to information access for contemporary readers as well as challenges for present-day scholars concerned with recovering information of the era.

Introduction

The value of *The Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature* to scholars of history and culture lies not simply in its utility for providing access to articles but also in its reflection of certain cultural norms. One rather insouciant commentary on the *Guide's* status as a cultural barometer notes its shortcomings as “a book to be browsed in simply for kicks” but contends that the index is nonetheless “like pumpkin pie, LSD, and television . . . an amorphous collection of American mores and attitudes” (Katz, 1967, p. 555). As this evocative and eclectic list implies, the *Guide* reflects contemporary cultural preoccupations, ranging from the traditional to the technological. In this, the *Guide* does more than indicate what information has been available to the general public; it reflects the values and the attitudes of those producing information -- as well as those who create access to information through editorial direction and indexing decisions. This latter feature, the mirroring of ideas the culture appears to accept or disdain, is the focus of this review.

Advances in science and technology often contribute to and change cultural understanding, even though such changes may be controversial or even resisted. Editorial decisions by the popular press, presumably based on perceived cultural norms, can influence the dissemination of information from scientific and technical communities to general readers, perhaps as much as the nature or validity of researchers' findings. Consequently, the general periodical literature is a

logical venue for mapping the introduction of new knowledge and its impact on existing beliefs. The Progressive Era, associated generally with the first two decades of the twentieth century, is a compelling time in American history in which to observe the dissemination of scientific discovery through periodical literature and the subsequent confrontations between scientific advances and existing norms and values. Because of the prominence of Progressive Era reform movements that sought social change, whose efforts were grounded in information provided by both journalists and researchers, numerous cultural norms were challenged during these years. Coincidentally, *The Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature* itself emerged during this period between Reconstruction after the U.S. Civil War and the start of World War I.

Among the many movements constituting the culture of reform during the early twentieth century was the Purity Movement, itself an amalgamation of organizations with differing perspectives regarding sex. Those affiliated with the Purity Movement included citizen groups investigating the scope of sex-related social problems such as prostitution, organizations hoping to see that only morally uplifting entertainment would be available, feminists seeking eradication of a double standard regarding male sexual activity as normal while female sexual activity remained promiscuous, ministers encouraging modest conduct, and medical doctors contending new scientific information should change both behaviors and attitudes toward pre- and extra-marital sexual activity. As Brandt (1985, p. 8-9) notes, "Physicians devoted to the venereal problem become an influential force in Progressive Reform. 'Progressive physicians' were generally those doctors who committed themselves to the larger political and social currents of reform during the first two decades of the twentieth century. . . . In fact, venereal disease, as a social construct, provided a means of organizing and explaining many of the social dilemmas

which Progressivism sought to address.” One result of these diverse efforts to reframe social attitudes and individual actions was the publication of numerous articles in general audience magazines concerning matters of sexual and reproductive health.

The leading consumer periodicals of the day – from *Ladies’ Home Journal* to *Harper’s Bazaar*— were to have been found on newsstands, in library reading rooms, and in readers’ living. These publications represented not only openness about topics once regarded as inappropriate for any sort of discussion and a source of reliable information in contrast to library reticence regarding access to materials on sexuality and pamphleteers who were willing to mail health information of not unerring authority directly to individuals. Articles published by *Good Housekeeping* and other respected serials were significant in the dissemination of reliable, authoritative sexual and reproductive health information during the Progressive Era. For scholars interested in the public health information that was provided through these outlets as well as the nature of the ensuing controversy as that information became public and began to challenge cultural norms, these articles are no longer so readily available. The *Readers’ Guide* becomes key, both in the traces it leaves and those it conceals, for revealing the nature of scientific information available and the cultural reactions to open discussion of once-taboo topics such as sexual and reproductive health.

Locating periodical articles which would have provoked concern, approval, interest, or outrage from Progressive Era readers is not a simple or clear-cut endeavor. There is the matter of determining the state of contemporary science, which was evolving rapidly, as reflected by developments such as the confirmation of the discovery of Salvarsan for the treatment of syphilis by 1910, the subsequently modified version of the drug resulting from recognition of Salvarsan’s

toxicity, and the changing understanding of the microbes which caused particular sexually transmitted diseases. Social attitudes further obscure the trail. The medical community, for example, had for some time understood the connection between syphilis and ophthalmia neonatorum, as a state public health bulletin (Davis, 1910, p. 86) and other sources testify. In the pages of *Ladies' Home Journal*, however, the connection remained oblique, even as Helen Keller described the importance of prophylactic treatment to prevent blindness in infants (Keller, 1907, p. 14). Producing a relatively complete retrospective assessment of access to sexual and reproductive health information, then, is challenging because of both the fluctuating state of science and the cautious approach to information provision that avoided confronting conservative attitudes too directly.

This examination of *The Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature* considers the problems associated with scholarly access to historical information through the particular matter of locating Progressive Era information on sexual and reproductive health. Analyzing the *Guide's* indexing structure and vocabulary and the existing scholarly literature on use of the *Guide* for access to historical information leads to an analysis of the array of terminology needed to determine the extent of sexual and reproductive health information available to contemporary readers of periodical literature. The divergent terminologies are considered for their implications regarding issues of access to historical and cultural primary literature.

Producing the *Readers' Guide*

The *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature* first appeared in 1901, as a supplement to the *Cumulative Book Index* published by the H. W. Wilson Company. The production of the *Readers' Guide* is explained in a series of contemporary and retrospective documents. Editors of the *Guide* produced introductions to each compiled volume offering insights into the indexing process and changes in terminology. Articles in professional publications offered librarians biographical information about those who produced this tool of the trade, its development as the *Guide* matured, announcements of landmarks achieved by the *Guide*, and even occasional short treatises on its uses. While articles by Progressive Era editors are relatively sparse, as the *Guide* endured and celebrated its longevity, later editors explained the development of their indexing processes. As few scholarly items assess the *Readers' Guide* (e.g., Bone, 1967; Lawler, 1950; Biggs, 1992) this history depends largely on documents created by the indexers themselves, supplemented by trade publications.

The *Guide's* fiftieth anniversary inspired a small spate of articles during the 1950s. Although these accounts vary a bit in their descriptions of the *Guide's* development, the narrative conflicts illustrate transitions in the working methods for producing the index. As one Wilson indexer began her explanation of her work, "There are so many details in the making of an index that this can be only a brief outline of the mechanical processes involved in publishing the Wilson periodical indexes" (Rakestraw, 1948, p. 796). From the details of work which each author sees fit to include, though, some observations about the *Guide's* development of subject terminology may be made.

Accounts in the library literature and the introductions to the volumes of the *Guide* themselves reveal several aspects of periodical indexing in the early twentieth century. First, the indexers with responsibility for the *Guide* at this time were primarily female librarians, most often recruited from prominent Midwestern and East Coast academic libraries or larger public libraries. Referred to as editors, these professional librarians had responsibility for a range of activities, from determining what to index and what terminology to use to supervising copy editors. Some editors were thought to have been particularly interested in the needs of the readers for whom the *Guide* is named, rather than focused on how other professional librarians like themselves might benefit from such an index. From the first compilation of the *Guide*, editors signaled their approaches to the selection of terminology for this finding aid. Contemporary writings also suggested that the nature of indexing practice – the basis for selecting articles and the terminology which was to represent them – evolved as the publication’s scope expanded.

The first compilations of the *Readers’ Guide* into multi-year volumes indicated, through brief editorial prefaces, how access to articles was determined. Guthrie, in the earliest preface, explained that editorial preference was for subject access rather than key word access: “Articles are indexed under the subject headings which most nearly describe the actual topics treated, regardless of the headings suggested by the frequently misleading titles” (1905, p. viii).

Additional explanation indicated that cataloging practices – noting the presence of maps and illustrations, for example – informed this indexing. Just five years later, Guthrie acknowledged that the terminology which served as access points in the first years of the *Guide* had been adapted, likely to accommodate the expanding range of material the index covered. The editor noted “constantly changing usage” as a factor in the shift to “use more specific subject headings

and to subdivide under those already used” (Guthrie, 1910, p. i). Whereas the first volume had articulated a relatively straightforward approach to selecting index terms, this introduction to the second five-year compilation began to reveal the complexity of such an undertaking.

Encyclopedias, perceived to be easily used by the average reader (Biggs, 1992), were one basis for the identification of indexing terms (Guthrie, 1910). The editor also describes reliance on specialized reference tools, *Cumulative Book Index* headings, and Library of Congress subject terms (Guthrie, 1910). Terminology changes identified by the editor included the substitution of Public health for Public hygiene (Guthrie, 1910, p. i). Prefaces to subsequent collected volumes of the Guide noted the continued incorporation of subject headings for access points (Wilson, 1915; Sherwood, 1919). Thus, it is evident that early compilations of the *Guide*, while serving as reliable points of access to the periodical literature, also reflected organizational expansion and change necessary to accommodate growth.

It is important to consider, though, the extent to which these developments represented change from earlier efforts at periodical indexing. Lawler (1950) articulates the ways that even in these years characterized by expansion and change, more consistency and focus of purpose was achieved than was represented by the work of Poole’s index. First, where Poole had depended on volunteers scattered throughout the country, the *Readers’ Guide* had a paid, collocated workforce whose editorial staff sought consistency in indexing. Next, in contrast to the title-based indexing employed by Poole, the *Guide* was based on author and subject indexing, with cross-reference terms as well. To keep related content together despite an expanding vocabulary of index terms, *Guide* staff adopted inverted subject headings. Still, despite these practices intended to allow access to information based “common usage” of language (Lawler, 1950, p. 102), other editorial

practices were at odds with this goal, including a tendency in early years to consult University of Minnesota faculty to resolve preferences for particular terms in their areas of expertise. Editorial staff, too, had subject area expertise, as the primary effort in indexing assignments was to try to have staff work with the same periodicals to achieve greater familiarity and consistency in content areas (Lawler, 1950).

A 1914 report by the Committee on Periodical Indexing to the members of the Keystone State Library Association commented on use of the *Readers' Guide* in libraries, indicating something of how others perceived this index during these formative, if mutable, years. The report noted, first, the Wilson Company's effective monopoly on periodical indexing at the time and suggested that the elimination of competition impaired libraries' public service efforts. The report also presented as problematic the exclusive reliance on American periodicals. Katz (1967) describes the index's ability to serve as a guide to all things Americana as its defining feature; the writers of the 1914 report were less than pleased by this aspect of the *Guide*. With its domestic content, the *Guide* was decried here as "provincial" and "a key to American thought rather than that of the civilized world" (Poland, Carr & Thomson, 1914, p. 903). The report's authors sought inclusion of international content and features that would enhance users' access to periodical literature. Poland, Carr, and Thompson were concerned with information access but sought to influence decisions about content rather than the vocabulary of indexing terms.

Nonetheless, it was indexing terminology, given at least one internal document produced by the Wilson Company, in which the editorial staff was interested. There was a corporate effort to manage decisions about the increasingly complex indexing terminology. Creating consistency in

multiple indexing titles published by Wilson became a goal (Wilson, 1923). Consequently, *RGPL* editors acquired further parameters, namely inter-organizational consistency, that influenced decisions about indexing practice during the Progressive Era.

An article celebrating the thirtieth anniversary of the index in 1930 presents a chronology of the *Guide*'s development and basic facts about its content. This source gave the number of periodical titles indexed in the *Readers' Guide* as expanding from fourteen to twenty within two years, but no allusion to the then-current number of titles is made. Other sources, though, note discrepancies between numbers offered by *RGPL*: for example, the first issue (February 1901) covered seven rather than ten titles (Rettig, 1992). Names of librarians, their previous employers, and occasional details of their lives, such as of "Miss Guthrie" who "carried on the work until 1915 when ill-health forced her to retire from active work of any kind" were provided ("The Readers' Guide Has an Anniversary," 1930, p. 220). The thirtieth anniversary article emphasized the publication's longevity rather than the techniques of its composition but at the same time presented key elements of the *Guide*'s working: an expanding base of publications to evaluate, an awareness of the needs of the general reading public, and a succession of editors who guide editorial practice. These factors contributed to the importance, and to the inherent unwieldiness, of the selection of index terms.

Fiftieth anniversary treatments of the *Guide* acknowledged its origins in the supplement to the *Cumulative Book Index* extending access from the initial seven periodical titles to 117 by 1951 ("The Readers' Guide: 1901-1951," 1951, p. 591). This half-century anniversary work provided more detailed discussion of indexing practices. The author predicted, rather aptly, that "Changes

in subject headings over the fifty years should interest the social historian no less than the librarian” (TRG: 1901-1951, 1951, p. 592). The examples of these changes were drawn from science and technology: from Kinematograph to Moving pictures, from Flying machines to Airplanes. In this, the author signaled how the *Readers’ Guide* reflected scientific advances and endeavored to construe connections in the midst of change.

Other articles noting the landmark anniversary provided quantitative details regarding the publication – 37,350 pages and approximately 3,473,550 lines of type – before addressing the matter of indexing as well (Potter, 1951). Potter (1951, p. 593) informed readers that “When the *Guide* began there were no subject heading lists except a very small ALA list” and also noted, in comment reflecting on contemporary indexing practices for the *Guide*, that “Encyclopedias . . . furnish many headings for Wilson Company indexes.” Other details of the editorial workings of the *Guide* include Dougan’s decision to pursue advance proofs of a number of periodicals in order to begin indexing at the earliest possible moment (Potter, 1951). Another editor, reflecting on her tenure, acknowledged that more than subject lists and deadlines influenced production of the index:

Let it be said that the minds of the editors are their own best reference works. They bring to their indexing tasks the professional techniques of the cataloger, an understanding of special fields of knowledge, sound judgment, prodigious memory, and that well known intuition – largely feminine at the Wilson Company . . . (Robinson, 1951, p. 605).

Thus, these articles indicate that decisions regarding indexing practices were further influenced by subjective factors. Editors drew not only on professional publications and reference materials;

personal knowledge, judgment, and memory played roles. As time passed, the complexity of these indexing decisions continued to grow.

By 1954, retrospective articles provided an overview of the practices which had developed over the course of many years of the *Guide's* development. Editors discussing indexing practices used to produce the *Guide* referred to Library of Congress Subject Headings, while noting that there were numerous exceptions. One author indicated that under certain conditions, staff developed their own terminology in consultation with specialized reference tools, and they avoided using words they could not locate in such resources (Robinson, 1954). Problems with developing headings for current events content are likewise noted. The practice of "See" references is discussed, with a preference for inclusiveness being expressed except when a reference was "obvious" (Robinson, 1954, p. 204). The final comment on the challenges of indexing the *Guide* was this:

We who work on one index must try to think alike and to learn the framework of past usage and thinking into which our work must fit. We must know when to omit an article too trivial to be of value, but always to include even the short work that has value. We must learn to read or scan the articles, and quickly transform the gist of the matter into one or more subjects, consistent in all respects to what we or our co-worker did yesterday or six months ago, with similar material. And we must be thoroughly familiar with the vocabulary of the many thousands of our subject headings (Robinson, 1954, p. 205).

This passage, in tandem with companion pieces, indicates something of the complexity of indexing work at the *Readers' Guide*. While the author strives to emphasize the consistency of

procedures, the authority of works from which terminology is derived, and the efforts to develop similar mindsets among staff, what stands out is the ongoing need to deal with exceptions to these efforts at orderly procedures. The composite descriptions of indexing activities reveal a sort of dialogue between past and present, and among editors of multiple reference works, in efforts to capture the concepts of a changing world.

Despite the scant secondary information on the *Guide* between the Great Depression and World War II, a picture of the *Readers' Guide* in the early twentieth century emerges with the following features. During the years now labeled as the Progressive Era, the *Guide* saw considerable growth, and this time was marked by a series of transitions in both content and strategies for facilitating access to information. There was a focus on domestic rather than international publications. Practices regarding terminology for the index underwent a series of shifts. When a former *RGPL* editor became editor of *The Columbia Encyclopedia* in 1924, this likely strengthened relationships between the two publications; yet, at the same time, it was clear that the *Guide's* staff increasingly relied on subject specialists to determine index terms.

Complicating this further was the need to reach both into the past and into the future, to ensure historical continuity and forward utility. Editors regarded themselves as bound to a certain extent by previous practice in order to ensure that information on a single topic could be accessed from one year to the next, while at the same time considering future information needs.

The question that emerges, then, is why, given such effort and attention to consistency of indexing practice, information on sexual and reproductive health is dispersed rather than collected in the *Guide* and why articles addressing related concerns seem to have been missed. In

short, how, given reliance on a combination of expert advice and terminology lists, did *RGPL* editors come to effectively restrict access to information on this topic at a time when it was emerging as a focus for public reform efforts? The literature on indexing theory and practice, in tandem with structural models of information provided by the *Guide*, indicate avenues for consideration of these issues.

Indexing Practice and Theory

Issues associated with creating and maintaining indexing terminology have been explored in a number of contexts. Scholars have considered historical and contemporary indexes, as well as to overall construction of a particular index and access to a particular concept. In a related vein, the matter of consistency in indexing practice has been studied. This research repeatedly notes the intricacy and implied meanings of indexing structures.

Scholars concerned with the status of women are among those analyzing the implications of historic indexing terminology. In this, Palmer and Malone (2001, p. 179) observe that indexes function as cultural mirrors which “reveal commonly held beliefs and assumptions about women emanating from both the authors of the publications being organized and from the catalogers who partition the publications by subject.” Their examination of sources such as the *United States Catalog* and the *Cumulative Book Index*, another Wilson product, leads them to conclude that indexing of content related to women is marked first by division from other content areas, then by imprecision in the way sub-topics, including women’s health, have been interpreted. Others have also noted the problems associated with indexing related to gender issues. Long

(1997, p. 118), for example, contends that the *Index Catalogue of the Library of the Surgeon General's Office* compiled between 1880 and 1932 fails to account for women fully or in terms which recognize female interactions with the medical profession as something other than “oddities.” Timmermans, Bowker, and Star (1998), in a study of the Nursing Interventions Classification, conclude that work of this predominantly female profession is incompletely clarified by the NIC terminology, which seeks to elucidate health care practices. These studies, then, indicate certain problems in the use of classification schemes for access to information about women and in particular about their involvement with health care. Given that female readers in particular were understood by Progressive Era periodical editors as a group lacking information regarding sexual and reproductive health, this confluence of scholarly concern over indexing of material pertaining to both women and to health is significant. These studies suggest that the indexing practices enacted by the *Guide's* staff represent another aspect of a broader problem of making health information available, particularly to female audiences.

More general concerns about classification systems include choice of index terminology and the consequences of structures for information access. Berman (1993) has criticized the *Library of Congress Subject Headings* for its choice of terminology as a reflection of dominant social values and prejudices. He argues that even the presence of institutional policies which claim to consider readers' needs in the derivation of access terms does not always translate into the selection of terms which serve a pluralistic readership. These concerns about the nature of information structures as integrators of “social organization” and “moral order” (Bowker & Star, 2000, p. 33) have been articulated more generically as well. Bowker and Star observe that an information structure depends on historical development of an array of information resources,

pragmatic institutional activity, and discursive activity that determines vocabulary and organizes these elements. This has implications for interpretation of historic information; as Bowker and Star indicate, scholars must recognize both text and context of an information structure. Such recognition is germane to understanding *RGPL* editors' representations of periodical articles and also how those portrayals related to social and intellectual issues connected to publishing information on sensitive health matters. In a period which saw major changes in scientific knowledge as well as social attitudes, it seems likely that consistent use of indexing terminology would have been even more difficult than the usual.

The challenges of inter-indexer consistency extend well beyond the *Readers' Guide*; Feinberg (1973) summarizes early work in this area. More recently, Sievert and Andrews (1991) and especially Leininger (2000) have reported rates of inter-indexer consistency of 44 to 50% when working with controlled vocabularies. Consistent indexing is generally assumed to improve retrieval effectiveness (see Cooper [1969] for limitations on this assumption). Consistency would have been particularly difficult to maintain when faced with the relative novelty of a controlled vocabulary for periodical indexing, as well as changes in understanding of sexual and reproductive health matters during these years.

Scholarly Use of RGPL

Some attention has been given to the methodological implications of selecting samples for analysis of periodical literature. Showalter (1977), for example, lists a series of contemporary research papers based on sampling of *RGPL* content. He argues that there are both benefits and

limitations to the use of *RGPL* as a basis for news analysis, including an apparent “de-emphasis on controversial materials” (Showalter, 1977, p. 347). Peacock (1987) further describes the use of the *Guide* as a research tool. Subsequently, Zollars (1994, p. 698) identifies further scholarly work, including prominent methods textbooks, which indicate use of the *Readers’ Guide* as a key tool for research projects and states the need for “over-sampling, cross-references, and other devices . . . as a means to correct or compensate for hidden inaccuracies in index classification.” These publications from the communication literature, rather than LIS, demonstrate both reliance on *RGPL* and continued efforts to discover ways to make the best use of the information access that the *Guide* represents.

Structures for Sexual and Reproductive Health Information in *RGPL*

We considered how a twenty-first century researcher would identify popular literature on sexual and reproductive health from the Progressive Era as a means to explore the structure and evolution of indexing practices of the *Readers’ Guide to Periodical Literature* in its first 25 years, 1900-1924. During this period the *Guide* published five cumulative volumes, covering three to five years. After the first volume (1900-1904) the size of each volume (in number of pages) was approximately the same and the number of periodicals covered was held at around 112. The editors of the 1910-1914 volume estimated it included 225,000 entries, representing 60,000 articles from 7,365 issues of the periodicals covered (preface, p. v). Table 1 provides detail on these cumulative volumes of *RGPL*, and Figure 1 shows the growth of the *Guide* over its first quarter century. Together, these visual elements demonstrate the growth of indexing

work for the *Guide*; a scholar would in turn need to account for shifts and expansion in the number of primary documents available as research materials.

	Periodical titles*	Pages	Number of years	Pages per year
1900-1904	67	1640	5	328
1905-1909	111	2491	5	498.2
1910-1914	116	2868	5	573.6
1915-1918	111	2193	4	548.25
1919-1921	112	1827	3	609
1922-1924	112	1905	3	635

* Number of periodical titles covered in total or in part, from the listing in the introduction to the cumulative volume.

Table 1. Statistical summary of *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature*, 1900-1924

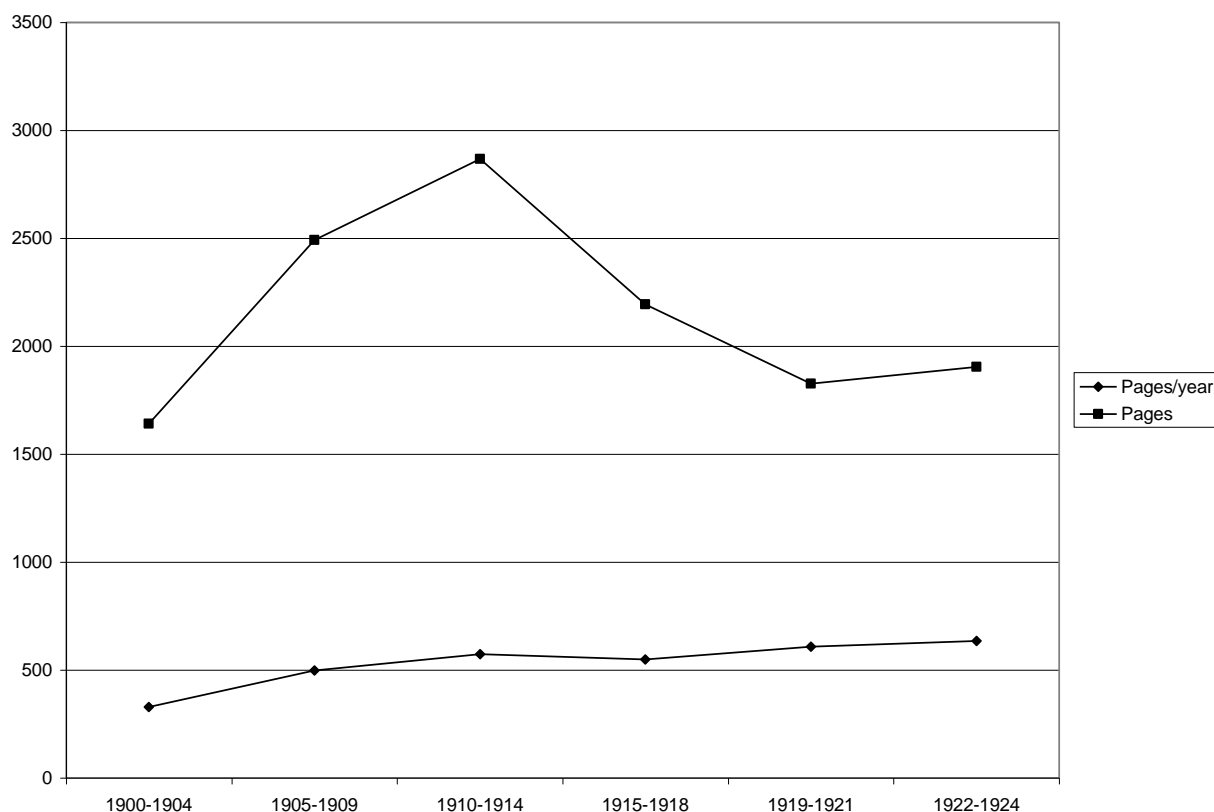


Figure 1. Number of pages and average pages per year in the first five volumes of *RGPL*.

From extensive work with the *Guide*, we identified a list of 69 terms under which information on sexual and reproductive health might be indexed (listed in appendix A). Each term was checked in each of the five cumulative volumes to identify: if the term was present, the number of *see* or *see also* references, the number of sub-entries, and the number of articles indexed by the term (including its sub-entries). Five of our index terms appeared only as cross-references (no articles were indexed under these terms in any of the five volumes), giving a total of 64 terms which appeared at least once as index entries. Because some of the index terms are very broad (Medicine or Woman) the number of articles indexed indicates how many items a researcher

would need to scan, not how many are on the topic of sexual and reproductive health. The total number of potentially relevant articles per cumulative volume ranged from 685 in 1919-1921 to 2733 in 1910-1914. The number of potentially relevant articles per year ranged from 208 in 1900-1904 to 547 in 1910-1914. Table 2 presents the statistics on number of articles on our topic and the nature of the indexing providing access to them. Thus, the *Guide* represents a set of materials which the researcher must further interpret in order to determine a meaningful and relevant compilation of historical materials. Broader terms may direct research toward articles not directly relevant to the particular project, while reliance on narrower terms may omit citations to writing directly related to the scope of inquiry. The researcher who intends to understand whether views articulated in the popular press were representative or extreme or how long certain perspectives persisted may face analysis of a considerable number of articles.

	1904	1909	1914	1918	1921	1924
Articles	1041	2300	2733	987	685	739
Articles/year	208.2	460	546.6	246.75	228.33	246.33
Index terms	39	50	50	46	43	45
Cross-references	8.21	8.54	9.31	6.56	3.75	3.18
Sub-headings	0.97	1.49	1.78	1.87	1.56	1.0

Table 2. Number of articles, average articles per year, number of index entries, cross-references and sub-headings.

The final volume covering a five-year period, the 1910-1914 cumulation, demonstrates what Fugmann (1993, p. 8) labeled the “small systems syndrome”: procedures that work well for

smaller applications can entail considerably more work when applied with larger collections of information. As can be seen in Figure 1, the 1909 and 1914 cumulations used the greatest percentage (50 of 64, or 78%) of the index entries on sexual and reproductive health. The 1914 volume also had the highest number of cross-references, an average of 9.3 per index term. The *RGPL* editors coped with this behemoth by reducing the years covered in the next cumulative volume from five to four, and to three in the next two cumulations. Another innovation in indexing practice was the more extensive use of sub-headings (Guthrie, 1910). This allowed much more explicit indexing. For example, the 1904 entry Children had four sub-headings: Care and hygiene, Diseases, Law, and Management; while the 1924 cumulation added four more subject-related sub-headings (Charities, protection, etc., Growth and development, Photographs and photography, and Religion, as well as five cross-references and nine geographic sub-headings. The expanding specialization of narrower and related terms, then, poses substantial considerations for researchers. Terminology appropriate to research in one year may be useless the next, and the nature of that change may aid or hinder the location of information. In this instance, the first sub-headings for Children would all be consulted for information related to sexual and reproductive health; many of the more specific terms associated with later entries still have potential for relevant content, for example, because of the practices of seeking expert commentary from religious leaders on such matters. This indicates that even the development of more precise indexing still presents linguistic and content relationships for assessment. Figure 2 shows the initial trend to include more subject terms and provide greater specificity in indexing, followed by a decline as the volumes covered fewer years, and presumably did not need as many terms to “spread out” the articles indexed.

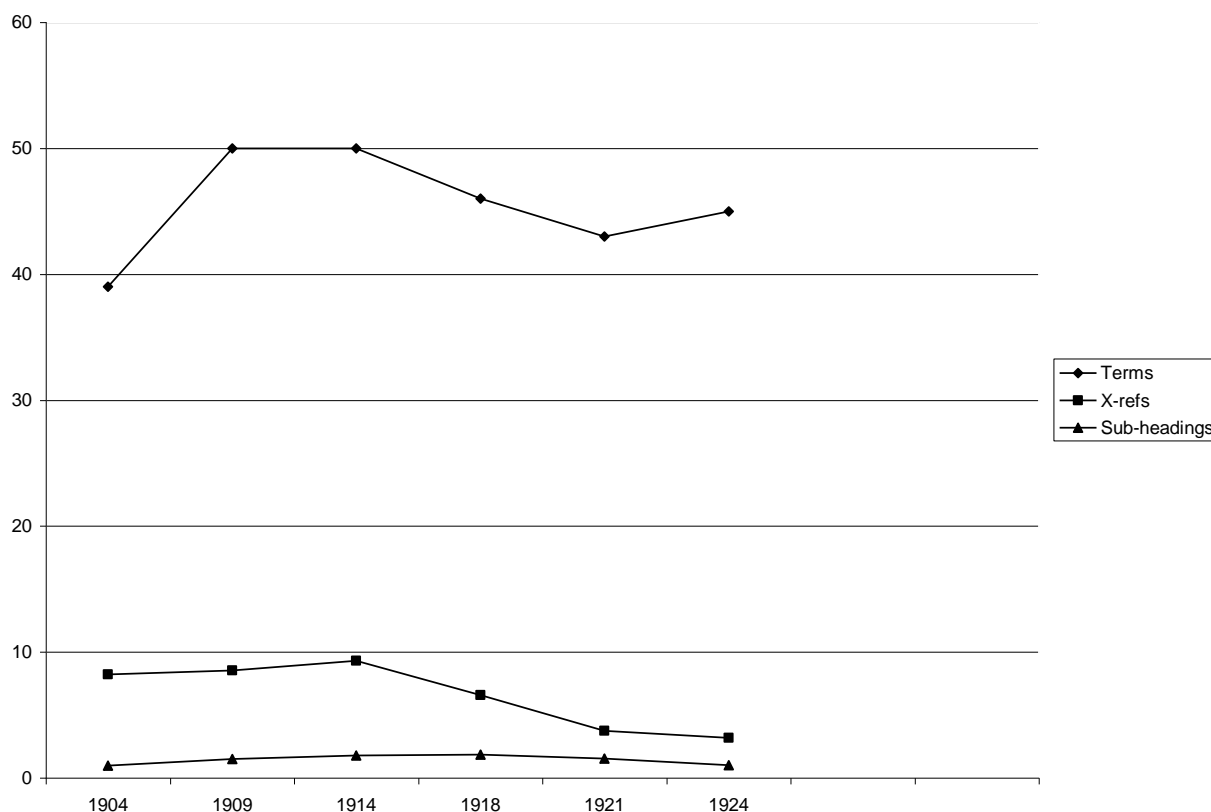


Figure 2. Number of index terms, cross-references, and sub-headings

Vocabulary changes are evident throughout the 25 years examined. As the authors of the 1951 retrospective noted (“The Readers’ Guide: 1901-1951” [1951]), these changes reveal a great deal about the social history. Reflecting the nature of reform movement concerns in Progressive Era, terms added to the *Guide* and their first use include Birth control (1918), Illegitimacy (1909), Sexual ethics (1914), Spinsters (1909), and Venereal diseases (1909). Other terms disappeared, including Celibacy (dropped in 1924), Domestic economy (dropped in 1918), although Domestic relations persists throughout the period, Gretna Green (used only in 1904), Race suicide (used 1909, 1914, and 1921).

More subtle changes are evident in the move from Hygiene, public to Public health, as noted by Guthrie (1910). Other examples include the use of Sex (without qualification) (1904, 1909, 1914, 1921) and Sex (biology) (1914, 1921, 1924); the distinction between the headings in 1914 and 1921 is not clear. Husband and wife was dropped in 1914, reappeared 1918, then dropped again in 1921. Sex instruction was added in 1909, dropped 1914, and reappeared 1918. Entries for venereal diseases tended to come and go: Syphilis was added in 1909, dropped 1921, and reappeared 1924, while Gonorrhoea appeared only in 1914. Sexual hygiene was used 1914 and 1918; it was followed by Social hygiene in 1921 and 1924. These changes in indexing terms suggest not only changes in *RGPL* editorial practice but also changes in how reformers and other influential figures spoke about these matters. The presence and absence of particular terms also reveal something of social attitudes toward these sensitive but increasingly public issues.

Conclusions

In examining the structures of terminology providing access to periodical information about sexual and reproductive health in the Progressive Era, several observations may be made. First, there are the claims about the *Readers' Guide* itself. Lawler (1950) reminds us of two conflicting but important features of the *Guide* important to assessment of its value in locating information. He notes that the *Readers' Guide* is just that – a guide, rather than a comprehensive resource which will account for every article published by a magazine. At the same time, Lawler contends that the purpose of the *Readers' Guide* is to ensure a more ready sort of access to information on a single subject, in contrast with the problem he represents with a competitor index:

If the reader wished to locate materials on labor unions, he was obliged to look under Labor, Associations of; Labor associations; Labor organizations; Trade unionism; and Trade-unions – with no cross-references to guide him from one to the other.... Articles on alcoholism were scattered under Alcoholism, Alcoholic excesses, the Drink Question, Drunkards, Drunkenness, Inebriates, Inebriety, Intemperance, Liquor, and Temperance (1951, p. 42).

On the one hand, then, there is the indication that the *Readers' Guide* is inherently partial; on the other, there is the idea that readers should not have to consult dozens of different terminologies to gain full access to information on a single topic. What seems clear is that the matter of sexual and reproductive health appears to confront both these claims about the Guide. Any number of articles related to the topic but do not appear under any of the terms which represent access points, which are certainly as scattered as the Lawler examples. Why one article in a series is indexed and another is not, but can be located by in-text references to previous or subsequent publications, is not adequately explained by *RGPL* editors' statements. Yet given that series of articles offer fuller exposition of an issue or a dialogue by multiple parties, such articles would be germane to both the contemporary reader and the later scholar. Because not all unindexed though related content is part of series, it is difficult to speculate about what proportion of sexual and reproductive health articles has been rendered inaccessible except by chance. Still, the findings associated with this topic cast some doubt on the earlier contention by Bone (1967) that *RGPL* indexing was complete rather than selective.

Nonetheless, when collected, these historic articles on sexual and reproductive health form a substantive body of literature. Some argued that (as discussed in the frequently cited articles

“Sex O’Clock in America” and “The Repeal of Reticence”) that excessive and immodest attention was being devoted to sex. The diffuse nature of Purity Movement activism resulted in divergent content in coverage of proponents’ aims and activities. At the same time, *RGPL* editors sought to differentiate subjects as the number of publications grew; dividing articles among a greater number of terms was a stated editorial aim. Thus, editorial practices would in fact have led to dispersal rather than collocation. Sensitivity of the topics at hand, in addition to the practice of consulting subject experts for guidance on terminology, might also have encouraged use of specific terms over the more general ones which now define interest in these articles. The array of terminology relevant to investigation of access to information related to sexual and reproductive health indicates the complexity and the pervasiveness of the subject in the early years of the twentieth century.

The number of potentially relevant index terms and articles does not tell the whole story of the accessibility of sexual health information. It is also apparent that there were limits regarding what information was made available outside of specialized communities of knowledge. Doctors understood gonorrhea as a significant health threat; yet this term occurs only in the 1914 volume of *RGPL* and indexes only one article, while Venereal diseases and Syphilis were established entry terms from 1909 on.

Lawler, whose account is informed by archives, interviews, and correspondence with former employees, describes these early years of *RGPL* as set during “late afternoon in an innocent world” (1950, p. 140); “No one denied that dangers existed in this tranquil world—particularly as Anthony Comstock darkly pointed out, for unwary youths; but virtue was a shield against

misfortune.” This portrayal suggests awareness of controversy over sex-related information, likely in the wake of the publication of Alfred Kinsey’s 1948 study of male sexuality, and conscious decisions to encourage gentle readers to avert their eyes from the unpleasant spectacle. Thus, the portrait of Americana presented is not so much in what is revealed as in what is concealed, or rendered obliquely – to learn how the nation dealt with efforts to increase understanding of sexual health, scholars must evaluate a complex network of terminology to ensure they have looked for information in all the right places.

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Appendix A. Index terms on sexual and reproductive health

Bachelors

Birth control

Birth rate

Books and reading

Celibacy

Charity

Chastity

Children

Children's literature

Convents [and nunneries]

Courtship

Divorce

Domestic economy

Domestic relations

Education of women

Engagements, Marriage

Etiquette (spelling changes)

Eugenics

Family

Friendship

Girls

Gonorrhea

Gretna Green

Heredity

Home

Husband and wife

Husbands

Hygiene

Hygiene, public

Illegitimacy

Immoral literature and pictures

Intermarriage of races

Literature, immoral

Love

Love in literature

Love in poetry

Marriage

Marriage certificates of health

Marriage law

Medicine

Mothers

Novels [and newspapers]

Parents

Pathology

Polygamy

Pornography

Prostitution

Public health

Purity

Race suicide

Sex

Sex (biology)

Sex hygiene

Sex in fiction

Sex in literature

Sex instruction

Sexual diseases

Sexual ethics

Sexual hygiene

Social diseases

Social hygiene

Social purity

Spinsters

Syphilis

Venereal diseases

Wedding anniversaries

Weddings

Wives

