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Biography

Stacy Magedanz is Reference Librarian and Coordinator of Library Services for Distributed Learning at Pfau Library, California State University San Bernardino. She currently serves as chair of the library's Web committee and also serves as an evaluator for the library's electronic resources committee. Previously, she was Reference Librarian and library Webmaster at McNeese State University in Lake Charles, Louisiana. She received an MA in Library Science from the University of Missouri-Columbia in 1996. ■



▼ ADVISOR REVIEWS—STANDARD REVIEW

Reference Suite @ FACTS.com

Date of Review: November 15, 2000

Composite Score:

★★★ 1/2

Reviewed by: Larry R. Sheret

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Pricing Options

The Reference Suite @ FACTS.com is available at the base price of \$1,995 per year for a site license that includes remote access. Multi-campus district pricing is available only to colleges. The following price schedule is for colleges with FTE's at or below:

5,000 FTE	\$1,995
10,000 FTE	\$3,300
20,000 FTE	\$4,700
30,000 FTE	\$6,000
40,000 FTE	\$7,350
50,000 FTE	\$8,700

Subscriptions to public and school libraries are not adjusted according to the size of the population served, but follow a rigid site based formula as follows:

1 site	\$1,995
2-10 sites	33 percent discount per site
11+ sites	50 percent discount per site

Additional savings are available to consortia, and several school and public libraries have been able to take advantage of this throughout the country. Considering the tremendous value that this product has, especially to junior high, high school, and community college students, it is unfortunate that libraries in less populated areas are unable to get a break on the cost of a subscription. It is unlikely that the average PL

serving a community of less than ten thousand, or a school with a student body population of only a few hundred students, would be able to afford to pay more than \$500 per year for a subscription. Specials and promotional prices are regularly offered to libraries wishing to subscribe for the first time. Instant free trials for any and all modules are available at www.facts.com.

The individual online modules, also available in print, may be subscribed to at the following base rates for FACTS.com, World Almanac Reference Database with encyclopedia (WARD), Issues and Controversies On File (ICOF), Today's Science On File (TSOF), Reference Suite @ FACTS.com

<i>Schools</i>		
FACTS.com	\$	995
WARD	\$	195 (add-on \$145)
ICOF	\$	495 (add-on \$395)
TSOF	\$	295 (add-on \$260)
Reference Suite	\$	1,795
<i>Public Libraries</i>		
FACTS.com	\$	1,195
WARD	\$	195 (add-on \$145)
ICOF	\$	495 (add-on \$395)
TSOF	\$	295 (add-on \$260)
Reference Suite	\$	1,995

Colleges (max. 5000 FTE) wishing to purchase either individual modules or combinations of modules use the same price schedule as PLs listed above.



Reference Suite @ FACTS.com Composite Score: ★★★★★ 1/2

The maximum number of stars in each category is 5.

Content: ★★★★★ 1/2

The Reference Suite @ FACTS.com contains 100,000 articles from *Facts On File World News Digest*, two weeks coverage of current news from Reuters news service, and additional news and information from *Issues and Controversies*, *Today's Science*, *the World Almanac*, and *Funk and Wagnall's New Encyclopedia*. Though not likely to offer the depth required by graduate students, or even those taking upper-division courses, this database provides an excellent source for factual information that has been superbly synthesized in a way that would especially appeal to the general public, and to students from sixth grade to college sophomores.

Searchability: ★★★★★

Natural language and Boolean searching are enhanced by a variety of options including reverse chronological, relevancy ranking, date range, full-text keyword and subject. Title searching has just been enabled, and proximity searching, though not yet available, is imminent...possibly by the time this review is published. The extensive cross-linking of information within documents usually provides users the opportunity to locate specific information while they read articles that are of a more general nature, and vice versa. On occasion, enormous numbers of irrelevant hits can be generated, especially by novice and less sophisticated searchers. It can sometimes be difficult to hone in on particular information using keyword searching. I would score this site lower but for the fact that the indexes are so well thought out. Indexes don't get any better than this.

Pricing: ★★★

This rating could range anywhere from 1.0 to 5.0, depending upon the profile of an individual library. Although the database is competitively priced for larger libraries, no provision has been made to offer discounts to small libraries not affiliated with a district or consortium, or for low volume users.

Contract Options: ★★ 1/2

Academic libraries may obtain site licenses, or institutional contracts based on FTE, but K-12 schools and public libraries are constrained to a site license that offers no special discount unless they are part of a district or consortium. No single computer workstation or simultaneous user contracts are available. There is no written provision for ILL.

Remote access is included in all contracts, and individual modules or various combinations thereof may be purchased.

Expanding the subscription schedule to accommodate libraries serving small populations ought to be a priority of FACTS.com since many small libraries are not part of a consortium, and so are priced completely out of the market.

Product Description

Facts On File was founded in 1940 to serve the radio news business with the publication of the weekly *Facts On File World News Digest*, the complete database of which contains 100,000 articles that have been meticulously indexed and cross-linked to nearly 1,000,000 records from *Facts On File* annual indexes. The Web version of these two sources went online as FACTS.com in March 1999. Four modules that have been added are *Today's Science*, *Issues and Controversies*, *The World Almanac*, and *Funk and Wagnall's New Encyclopedia*. Together, these five modules make up the Reference Suite @ FACTS.com, which was launched in April 2000. In addition, Reuter's newswire delivers stories that are held for two weeks, thus providing a vital bridge between daily news and the articles added weekly, monthly or yearly by the various publications that make up the Reference Suite.

Facts On File News Services is no longer affiliated with Facts On File, Inc., the book publisher, but is now owned by WRC Media, the publisher of *The Weekly Reader*, which also owns *The World Almanac Education Group* and *Funk and Wagnall's Encyclopedia*. By combining these resources into the Reference Suite and making them available

online, Facts On File News Services provides a stand-alone product that is an excellent and comprehensive source for general information needs.

The Facts On File World News Digest forms the backbone of the Reference Suite. Since its inception in 1940 it has amassed an extensive collection of scholarly, yet easy to understand, articles that include topics ranging from prehistory to current events. Twenty full-time writers prepare articles for publication each week. The entire text from 1980 to the present is available in the Key Events section, and selected articles predating 1980 are in the Historical Events section. Within weeks, the entire Historical Events archive from 1940-1980 will be included and accessible to online searching.

The World Almanac Reference Database is the online version of the standard reference book of the same name that is found in every library worthy of the name. But unlike its printed counterpart, the online version is keyword searchable, hyperlinked and displays in color. An effective synergy occurs between the large amount of unprocessed data contained in the World Almanac and the highly synthesized information in other parts of the Reference Suite to which it is hyperlinked.

Today's Science @ FACTS.com presents the entire hyperlinked backfile of *Today's Science on File*, a monthly publication that began in September 1992. The articles are written for students, and special content has been generated for teachers, including menu access to articles that match specific National Science Education Standards. Throughout

the articles, green radio buttons appear near important terms. When the computer screen pointer touches the buttons, mouse-overs provide on-the-spot glossary notes. The Hot Topics menu spotlights the most significant current scientific knowledge and happenings. Ever true to providing "information in context," articles present the background history and facts necessary to understand the latest findings.

Issues and Controversies @ FACTS.com presents balanced coverage and accurate explanations of opposing points of view on critical, current issues. Hyperlinks, tables of contents and menus provide ready access to relevant primary source documents, newspaper editorials from *Editorials On File*, active links to internet sites, charts, graphs, maps, contacts, and other important and interesting ancillary information. More than 350 critical issues and controversies appear in the table of contents. Articles are about 10 to 15 laser-printed pages in length.

Funk and Wagnall's Encyclopedia is already included in full text in the World Almanac Reference Database. Beta testing is underway to include the encyclopedia's photos and graphics and to create hotlinks with the other modules. Funk and Wagnall's is one of the world's leading encyclopedias, and it provided the text for the first release of *Microsoft Encarta*.

FACTS.com adds new modules to the Reference Suite only after they have been linked and cross-linked to the other modules, thus forming a Web of information that transports one through information chronologically, and from the narrowest factoid to the broadest concept. Coverage includes virtually every aspect of life be it politics, economics, religion, science, education, sociology, technology or art.

Because of the way information has been indexed and arranged into a carefully thought out "knowledge tree," keyword searching is usually not as effective as "gophering" along the extensive network of menus and indexes. They are the best way to navigate because they reflect the "information in context" structure by which the entire database has been integrated.

The five modules that comprise the Reference Suite are enhanced by a two-week record of recent news from Reuters Online News Service, internet links, selected material from *Editorials On File*, background materials, charts, graphs, photographs and maps, and *Software and CD-ROM Reviews On File*.

Search pages of each module are similar in format. File folder tabs that provide database selection are arranged along the top of the screen. Clicking a tab causes it to display in color.

A column along the left side of the screen contains the search tools, including keyword (natural or Boolean), database selection, date range, story date, title only, and display options (reverse chronological, relevancy rank, alphabetical) that vary slightly depending upon the modules being searched. Below these tools are the Begin Search, Clear Search, Search History and Help buttons. Further down one may select from various menus specially designed for each module. Menus include Hot Topics, Indexes, Key Advances in Science, Overview Articles, Biographies, Glossary, Photographs and Graphics, For Teachers, Issues: Pro and Con, Groups to Contact, Table of Contents, Almanac Favorites, Special Reports, and Special Information about each database.

Another column located at the right of each search screen provides additional access points that are tailored to each module. For example, Issues and Controversies provides access to "Privacy: National High School Debate Topic" from the column at the right. The default search screen is FACTS.com which has the following selections in this column: Key Issues, Key People, Obituaries (1980–2000), Newspaper

Editorials, Historic Documents, World Heads of State, Government Leaders, Country Profiles, Maps, Photographs and News Art.

The central portion off each search screen contains headline news and photographs that are pertinent to each module. Both the center and right-hand columns convert to display search results, but the left hand search option column remains on the screen.

Articles are hyperlinked and include bibliographic information. A column to the left of each article contains links to related information. The table of contents at the start of each article is active, and clicking on desired topics takes the reader directly to that point in the article. Return to home and help icons are prominent on every page that displays articles or source material, making navigation of the entire database very easy even for first time users.

The database tracks use so that statistics are readily available to all subscribers.

Critical Evaluation

Extensive, well thought-out indexing and hyperlinking both within and between the modules has resulted in a sort of information tapestry that is unique, and which gives FACTS.com a personality that repeat users will come to recognize and appreciate. Novice users may find that keyword searches frequently fail to locate information, but the indexes quickly yield productive, relevant results.

Given the public's familiarity with internet searching, many users would probably be apt to keyword search this site without bothering to try an index search. It would be beneficial if the screen configuration could be changed so as to visually enhance the index option. It is my opinion that inexperienced users who gravitate toward keyword searching will grow frustrated and lose interest with this site fairly rapidly. Index searching yields far better and faster results. The indexes also acquaint users with a feature that sets FACTS.com ahead of its competitors. Namely, information is presented as embedded within a context. There is a smooth transition between facts, unique topics, general subjects and broad concepts.

FACTS.com is built on a solid foundation of informational material that has long been accepted by librarians as objective and authoritative sources for finding succinct accounts of key events, trends and background circumstances. What sets the Reference Suite apart from competitors such as Electric Library and InfoTrac is the way in which the editors have distilled data from hundreds of sources and have presented this information in a way that students and the public can understand without feeling overwhelmed or talked down to. Much of the work and expenditure of time required to research information has already been meticulously carried out by the writers and editors at FACTS.com

While I was preparing this review, an English 100 class came into the Learning Resource Center here at Central Arizona College's Aravaipa Campus. Their task was to begin collecting information for the argumentative essays that they had been assigned to write. The professor had asked me to present a short bibliographic instruction session on the various information resources that would be most helpful to them. My plan was to introduce them to the library's online book catalog, InfoTrac, Electric Library, Opposing Viewpoints Pamphlets, and to the Issues and Controversies module of the Reference Suite @ FACTS.com. Although the college does not currently subscribe to FACTS.com, I had obtained access to the site for the purpose of writing this review, and decided to try it out on the students.

After each student had opened Netscape, they were instructed to access The Reference Suite using the special URL provided me by

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<<http://www.FACTS.com>>

<<http://www.2facts.com>>

FACTS.com. At the top of the screen, I had the students click on the Issues and Controversies tab. When the search screen for that database came up, I had them choose "Indexes," then "Table of Contents." The entire class became so focused in reading the articles they found that they were scarcely interested in hearing about the other resources in the library.

Unlike standard encyclopedia articles, the articles in The Reference Suite @ FACTS.com captivate the mind. They are almost difficult to scan because they are so fascinating to read and rich in their content.

When I began my investigation of The Reference Suite @ FACTS.com, I was wondering how it would stack up against strong competitors such as Electric Library, Britannica Online, and InfoTrac. The Reference Suite lacks the enormous amount of source material available through Electric Library and InfoTrac. Nor can it compete with the depth and breadth of Britannica. However, The Reference Suite is unique among all other sites by the way it processes and presents information in a context that demonstrates its relevancy to our lives. I do not know whether or not there has been a conscious attempt on the part of the publisher to make information relevant. This is, nevertheless, a learning outcome that occurs in the mind of the reader as a result of the quality of the presentation.

Trying to compare The Reference Suite with other offerings would be in vain. Some will lament that neither newspaper nor journal articles are archived. But that would defeat the philosophy of this database. It is not merely the assemblage of information that is of interest here, but the weaving together of information through careful human consideration and expertise before its inclusion in the database. This is the hallmark of The Reference Suite @ FACTS.com. The choice for librarians is not whether to choose The Reference Suite or some other database, but to decide which other database(s) will best complement it.

Contract Provisions

Academic libraries may obtain site licenses, or institutional contracts based on FTE. School and public libraries are constrained to site licenses or consortium contracts. Although district contracts are not available, multisite discounts apply. No consideration is given to the size of user pools. Remote access and an unlimited number of computer workstation access and simultaneous user access is included with every contract. There is no written provision for Interlibrary Loans. Contracts are available for individual modules or for the combined Reference Suite.

Authentication

Authentication is by IP filtering for on-site computers and remote users may access the system if they are properly authenticated with a system such as a proxy server or by using referring URLs.

Author References

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Selected Users

United States Army; New York Public Library (70 branches); King County Library System in Seattle; ABC News; CNN; Fox Network; New York Times; Wall Street Journal.

Biography

Larry Sheret is the Program Coordinator of the Learning Resource Center at Central Arizona College, Aravaipa Campus. He serves on Central Arizona College's Learning Outcomes and Web Development committees. Mr. Sheret earned his MA from the University of Arizona School of Information Resources and Library Science in 1996. ■