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Like a Hurricane: A Brief Narrative on the Recent Developments of the Print Reference Collection at the University of Winnipeg

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Abstract

A paper presented by Michael Hohner as part of the panel session “Print Reference Collections: The Future Is Ours.”

Like a hurricane! Hurricane Michael! And that’s the kind of force it would seem to take to blow the dust off such a weighty Reference Collection at the University of Winnipeg.

We had made some dramatic progress almost a decade ago when a top-down mandate (which loomed for years) finally forced us to remove half our Reference Collection to make room for a teaching lab inside the library. Six rows with a total of about 100 bays and 12,000 items were removed from Reference Collection, but there was plenty of deadwood still to be found (all topped with huge dust bunnies).

We were engaged in numerous collections projects last summer (2017), including an inventory of our collections (the first in 20 years!). We were taking inventory of our Main stacks collection of around 500,000 items, but also needed to take inventory of almost 13,000 items in our Reference Collection, as discrepancies were being found with many items transferred from Reference to the Main stacks several years ago.

A new staff hire in Reference (Chris Mailoux) seemed shocked at the state of our Reference Collection while inventorying that collection. A veteran staff member (John Dobson) who had worked in our library for 30+ years and served at the Reference desk for many years was hopeful and eager to help.

If I were to say it was a project, it was in many ways, given the undertaking; but it was so unlike any project I had ever managed. It was chaos! . . . But it was organized chaos, because we had some basic ground rules. For instance, I promised nothing had to be deleted immediately . . . except for the items that obviously needed immediate deletion. We made piles and categorized items into various themes as we went bay by bay across the collection (which was less subject oriented than the previous review in 2010) . . . dated directories, old annuals and year-books, other items too specialized or too dated, or

not a reference resource to begin with (“referency” as we termed it).

A goal was to refocus the collection, making it less specialized and exhaustive. Did we need a book about constructing historical astrolabes in the Reference Collection? Did we really need a dozen astronomy dictionaries of various vintages and from various publishers, when a couple key ones should suffice? John and I formed piles and Chris immediately shifted and blew the dust off the books that remained. I consulted with the subject librarians and with faculty members as they came by, especially on more risky deletion decisions (such as multivolume sets), and deliberated on deliberate redundancies, and highlighted several embarrassments in our collection.

Everyone was quite positive about the very visible changes they were seeing (as items were pulled off to the side and a new collection quickly emerged), and was sucked into our vortex as much as I was, even though it was a hugely busy time for all before the fall semester. If we were unsure, we migrated the item to the Main stacks (but added notes to the record, so we could revisit it again in a few years). Again, our goal was to make the Reference Collection much more approachable and accessible to our community of scholars.

It is easy to feel that Google and Wikipedia have already won, even with more electronic reference content being purchased each year, but our print collection seemed like a professional embarrassment for anyone who had tried to lead someone into the belly of the beast—it was a throwback to throwbacks, which still included cyclopedias from the late 1800s (“*fun facts every modern gentleman of the era should know*”), along with decades-old directories, previous editions of the same title all held in Reference (such as *Granger’s Index to Poetry* and *Brewer’s Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*), and previous print editions even with much newer editions available to

us online (like the *St. James Encyclopedia of Popular Culture*—2000 versus 2013). Also, we had many yearbooks and annuals, which we were maintaining for the last 3 or 5 or even 10 years in the Reference Collection, before moving the oldest volume to the Main stacks with receipt of the newest in Reference—a fairly common practice, except all our standing orders for these had been cancelled in 2010, and these “current years,” which were far from current now, were caught in our Reference purgatory.

It is easy to feel overly invested in our Reference Collection, given the costs for resources and limited budgets. As a Canadian institution, our budgets are particularly sensitive to exchange rate fluctuations—right now, just imagine paying an extra 30 cents on every dollar you spend. Our budgets have seen increases, but never enough to compensate for major exchange rate changes, which are felt throughout the entire resource budget. Fortunately, we do have a couple trust funds set up for Reference items to rely on, but the terms limit us to print acquisitions. And, with electronic format, we quite often see a higher premium. For me it is not surprising we have tended to be more print oriented.

Today, about 10,000 items still remain in our current print Reference Collection. About 1,600 items were removed from our Reference Collection and the library’s collection entirely (progress!). About 600 items were migrated from Reference to our Main stacks, but those were mostly items that seemingly

belonged in the general collection in the first place, such as art books (kept in Reference mainly due to the initial cost and the hope that they would be better protected in that area).

With this go-around we removed 30 bays or about 30% of the shelf capacity in our Reference Collection. Six main rows remain, but the rows were shortened to have six bays in length in each row (so 72 bays in total) and provide improved access from either side of the row. The area from which the shelving was removed now has study tables, so people can work more closely with our print Reference Collection once again, and we see our collection getting used much more now than ever before (as evidenced with material placed on our return cart and with the internal use counts we have continued to track for almost a decade now).

So where do we go from here? How do we better integrate our trusted print and electronic reference resources? Where does reference even begin or end? How do we get better return on our very expensive investments? And how does a Canadian academic library better insulate itself from a premium for online access (often 50 cents on the dollar) but also the current 30 cents on the dollar we face with the exchange rate? Paying double means we may end up with half, but perhaps this can also make us a model in some way as we all continue to struggle with our reference collections in general and our print reference collections in particular.