Against the Grain

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Foreshadowing the Web from the 1950s: Gale's Encyclopedia of Associations

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Foreshadowing the Web from the 1950s: Gale's Encyclopedia of Associations

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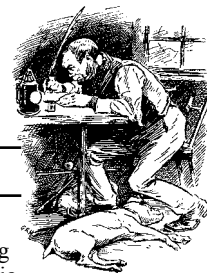
The first edition of **Gale's** *Encyclopedia of Associations (EA)* appeared in 1956 (with a list price of $15!). The work was created by **Fredrick Ruffner**, a market researcher at **General Detroit Corporation**, a manufacturer of fire equipment. **Ruffner** could not locate some needed marketing statistics, so he sought a current directory of trade groups that might have the information. Finding no such current reference source, he decided to compile his own.

While *EA* was offline (i.e., print) when it first appeared, the basic functions and characteristics of this 1950s reference book anticipated those of the Worldwide Web some 40 years later in several striking ways. (As further described below, *EA* has evolved over the years and today is available in multiple print and electronic formats.)

Keyword Searching

From the first edition in 1956, *EA* was arranged and indexed by keywords in the association names. The essentially pre-computer concept of searching by keyword for reference information was so novel for the time that almost the entire first page of the introductory "How to Use This Directory" was devoted to explaining the concept of keywords. For example: "American Dental Association will be found in the Medical and Health Section, listed under Dental…."

Of course, today, much of humanity conducts keyword Internet searches for information as naturally as rolling out of bed in the morning. Around this basic reference activity, a $12 billion search advertising industry has developed, according to the **Interactive Advertising Bureau**. (**Gale** occasionally experimented with running ads in *EA*, but the print format did not support matching ads to the searchers' specific keyword queries, which is the sweet spot in search advertising, nor could *EA* come close to the user traffic of the Web.)

EA was not the first instance of keyword access, but its innovative use of keyword indexing in a ready reference environment foreshadowed the eventual, nearly universal embrace of this means of information retrieval.

Ruffner recently recalled his original rationale for the keyword arrangement: "An alphabetical arrangement just didn't seem useful since so many association names begin with general terms such as "National" or "American." Keywords bring together groups with similar purposes and help the users more quickly find what they need."

Tear Down the (Library) Walls

EA is a library tool, but its function is extroverted — to lead users beyond the library collection to obtain the information they need. Other library tools, such as the book catalog or periodical indexes, have served the purpose of leading users to information stored *within* the library, with librarians there to help produce the physical books or documents if needed.

EA on the other hand directs users to outside organizational sources of information to meet their needs. Librarians have used it to supplement information found in the library, or in the case where the library has scant information on a topic, to provide at least some lead. Supplied with the contact data for a group from *EA*, the users are on their own to identify and acquire the specific information they need to solve their problem.

And today that is exactly what billions of people are doing via the Web at home, on the job, or even from within the library: independently obtaining needed information from sources outside the library, searching by keywords.

Information Wants to be Free

EA positions itself as a guide to free or low-cost information. From early on, *EA*'s introduction promoted the wealth of information available for "the cost of a postage stamp" from the groups listed in *EA*'s pages. Today the cost is often less than that: free on the Web.

Association Websites appear near the top of **Google** results lists for some topical searches, such as the following examples: diabetes, trout, radiology. In this respect, **Google** is at times carrying out *EA*'s long-time promise of leading the user to a bounty of free information from associations. Of course, **Google** searches are not focused exclusively on association information, but also report numerous other content sources (which can be less reliable), nor are the searches consistent in their coverage of associations, routinely omitting or burying deep in the results list important groups relating to the topic being researched.

Everybody Get Together

Americans always have associated and networked with each other around common interests and objectives. This characteristic was recognized in the mid-19th century by **Alexis de Tocqueville** in his *Democracy in America:* "The Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions constantly form associations," a quotation that appeared in the front of *EA* for decades. *EA*'s purpose is to document, support, and further such social and professional networking of like-minded individuals. Its tremendous success as a reference publication demonstrates how important this mission has been.

The Internet continues and expands *EA*'s role as a "switchboard" between the individual and a group that can help. Association activities increasingly take place via online networks, involving both established associations and "born-virtual" groups such as LinkedIn and its subgroups. In fact, it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish between born-virtual groups and traditional membership organizations.

Directory Information Online

When *EA* went online with DIALOG in 1979, it was one of the few directories in the world (along with the Foundation Center's) to be publicly available for online searching among the predominantly bibliographic periodical databases of the time. (Bibliographic products were the first reference works to be digitized due to the tremendous logistical assistance the computer provided for sorting and cumulating brief, formatted records.) Today a major function of the open Web is to serve as a gigantic directory with hundreds of millions of listings, though the quality, depth, and currency of the listings vary widely.

Government Precedents

Both *EA* and the Internet had forerunners originating with the U.S. government. *EA* was preceded in 1949 by the U.S. Department of Commerce title, *National Associations of the United States*, which was not regularly updated after it appeared. The Internet evolved from ARPANET, established in 1969 by the U.S. Department of Defense Advanced Research Project Agency.

The More Things Change

New content delivery methods develop and related new business models evolve. But persisting across the decades is the public's need for reliable information and assistance inexpensively and conveniently obtained from reputable organizations.

EA has served this need for more than half a century and today is a dynamic product that is trusted as a vetted, comprehensive source on associations. The 50th edition of the work, now multi-volume and still including keyword indexing, appeared in 2011 in print, eBook, and online formats.

The Web, amidst its clutter and chatter, now also serves the association access function in part — at times with stunning speed and convenience, at other times with confusing, incomplete, or unreliable results.

Selected Sources

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