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Are print directories dead?

Because directories are intimately concerned with human beings and their organizations, they serve almost as many uses as the imagination can bring to bear on the data.—William A. Katz¹

Are print directories dead? It certainly looks that way according to “The Future of Directory Information.” Author Marydee Ojala explains that the 2006 edition of the venerable *Thomas Register of American Manufacturers* will be the last printed version.² All future Thomas directory information will be available exclusively online via ThomasNet (www.thomasnet.com).

ThomasNet’s decision to go e-only is reasonable, considering its clientele is comprised of manufacturing companies and business people. Other directory publishers will undoubtedly find a pure online option financially appealing, as well. But superseded directories have a value and utility that transcend their immediate purpose. They are windows on the past and portals to paths that enable historical researchers to travel into history with a detail long since forgotten and to peer through the lenses of their predecessors.

This is true of all superseded reference works—from encyclopedias to dictionaries to directories.³ By capturing a snapshot at a point in time, they provide a context, which, although often imperfect, is nonetheless useful and often irreplaceable. In fact, the universes—defined by both inclusion and exclusion—that are captured by

directories and other reference resources offer a view of the world from a particular perspective, whether they are published by or for a particular association, organization, or industry, or for general use. This is important for future historical explorations.

Is there a need for old directories?

Are old directories used? There is ample proof that they are. Historians regularly use city directories to study the physical movement and social and economic status of individuals and groups, as well as the evolution of communities. And using the Ayer directory to quickly determine what was published in a particular community, at a particular point in time, has long been a standard approach used by historians and librarians alike. So important is this resource that a significant run of years has been digitized by the Library of Congress.⁴

But access to the past is not solely needed by historians; other professionals use history also. To show change or to argue that a trend or period of stability has emerged, one must know what has happened over time. Sometimes there are questions of fact that a directory can resolve, or it may suggest resources or people to consult. Lawyers may use information

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from superseded directories to prove a point; business people may use it to suggest a marketing trend, and physicians, to help understand the spread of a disease. The end of access to historical sources must have profound consequences for those seeking to understand the present. Imagine a world in which people act only on what they see or what is considered current. To play off an observation by comedian George Carlin: It wouldn't be fun if, all at once, everybody just forgot everything they knew.⁵ This may seem a profound fear for such a simple thing as a directory, but the past is lost in little pieces over time until recovering it, even on the simplest

of levels, may not be wholly possible and certainly not economical.

Proof of the use of directories in a diversity of professional settings is abundant and easily obtained by searching such databases as the Web of Science, America: History and Life, JSTOR, ABI/Inform, Business Source Premier, Science Direct, Digital Dissertations, Project Muse, Westlaw, Google Scholar, Google Book Search, and the "search inside the book" feature of Amazon.com.

The *Thomas Register* is still important

How important are older editions of the *Thomas Register*? They are important

Reference desk questions

These questions were asked at our reference desk; all were answered by using old print directories:

- *How many female employees did Rich Products Corporation have in 1967?* Directory used to answer question: *New York State Industrial Directory*.

We were surprised that a manufacturing directory actually broke employment down by gender, but apparently this was not an uncommon practice in the 1950s and 1960s, though today manufacturing directories tend not to include this breakdown. (The Rich Products entry even listed how many women worked in the office and how many worked in the plant.) Answer: 54 women, 33 of whom were office workers.

- *What supermarket chain had a store located in the Boulevard Mall (Amherst, New York) in the late 1960s and early 1970s?* Directory used to answer question: *Directory of Shopping Centers in the United States*.

This question could also have been answered by using the *Polk's Buffalo Northeast Suburban Directory*, but the *Directory of Shopping Centers*, besides listing tenants,

also provided the date the mall was opened, its architect, number of acres and parking spaces, and estimated sales volume and noted that the building was air conditioned and had auditorium facilities. Answer: Acme-American Super Market.

- *Was the Pennzoil Company listed on the Standard & Poor's 500 Composite Stock Price Index in 1992?* Directory used to answer question: *Standard & Poor's Register*.

On the surface, a deceptively simple question, but finding a list of companies listed on the Standard & Poor's 500 for previous years is not as easy as it appears. The Standard & Poor's Web site only provides recent constituents (though you can pay to access older information). Old print editions of *Standard & Poor's Stock Reports* and *Security Price Index Record* would have answered the question (if your library saved them!), and the online database Wharton Research Data Services can generate a list of companies that have been on the Standard & Poor's 500, but this product is very expensive and beyond the budgets of most libraries. Answer: yes.

enough to be purchasable in microfiche.⁶ (The term *register* has an air about it more rarefied than the term *directory*, and there are other directories traveling under aliases: for example, *Books in Print*, *Encyclopedia of Associations*, and *World of Learning*.) A database search run in November 2005 in the Web of Science found 27 articles that cited the *Register*. A search of JSTOR found 50 articles (excluding book reviews) mentioning the *Register*. Most of the citing journals are from the fields of business, law, or economics; but, surprisingly, there are also cites from *American Art*, *American Speech*, *American Journal of Psychology*, and the *Modern Language Journal*. A search of Westlaw uncovered 90 court cases that cite the *Register*, and in ABI/Inform Global—limited to scholarly journals and omitting articles from newspapers and trade publications—more than 50 citations were found. Searching by “cited source” in Business Source Premier retrieved 15 citations. Further, we found several articles where *Register* citations were embedded in the text but not cited as notes.

Some cites to the *Register* were to the online version. In the future, the verification of such citations may only be possible if an archival version—presumably a paper version—is produced and retained. Implicit in this concern is the need to preserve editions: snapshots across time, whether in electronic or hardcopy form. Reference tools published electronically only in continuous revision will make this impossible.⁷ And reference tools published only as online databases may present a host of preservation problems.

This is noted in *Building an Electronic Records Archive at the National Archives and Records Administration* (2005), edited by Robert F. Sproull and Jon Eisenberg: “Even when the underlying database itself is amenable to preservation, displaying information from that database for users poses enormous challenges. For example, the information displayed might be the output of analysis software that has gone

through multiple revisions—what was actually viewed on any particular day is a function of the version of the software running on that day.”⁸

It is not inconceivable that verifying a piece of information from the 19th century may be easier in the future than verifying information from the 21st century. Librarians and historians⁹ have pondered the challenge of preservation in the electronic age for some time, and librarians may have influence on the formats in which information is published through their purchasing decisions.

Reliance on databases

Hundreds of libraries currently subscribe to Gale’s Ready Reference Shelf, an online database that culls entries from 14 of Gale’s most popular reference directories (among them are *Directories in Print*, *Encyclopedia of American Religions*, *Encyclopedia of Associations*, *Gale Directory of Publications and Broadcast Media*, *Publishers Directory*, and the *Research Centers Directory*). Many subscribers to the Ready Reference Shelf also maintain subscriptions to the print directories included in the online product; however, some libraries have cancelled those same print sources because of their online availability. Gale’s Ready Reference Shelf provides current information only, so librarians who made the decision to cancel their print subscriptions also decided that old directory information is neither needed nor very important, though they most likely came to that conclusion unconsciously.

On the other hand, perhaps, though aware of the importance of old print directories when they made the decision to cancel, the need to save space took precedence over other concerns and cautions. Sitting in a small library, they reasoned that larger libraries would save older editions. A good micro or local decision, but, at a macro level, if the majority of libraries turn solely to online databases for their directory information, publishers will stop publishing print resources—and without

print there will be no “library of record” for directory information and probably no editions, as we understand the term.

Databases offer powerful advantages over print, and we are not suggesting that libraries live without access to resources, such as ReferenceUSA.¹⁰ Nevertheless, many directories are so vital to historical researchers that they should be retained through their editions. Remember, even if your library decides not to save superseded directories, by subscribing to a print directory you will be offering an economic incentive to publishers to keep publishing in print, thus enabling research libraries that do save old directories to continue this important archiving role.

Guidelines for print

The following are suggested print subscriptions and retentions for a core directory collection; however, a specific library’s mission may well require the acquisition and retention of other directories.

- **City directories.** If your institution can afford to subscribe to only one print directory, your local city directory should be acquired. While oftentimes thought of as only useful to genealogists, city directories are heavily cited by a diversity of scholars.

- **Media directories (newspapers, radio and television stations, periodicals).** Media directories are copiously cited; their geographical arrangement and subject classification are a boon to researchers. For U.S. coverage, acquire *Gale Directory of Publications and Broadcast Media* (or a combined subscription to *Bowker’s News Media Directory* and *Broadcasting & Cable Yearbook*). For international coverage, acquire *Benn’s Media Directory*.

- **Serials directories.** Although periodicals are included in both *Benn’s Media Directory* and *Gale Directory of Publications and Broadcast Media*, neither offers the detailed information that is included in *Ulrich’s Periodicals Directory* or *Standard Periodical Directory*.

- **Book publishers and books.** Book publishing is still an important industry, as well as a measure of intellectual output and focus. Acquire and retain *Publishers, Distributors & Wholesalers of the United States* and *Literary Market Place*. Copies of *Books in Print* should also be saved, but when print-on-demand technology becomes more commonplace, the whole concept of *in print* will change, since books residing on publishers’ servers may never go *out of print*.

Articles using *Thomas Register*

Some examples of recent articles using the *Thomas Register* as a data source:

Rajshree Agarwal and Michael Gort, Firm and Product Life Cycles and Firm Survival, *American Economic Review* 92, no 2 (May 2002): 184–90. (Agarwal has written several articles for which the *Thomas Register* is a key source of data.)

Darren Filson, Product and Process Innovations in the Life Cycle of an Industry, *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* 49, no. 1 (September 2002): 97–112.

Steven Klepper and Kenneth L. Simons, Industry Shakeouts and Technological

Change, *International Journal of Industrial Organization* 23, nos. 1-2 (February 2005): 23–43.

Carol Rice and Ellen F. Heineman, Application of a Method to Evaluate the Quality of Work Histories and Document the Exposure Assessment Process, *American Journal of Industrial Medicine* 44, no. 1 (July 2003): 94–106.

Michael F. Smith, Richard A. Lancioni, and Terrence A. Oliva, The Effects of Management Inertia on the Supply Chain Performance of Produce-to-Stock Firms, *Industrial Marketing Management* 34, no. 6 (August 2005): 614–28.

• **Standard & Poor's Register of Corporations and/or Dun & Bradstreet Million Dollar Directory.** Having an historical run of either of these titles is necessary for any institution interested in business history. For international coverage, acquire and retain *Dun & Bradstreet Principal International Businesses*.

• **State manufacturing directories.** State business directories cover thousands of companies not included in either the *Million Dollar Directory* or the *Standard & Poor's Register*.

• **Encyclopedia of Associations.** Many organizations have an Internet presence and are easily found using a search engine and, therefore, it can be argued that older editions of the *Encyclopedia of Associations* are actually more valuable than the most recent edition. However, the historical "snapshots" of universes of associations at given points in time, which are provided by superseded editions, argue for their retention.

Notes

1. William A. Katz, *Introduction to Reference Work*, vol. 1 (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1992), 316.

2. Marydee Ojala, "The Future of Directory Information," *Online* 29, no.5 (September/October): 38–39.

3. There is a rich literature, which either directly or indirectly explores the past (or past views of it) by using old reference materials. For some examples, search America: History and Life and Historical Abstracts. Some general insight on what is to be learned from the study of old reference materials is offered in Charles A. D'Aniello, "A Sociobibliographical and Sociohistorical Approach to the Study of Bibliographic and Reference Sources: A Complement to Traditional Bibliographic Instruction," in *Conceptual Frameworks for Bibliographic Education: Theory and Practice*, eds. Mary Reichel and Mary Ann Ramey (Littleton, Co.: Libraries Unlimited, Inc., 1987), 109–133. For a valuable overview of the history of reference materials, which cannot help but

suggest uses to which they might be put by contemporary scholars, see: Bill Katz, *Cuneiform to Computer: A History of Reference Sources* (Lanham, MD and London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1998).

4. The *N. W. Ayer and Sons American Newspaper Annual* (which went through various evolutions and corresponding title changes across its long history) is now available in digital form for 1869 to 1919 at www.loc.gov/rr/news/news_research_tools/ayersdirectory.html; was last published in 1986; and is continued by the *Gale Directory of Publications and Broadcast Media*.

5. The actual quote reads: "Wouldn't it be fun if, all at once, everybody just forgot everything they knew?" George Carlin, *When Will Jesus Pass the Pork Chops?* (New York: Hyperion, 2004), 51.

6. An advertisement for backfiles of the *Register* (1905–1983) from *Research Publications* observes: "Covering the years 1905 to the present, this comprehensive reference tool is a valuable historic, social, and technical aid for researchers of American business, industry, and commerce." From *American Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (Spring 1984), U7 (un-numbered).

7. Print editions of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* continue to be published, along with the more current online resource. The enduring value of older editions is evidenced by the online searchable version of the 1911 edition.

8. Robert F. Sproull and Jon Eisenberg, eds., *Building an Electronic Records Archive at the National Archives and Records Administration: Recommendations for a Long-Term Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: The National Academies Press, 2005), 19.

9. For an excellent general overview from an historian writing for other historians, see Roy Rosenzweig, "Scarcity or Abundance? Preservation in a Digital Era," *The American Historical Review* 108, no. 3 (June 2003): 735–62.

10. ReferenceUSA is an online directory of more than 12 million U.S. public and private companies. *W*