

Does Continuous Revision Require Continuous Replacement?

THE POLICY OF THE continuous revision of encyclopedias makes it necessary for the librarian to decide how often his library should replace a multi-volume encyclopedia. A conscientious librarian is likely to feel that an encyclopedia should be as current as the budget will allow, even if other reference books have to be passed over. The pace at which knowledge is increasing in most fields would seem to make the continuous revision and continuous purchase of encyclopedias obligatory. Unless an encyclopedia is new, how can the latest, or even the recent, developments be made readily available? The logic seems inescapable: (1) an encyclopedia is usually the first source one turns to for an authoritative discussion on an unfamiliar topic; (2) human knowledge is increasing at a dizzy and bewildering pace; (3) encyclopedias summarizing human knowledge are now continuously altered so as to keep up with these developments. Therefore, in order to make the latest facts available, libraries should keep their encyclopedias as up to date as possible.

Despite the argument just outlined, I believe it can be shown that from a practical standpoint the latest revision of an encyclopedia is not essential for good reference service. In the first place, it is obvious that an encyclopedia is not the proper source for current or near-current information, because research and events develop far too fast for such a ponderous instrument to keep pace with them. Almanacs, handbooks, periodicals, and even

encyclopedia yearbooks can be expected to supply up-to-date information not available in an encyclopedia. Sometimes more recent facts can also be found in an official or a primary source, such as a government document or a scientist's report in a learned journal.

Considering that encyclopedia replacement is such a practical subject, it is curious that so little discussion of it can be found. A search of *Library Literature* revealed only one article, which will be quoted later. In the prefaces to *Encyclopedia Americana* and *Collier's Encyclopedia* oblique references appear, but in *Britannica* the issue is faced squarely. The writer of the preface to the *Americana* (1953) makes incidental mention of the preponderance of closed material but does not go into detail.¹ The publisher of *Collier's Encyclopedia* (1954) refers to obsolescence indirectly by repeating three times on one page that *Collier's* is "entirely new." He then adds that as a result of this it has not been necessary to resort "to the standard encyclopedia practice in revision of cutting existing articles to make room for sketchy recordings of recent developments."² Walter Yust, the editor of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, is more precise. He declares that about 75 per cent of the material in an encyclopedia receives very infrequent revision. It is perhaps worth emphasizing that Yust also makes it clear that by no means all the

¹ "When one considers that the greater part of a general reference encyclopedia necessarily comprises articles on closed subjects, such as biographical sketches of historical personages, records of epochal events of past times, histories of philosophies and religions, descriptions of vanished civilizations and pioneer mechanisms, it will be realized the revisions of *The Americana* have been mainly concentrated on subjects of continuing development." Vol. 1, p. iv.

² Vol. 1, p. v.

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remaining 25 per cent requires or receives revision every year or even every three years.³

Is there reason to assume that the revision policy of other encyclopedias is more rigorous than that of *Britannica*? The outstanding example of the durability of the material in an encyclopedia is perhaps the fact that articles on literature in the 11th edition of the *Britannica* (1911) are still recommended to students. The material that does not soon become out of date is what we value in encyclopedias, and it is for this type of information that the public should be encouraged to consult them. It does, however, seem uneconomical to buy frequent reprints of the nearly permanent material found in encyclopedias just to obtain the transitory information which can be supplied at much less cost and usually in more current form in other reference books.

Why then do reputable makers of encyclopedias bring out annual revisions if they do not expect to sell them annually, or at least as frequently as possible, to their customers? Yust explains that the purpose of continuous revision is primarily to keep a set at a constant value.⁴ Under the previous system of infrequent new editions, the value of an encyclopedia was high when it first appeared, after which it would decline at an accelerating rate. Then, when word got out that a new edition was in preparation, the value of the current edition became almost nil. Continuous revision corrects this situation, but it creates the danger of a librarian's assuming that an encyclopedia must be up to the minute in order to do its work. In an age when many products appear in a new model every year, it is easy to assume that encyclopedias also are not built to last. Although salesmen may encourage this

³ "Experience down the years indicates that 75 per cent of the material in an encyclopedia needs changing only at long intervals. The other 25 per cent requires continuous revision, some every year, some every two years, some every three years, and so on." *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1955), Vol. 1, "Editor's Preface."

⁴ Walter Yust, "Revision of Encyclopedias," *CRL*, I (1940), 148.

view, the editor of the *Britannica* as noted above does not do so. He says further, "It is, I believe, a most unfortunate development in the distribution of encyclopedias that the question of constant timeliness should enter so much into the sale and purchase."⁵ Continuous revision, it would appear, does not require continuous replacement.

Turning from the makers to the users, one should ask who consults an encyclopedia? Certainly not the specialist. Rather, as mentioned above, the person who wants an introduction to an unfamiliar topic or perhaps one who wants to refresh his memory about something he has forgotten. Such a person seldom has need of the latest statistic or the most recent development on a rapidly changing subject, and he will probably be disappointed if he looks for this kind of information in even the most recent encyclopedia.

If it is accepted that the latest encyclopedia is not essential for good reference service, there remains the question raised at the beginning of this discussion: how often should an encyclopedia be replaced? No precise answer will be given here, but it has been my experience that, if it is used intelligently for basic and introductory information, a good encyclopedia will provide excellent reference service for five years and beyond that if need be.

To the objection that a five-year-old encyclopedia will not be used intelligently by some readers, with the result that out-of-date and inaccurate information will be disseminated, the response must be that almost every book is susceptible to some kind of misuse and that even the most recent encyclopedia will contain some obsolete information. Providing the latest encyclopedia will not guarantee that it will be used intelligently. Whether it is old or new the librarian must still supply adequate sources for recent information, and he must always guard against improper use of encyclopedias.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

The training of patrons in the proper use of encyclopedias is a closely related subject, but one not pertinent to the present discussion. It ought, however, to be pointed out that, on the basis of the facts

brought out above, a recent encyclopedia does not materially affect the educative role and responsibility of the librarian to see that the books in his care are used to the best advantage.

The Subject Ph.D. and Librarianship

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lem of vital importance. Some urgent needs in documentation research are: truly flexible classification schemes, suitable for subject headings and mechanical selection codes as well as for classification *per se*;¹⁰ a new approach to subject headings, possibly with points of access in classified index proportions; machines for literature searching based on some principle other than the dichotomy; and studies in language engineering, linguistics and semantics to provide a basis for reduction of the ambiguity in terminology, especially in subject headings and in machine language codes.

The place of the subject Ph.D. has been discussed, mainly from the point of view of the holder of this kind of doctorate. The provision of library training to potential librarians with such a background offers an opportunity for the

schools to develop flexibility in their programs. On the other hand, the core curriculum in librarianship is a necessity for work in any aspect of library science, including subject specialties. The Ph.D. who becomes a subject specialist librarian may still maintain his paramount interest in his subject field, whether in an academic or a special library. Those more interested in professional librarianship will find positions in administration, reference, bibliography and cataloging for which the doctorate has a distinct advantage. The whole new science of documentation practically requires advanced study in subject fields as a prerequisite to accomplishment. The problems which must be solved before the library can reach its greatest fulfillment as a functioning storehouse of information pose a real challenge to every branch of the library profession. In this respect, the subject Ph.D. has an important contribution to make, whether as a conventional librarian, a subject specialist or a documentalist.

¹⁰ The essential unity of problems in these three areas has been pointed out in Brian C. Vickery, "Developments in Subject Indexing," *Journal of Documentation*, XI (1955), 1-11.

Second Annual Midwest Academic Libraries Conference

The second annual Midwest Academic Libraries Conference will be held at Marquette University in Milwaukee, May 10 and 11, Friday and Saturday. Three speakers have already been engaged, Robert Downs, Ralph Esterquest, and the Academic Vice President of Marquette University. Invitations will be sent to all academic libraries in the Middle West after March 1.