A Hobson's Choice: Books or Web Sources?

By David Isaacson

Sometimes it is better to use a website than an old-fashioned book. Sometimes the reverse is true. At other times, it's a toss-up. Sometimes a book is more factually reliable and even easier to use than a website. Just because something is online doesn't mean that finding the actual answer is easy or that the results are worth the effort. Experience will help, but unfortunately, the "final answer" changes as each day the World Wide Web changes and its search engines evolve and multiply. Similarly, different print reference sources provide assorted answers although changes occur much less frequently due to the length of any print publishing process.

Recently I had a reference question that seemed to be a natural and quick answer for World Book Encyclopedia, still one of the best of the basic multi-volume encyclopedias: "How many deaths were there in the Revolutionary War?" I chose the print version of World Book because it is easy to use—even if one doesn't start with the index as librarians have been taught. Also, a simple statistic such as American Revolutionary War fatalities can visually be separated from other information on a page of the encyclopedia. The nature of the question also suggests a tool written in relatively simple or introductory English so that junior high students can understand the meaning of the text. For decades, World Book has been reviewed as a reliable source for general overviews of subjects that would include "ready reference" or fact-based answers. In fact, it is very carefully edited so those more difficult topics are first discussed in simpler, student-oriented terms followed by more complex words and concepts. There are graphically highlighted sections in larger articles that facilitate browsing or locating smaller unit of information within a larger unit.

I found the article on the Revolutionary War in the "R" volume, and skimmed the pages at the end of the article where I found a section called "Results of the War." There, it was easy to identify two paragraphs of detail including statistics, and, more specifically, the information that 7,200 people were killed in battle. In addition, if those who died in military camps from disease or weather exposure or in prison after being captured by the British were included, the total of all deaths of the early American revolutionaries was 25,700. The British deaths totaled about 10,000.

Two days later it occurred to me that perhaps I could have answered the same question more efficiently by searching the full-text online version of World Book available from the University Libraries' alphabetical list of databases found on our website (http://www.wmich.edu/library/). Indeed, I did find the answer: "War losses. American military deaths during the war numbered about 25,000. In addition, approximately 1,400 soldiers were missing. British military deaths during the war totaled about 10,000." Not only is the online version a condensed version of the print volume, but the information in the print version, because it is more precise, seems therefore also to be more accurate. However, and this has been shown to be true in several studies, it took me longer to find the information online rather than in print. When using the online product, it took time to figure out from the pull-down menus that I had numerous searching options, and that I probably wanted to choose the full-text mode of searching. Even then, the search did not take me to the exact part of the article I wanted; I still had to browse the article, which was harder to do since the search terms were not boldfaced as they are in some print and online databases. This consumed at least as much time as browsing the print version.

My point could be made over and over every day when a librarian must make a choice between searching either the online or the print version of the same resource. Online is often not the more efficient way of answering reference questions as opposed to the "old-fashioned" way of using printed resources. And, different types of resources in print or online actually have different search issues. For example, finding a statistical table in the World Almanac in print or online, where it is found among the FirstSearch databases, has other difficulties because of two different approaches to searching.

I can't help but point out that finding the original question in the renowned New Encyclopaedia Britannica in either the print or online versions is more frustrating than in either version of World Book. The index of the print version, which I knew I must use given the Micropaedia and Macropaedia divisions, did not, as far as I could tell, have a sub-entry for Revolutionary War until I found the heading "United States War of Independence." Fortunately, there was a cross-reference from "Revolutionary War" to this somewhat arcane heading. A scanning of the article did not yield an answer.

I then decided to try the new, highly touted, free, online Encyclopaedia Britannica. The search under "deaths revolutionary war" gave me 31,496 responses, the first of which linked the words "war" and "revolutionary" in the article on the "Reign of Terror" in the French Revolution. This kind of result is frequent when searching keyword indexes. Unless the key words entered have only one interpretation, the results will cover a wide assortment of hits that merely show that the keywords are found buried in the text. Many of the commonly used search engines, including the indexes to full-text reference tools, find the indexes to full-text reference tools, find the number of times a word occurs in a "document." Word combinations, phrases, and sequence can reduce the number of hits, but online indexes and different search engines search in different ways with a variety of search techniques that can only be learned after reading lengthy "help" screens. The original goal of a common interface between different systems is far from being achieved.

I browsed the next 30 or so entries that highlighted my search terms, but none gave me anything on the U.S. Revolutionary War. My next search using the terms casualties, revolutionary, and war also gave no obvious results in the first 10 hits. I got smarter and decided to use the same rather old-fashioned terminology online as I had in print. Apparently, EB has not edited the online version because "deaths, war of independence," led me to the same online text as I'd found in print. Quite predictably, I had no better luck trying to ferret out the number of deaths in the online version than I had when I browsed the print edition.

My next, presumably reasonable choice, if one believes the hype on the Britannica home page, was to search the "best sites, chosen by our editors, of the Web". I tried "deaths revolutionary war," but my first hit was something useless from Antiques magazine, and the next ten hits were no better. I was less than impressed by the vaunted web choices made by a once reputable publisher whose name stood for quality and thoroughness in general encyclopedias.

Fortunately, these examples of successful and unsuccessful searches are not par for the course in reference work. The original question about Revolutionary War deaths came from a student who described it as "trivia." But even trivia questions need to be handled professionally. Had the patron insisted on a more authoritative source, assuming that World Book was unacceptable, I would have searched further. Certainly there are specialized books on the Revolutionary War that might be more authoritative than the many diverse statistics found in World Book.

The real moral or point of this story is that if reference work is facilitated and advanced by the electronic revolution, then there are a lot of caveats to be
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recognized. Human factors are just as signifi-
cant as the inadequacies of computerized
indexing and other technological
issues. At first glance, electronic sources
do seem to perform magical tricks for our
users. However, humans have designed
all of the software, including the indexing
methods. Those searching tools still suffer
from “numerical” approaches rather than
interpretation or mediation that is based
on human knowledge of an information
source. Other human beings have to
search them and words become the key to
all of the responses—accurate or inaccu-
rate. Whether a keyword or subject index
retrieves data that in and of itself is accu-
rate is another key issue. Even the most
official organization or individual is
potentially fallible. Finally, there is the
question of the actual patron need.

Reference librarians have to relate to and
understand people as much as they must
have skills in searching print and/or
electronic resources. The question that
motivated this essay seemed to be
straightforward—a statistic about deaths
during a particular war. It is easier to find
a number than to find an analysis of how
and why the War of Independence
happened. It is easier to find a discrete
piece of information than to find the right
and/or complete explanation of a concept
or complex event. Reference librarians
must do both and more in their daily ref-
ereence interactions. At this date in the his-
tory of libraries or information centers or
sites on the information highway, the
entire interpretive process has been com-
plicated by a choice between the old-fash-
ioned print sources and the opportunity
to search online sources—and the search
catalogs or indexes to each. But, that
choice is possibly the least of the issues
facing the now and future librarian. This
commentary is all by way of reminding
you that a reference librarian’s work
involves significantly more than the
overly simple distinction between an elec-
tronic or printed source of information.
Would that it were only a Hobson’s
choice!

[Hobson’s choice. ...the choice of taking
either that which is offered or nothing; the
absence of a real choice. After Thomas Hobson
(1544-1631) of Cambridge, England, who
rented horses and gave his customer only one
choice, that of the horse nearest the stable
doors. Random House Dictionary of the
English Language]

Sounds of Music
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 guides describe library and Internet
resources in music and dance, and pro-
vide links to hundreds of Web sites. The
Web seems a logical extension of the
Music & Dance Library’s role as a
resource both on and beyond the campus
for performers, private teachers, societies
and organizations, festivals and schools,
and their patrons. Whether identifying a
song hummed over the phone, or doing a
national search for an obscure chamber
work, we have always been committed to
serving the large and active arts commu-
nity of which we are a part.

Half a century after Harper Maybee’s
death, students and others using his
library still “sit and let the sounds of
music creep into their ears.” But they do
much more, within and outside the
library, that the library makes possible—
watching, searching, “surfing,” and inter-
acting with the whole world of music and
dance activity and scholarship. And while
Harper C. Maybee probably would not
recognize the University, the department,
or the music collection these days, we
know he would still be proud to have his
name on the Music & Dance Library.