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Online Ready Reference in the Public Library*

Online computer databases can serve as excellent and cost effective resources for ready reference in public libraries. In the following discussion some philosophical and cost factors as well as staffing patterns connected with online searching will be examined. The primary source for this information comes from a three-year attempt to maximize usage of online searching, given existing cost constraints, in a medium-sized public library.

Database Usage in Public Libraries

The Northbrook (Illinois) Public Library is a member of the North Suburban Library System (NSLS)—one of eighteen state-funded locally-governed library systems in Illinois. There are forty-four public libraries in NSLS. As of January 1987, twenty-two of these libraries besides Northbrook offered online database searching. Eighteen of the twenty-two responded to a brief informal questionnaire regarding current search activities, although one of these eighteen declined to furnish any information. Comparing these responses to comments in articles and at online meetings suggests that the forty-four NSLS libraries probably represent in microcosm the continuum of database usage in public libraries. The NSLS libraries that offer online searching are not all large or even medium-sized libraries—some of the smallest libraries have added online databases. Nor

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are all the NSLS libraries affluent North Shore institutions. Total budgets range from \$86,000 to \$3 million. Although there are a number of libraries with budgets over \$1 million, fourteen libraries have total expenditures of less than \$500,000 ("Illinois Public Library Statistics," 1986). Among the libraries responding to the questionnaire, amounts budgeted for online searching ranged from \$1,000 to \$10,700 (mean = \$4,388). The number of searches done in the past year ranges from 1 (for a library that began searching several months ago) to more than 1000.

Two libraries do not have a separate budget for online searching; they simply pay the costs out of general funds. Most libraries restrict cost free searching to residents of their community. In some cases there are additional dollar limits on the searches with \$25 being the most common amount. Several libraries allow only a fixed number of searches per year—usually equaling one per month—although one library will do only three searches per year per patron with a maximum of \$20 per search. Another common policy is to search free if the librarian initiates the search but charge if the patron requests a search. Several libraries require the patron to sign a statement to pay all costs above a fixed amount. These statements also include the equivalent of a "hold harmless" clause disavowing any warranty or liability on the part of the library for the information found. Given the nature of the online policies and the number of searches reported, it seems likely that only a few of these libraries are using online databases very often for ready reference. The Northbrook library does use online sources for ready reference and does so frequently.

The Northbrook Public Library began online searching in October 1981. Searches were done by the head of reference and patrons were required to pay all search costs. Six searches were done from October to December 1981 and thirty-nine more in the following year. January through September 1983 produced an additional forty-seven searches. At this point a new policy was adopted. All full-time reference librarians received search training from a new department head, and the library began subsidizing the first \$20 of search costs for any registered Northbrook patron. Searches were done at the discretion of the librarian on duty. Total searches in 1983 equaled 132 and by the end of 1986 amounted to 729 for that year.

A further liberalization of search policy took effect in July 1986. Online databases were truly integrated into the regular pattern of reference source use. They are now chosen (as they have been since 1983) when considered the most appropriate source, but the staff member is no longer required to ask whether the person has a Northbrook library card before answering the question using a database. Since the provision of reference services is not restricted to Northbrook residents, it seems unethical to treat one source for reference service—online searching—differently. An

enlightened board agreed to try this policy on a six-month basis to study the effect on costs. The policy was renewed when no demonstrable effect on long-term growth in costs could be found. It is now permanently in effect.

Ready Reference Use of Databases

It seems fairly certain that a basic reason why search costs have not gotten out of hand lies in the way online databases are used at Northbrook. In almost all cases (over 95 percent), the librarians are using online searching as a ready reference tool—not as a response to patron requests for extensive literature searching. Therefore, it is important to have a common understanding of the difference between ready reference use and literature searching of databases.

Ready reference is a term in such common use that a definition is almost superfluous. However, as one begins to investigate what various librarians mean when they speak of ready reference online searching, it becomes apparent the words may be used to define a wide range of activities. Katz (1987) makes a distinction between specific search questions, usually looking for general information on a topic, and ready reference questions, seeking quick facts about dates, persons, statistics, and the like. He goes on to state that 40 to 60 percent of questions other than directional questions in an average library will be of the former variety and 30 to 40 percent of the latter. In some respects, this distinction becomes blurred in the use of online databases at a busy public reference desk. When the question is: "I need anything you have on the Universal Widget Co.," and the librarian retrieves a summary financial printout on the company using DIALOG's file 516 (D&B's MARKET IDENTIFIERS), spending two minutes and forty-eight seconds on the search, does this qualify as ready reference because it is providing quick facts (statistics) or as a specific search question because it is providing general information on the topic? When a large library with over \$30,000 budgeted for online searching says it is using online databases for ready reference but takes down the questions to be searched later, is this really ready reference?

If the primary characteristic of ready reference is being able to find quick facts, most reference work in a busy public library probably qualifies as ready reference. Even Katz's specific search questions requiring general information on a topic—e.g., "I need a simple explanation of how a grain elevator works"—are difficult to distinguish from ready reference with an experienced librarian who goes directly to something like *The Way Things Work*. Librarians who have only three to four minutes to spend on each question rarely can afford to get into in-depth reference searching—manual or online. Therefore, if an online database is to be used at a busy public reference desk, it almost has to be used in a ready reference mode.

Three elements are essential if online databases are to be used for ready reference:

1. The terminal must be at the reference desk and the connection to online vendors must be at least as convenient as the connection to a copy of the *World Almanac*. That is, the computer or terminal is turned on and a communications program is either loaded and ready to run or is accessible at the press of several keys from a menu.
2. There is someone who is capable of searching online scheduled at the reference desk at all times the library is open.
3. If the library does not charge for looking up the name of a president of a company listed in Standard and Poor's *Register of Corporations*, then the library also does not charge for looking up the name of the president of a small company that can be found only online in D&B's MARKET IDENTIFIERS database.

Given these parameters, there exists an obvious difference between ready reference searching in public libraries and the use of online databases for literature searching. Literature searches—i.e., comprehensive bibliographies on a topic often requiring subject competence in a field to compile—have seldom been a feature of public library service unless the library offers a fee-based information service. Online computer databases do make marvelous tools for compiling lengthy bibliographies on topics for doctoral dissertations or extensive academic or special library research. However, public libraries have never had the budgets or time to do literature searching when only manual sources were available, and few can afford this even now with computer databases.

The most effective use of online databases in ready reference is found in two areas: faster access to information that might be findable in manual sources if the time to search were available and access to facts in sources that either cost too much for the library to obtain or simply are not available in a print version. If print sources are available, the library may choose not to purchase them because online searching is more cost effective. Deciding when online becomes more cost effective than a print counterpart can be a difficult process. With some investment of time, however, it is possible to develop an "Online/Manual" ratio that reflects the relative costs of accessing data online or through manual sources (Anderson, 1987). Of course, with heavily used print sources there is still no way that online searching can be an economical substitute.

The question that has provided a topic for a number of articles—i.e., whether a library should offer online searching—is the wrong question to ask. We are in the business of providing information. Clients may not care how that information is supplied as long as they get what they need. Using online or print sources is a matter of choosing the channel through which

the information is to be supplied. Downloading, a term for capturing facts from an online database, can equally well be applied to photocopying some pages from a reference book. Both cases facilitate the transfer of needed information from some stored form to the user. Librarians should be the facilitators of this transfer, choosing the most effective channel to download requested information. If an online database is the best choice in a particular situation, then the reference department should not be deterred from using it just because the cost appears at the end of the search. It is almost ironic that probably the major factor in preventing a widespread acceptance of online searching—i.e., the clear cost figures supplied by the vendor—is something reference librarians have been seeking for years—a way to provide accurate costing for their services.

Cost Factors

Several factors make up the online cost equation. Although individual cost figures usually appear at the end of each online search, it is not easy to compare costs of competing sources for online databases. Another factor influencing ultimate cost may be differing levels of expertise among the searchers on the reference staff. Questions about these costs may arise when making initial decisions regarding adding online sources to the reference collection. One can find in the literature some studies of cost comparisons of experienced versus inexperienced searchers or comparisons of different online vendors. However, these studies usually deal with extensive searches on fairly complex questions. Generalizing from these studies to the environment at a public library reference desk may not be warranted.

One study at Northbrook analyzed cost factors in a ready reference situation based on a year's collection of search data (Anderson & Weston, 1987). Comparisons of average search costs for searchers with experience ranging from four months to seven years are reported. The average amount spent online per question by the most experienced searcher was \$3.95. The newest searcher averaged \$5.39. This is a 36.5 percent difference. However, in the total cost perspective of providing information services, the difference is not particularly significant. First, the more experienced searchers probably cost the library more in salaries if for no other reason than simple longevity in the field. Second, using online sources for ready reference, as stated earlier, implies that the sources are available anytime the library is open. To have only experienced searchers present at all hours is probably physically impossible or at least very costly. In the Northbrook study the net result in savings, if the most experienced searcher had been able to do all the questions of the newest staff member, would have been \$102.24. This was 2.6 percent of the money spent for online searching in the year studied, or about twenty-six more questions searched at the least expensive average rate.

When it takes a novice reference librarian thirty minutes to find an answer to a question in a print source that a long-time veteran would find in five minutes, the labor cost may be as much as ten times higher for the novice given differing salary levels. However, there does not appear to be very much interest in worrying about manual question answering costs based on experience levels of reference librarians.

Another cost variable discussed in articles is the choice of an online vendor. One study reported discounted cost differences ranging from zero to 45 percent between BRS and DIALOG on identical searches on both general and specialized databases (Hoover, 1979). The Northbrook study referred to earlier extrapolated from searches on BRS to calculate search costs on DIALOG for the same connect time and number of citations printed. While there was a 22.6 percent differential between the full BRS cost and DIALOG (in DIALOG's favor), when BRS was accessed through a consortium such as the Bibliographic Center for Research, it was 4.06 percent less expensive than DIALOG. The only time significant cost differences are found is when searches are concentrated on a few specialized databases that have widely varying royalty charges depending on the vendor used.

Hidden Costs of Online Searching

Utilizing online databases to answer ready reference questions may also generate additional costs not readily apparent from the sign-off tabulation at the end of a search. In addition to staffing, training, and documentation costs, there may be effects on other aspects of library service. For example, some librarians have speculated about increased costs in requests through interlibrary loan to obtain photocopies of articles located through an online search. Possible additional heavy use of in-house magazine collections may also be considered as a hidden cost factor. Online databases expand the individual library's horizons enormously. Locating previously unavailable information bibliographically does not do much good if one cannot also provide the actual details when needed.

In the North Suburban Library System, photocopy requests are handled through the Central Serials Service (CSS). Detailed statistics are kept of Northbrook Public Library's requests to CSS as well as statistics on in-house use of the periodical collection which is shelved in a closed stack area. This makes it possible to study use patterns over a period of time to look for correlations between database usage and periodical requests.

Chi-square analyses of annual totals for CSS requests, in-house use of periodicals, and database searches for the years 1982 through 1986 were performed. Pearson's correlation coefficient and regression equations were also calculated, using the EPISTAT statistical program for an IBM PC, on

monthly totals for these three variables. Checking for a relationship using individual months from 1986 and CSS requests/database searches as the variables produces a chi-square of 99.64506 with 28.869 required to reject the null hypothesis (that there is no relationship between the variables) at the 5 percent level. In all cases there was a significant correlation between the number of searches, the number of CSS requests, and the in-house use of periodicals.

Correlation does not necessarily imply causality. Just because the correlation exists, it would not be fair to conclude that online searching was responsible for increasing serials use. There may be very little significance to the correlation because of the time/linear relationship of the data. The same positive correlations were found between reference questions and database searches, in-house use of periodicals and interlibrary loan, and reference questions and interlibrary loan.

The only reasonable conclusion is perhaps obvious (and somewhat Gestaltian)—i.e., all elements of service provided contribute to and affect the total level of service. If users are pleased with the reference services provided, they will no doubt be more likely to come to the library for other services and vice versa. And increasing services increases costs, but there is no particular reason to single out database searches any more than any other area of the library as creating significant cost increases for other services.

Budgeting for Online Searching

Of interest to reference managers and library directors is a related question—i.e., what is a reasonable amount to set aside for online searching (if indeed it is necessary to segregate online costs from other reference costs). In an attempt to derive a cost predictor, the correlation between total number of reference questions asked and number of database searches was used to develop a regression equation. As noted earlier, a correlation does exist between these two factors ($r = 0.59$), even though there may be no causal relationship. In this case, the equation for predicting Y^1 (number of online searches) based on X (number of reference questions) is:

$$Y^1 = -4.237 + .013859X$$

As an illustration of how this equation might be used to predict amounts needed for searching in a future year, a month-by-month calculation was done using 1985 reference data to predict the number of searches for 1986. These figures were then multiplied by the long-term mean cost per search of \$6.50. As illustrated in Table 1, this would have underestimated the actual 1986 expenses by \$53.99 (1.1 percent) at the $+1s_{est\ y}$ level. In other words, in 68 percent of the cases, the cost would not be expected to exceed \$4,860.36 (the true cost was \$4,914.35). At $2+s_{est\ y}$ (95 percent level),

the equation would have overestimated expenses by \$1,160.44 (23.6 percent). It is not suggested that this regression equation can be used directly as a guide by other libraries to predict searching costs. However, additional studies of this nature under other searching conditions would be helpful in testing the possibility of predicting search costs.

Question Analysis

To provide some idea of how online databases are being used for ready reference in one library, a subject analysis of Northbrook searches during the period January through December 1986 was conducted. The search logs included a space for "question." This disclosure is not intended as an invasion of privacy (see later discussion), rather it has been used to increase knowledge about how this new tool is being used. Instead of attempting to allocate the questions to traditional Dewey subject areas, they have been grouped into what is believed to be a more meaningful categorization corresponding to the kinds of databases available (see Table 2).

Of significance is the dominant position of business related questions. Searches for financial data on specific companies (primarily on Dialog's File 516, D&B's MARKET IDENTIFIERS), searches for general business information as well as background information on companies from business news databases (such as File 148 and TRADE AND INDUSTRY INDEX), and general business news stories from the *Wall Street Journal* and *New York Times* accounted for 52.3 percent of the online dollars spent in 1986 and 50.2 percent of the total number of searches.

Consumer product information, on the other hand, accounted for only 0.64 percent of the money spent. (This is probably due to the existence of alternative sources such as the microfilm and InfoTrac II versions of *Magazine Index* in the library.) Other than business questions, there were only a few significant categories of questions searched over a fraction of a percent of the time. General news stories, education, medical, and psychological topics accounted for 28.28 percent of the cost and 26.9 percent of the number of searches.

Table 2 also illustrates the effect of price differentials between scientific databases, more generalist databases such as ERIC, and basic bibliographic or biographical sources. If one makes a somewhat unfair assumption that each access of an online database resulted in information of some sort being retrieved (even negative information), some interesting questions can be raised about the relative costs and benefits of information in different fields.

Art questions appear to be the best bargain of all. At \$1.59 average cost per search and a 3-to-1 ratio of the percent of total questions versus percent of total dollars spent, this was clearly the cheapest searching done in this

Table 1
Predicted vs. Actual Search Costs

<i>Month</i>	<i>Predicted 1986 costs based on 1985 data</i>	<i>Predicted 1986 costs based on 1985 data (+1s est y)</i>	<i>Actual 1986 costs</i>
1	\$326.31	\$427.51	\$376.38
2	\$307.19	\$408.40	\$383.67
3	\$369.34	\$470.54	\$396.29
4	\$260.72	\$361.93	\$326.77
5	\$343.16	\$444.36	\$337.24
6	\$233.09	\$334.30	\$213.89
7	\$232.64	\$333.84	\$394.83
8	\$224.40	\$325.60	\$360.40
9	\$297.41	\$398.61	\$494.55
10	\$380.93	\$482.13	\$643.06
11	\$395.97	\$497.17	\$650.50
12	\$274.76	\$375.97	\$336.77
Total	\$3,645.92	\$4,860.36	\$4,914.35

Table 2
Subject Analysis of Online Searches
January-December 1986

<i>Category</i>	<i>Average cost</i>	<i>Percentage of total cost</i>	<i>Percentage of total searches</i>
Art	\$ 1.59	0.10	0.30
Bibliographic	1.84	2.47	6.50
Biographical	3.67	2.81	3.70
Business info	9.69	9.41	4.70
Company (financial)	4.42	27.38	30.00
Company (news)	4.23	8.83	10.10
Consumer info	3.88	0.64	0.80
Dissertations	7.45	0.46	0.30
Educational	4.38	4.17	4.60
Engineering/Science/ Biology	8.15	3.87	2.30
Foundations	7.13	1.18	0.80
Government	5.67	0.59	0.50
Hardware/Software reviews	10.03	2.69	1.30
History	2.52	1.41	2.70
Legal	4.52	0.28	0.30
Library Science	6.21	0.64	0.50
Medical	3.44	5.69	8.00
News stories	5.59	11.91	10.30
New stories (business-related)	5.99	6.68	5.40
Psychological	7.88	6.51	4.00
Sociological/Political	5.26	2.28	2.10
Statistical/Demographic	5.89	0.97	0.80

year. However, these art questions provided only negative intelligence—i.e., no information on the individual artists being searched was found—which is the reason the searches were so inexpensive. But the value of this negative information to the patron (and in terms of librarian time) could possibly be quite significant. If someone was thinking of buying a painting by an artist who was represented as being of some importance, learning that nothing had appeared about the artist in *ART BIBLIOGRAPHIES MODERN* or *ART LITERATURE INTERNATIONAL* could be quite valuable. To manually cover many years of *Art Index* for the same negative information would be considerably more costly for librarian or patron.

The most expensive searching in terms of average cost per search was for reviews of computer equipment or software programs—\$10.03 per search. And the relationship between total dollars spent on this category and number of searches was the opposite of the art example—1.3 percent of the searches accounting for 2.69 percent of the costs. But these searches provided knowledge on software frequently costing in hundreds of dollars and computer equipment worth thousands of dollars.

Searches in the business area, while usually moderate in average cost, can produce extremely valuable benefits. For example, how does one measure the worth to someone who goes into a job interview armed with a detailed financial background about a company only obtainable through an online search? And other users have reported that information from a database search resulted in their company being awarded expensive contracts. In the nonbusiness sector of reference services the average \$3.67 biographical search for students who were unable to find needed information in printed indexes is equally important.

Problem Areas

Privacy Considerations

Just as accounting control must be exercised in the library acquisition process, amounts expended on online searching must be recorded in some fashion. The usual method in an online search service is to use a manual logging process or some type of software to accomplish the same task. Commercial programs such as ProSearch or DIALOG LINK can provide detailed cost accounting. Alternatively, a simple Basic program can be written to ask the searcher to input the needed facts at the beginning and end of the search with the online times being recorded automatically through the DOS time and date commands if using PC-compatible equipment.

However, when the library is required to maintain some control over individual patron usage of the online system because the searching policy puts some restrictions on the amount of free searching, privacy issues may

come into play. In the search log used at Northbrook, space is provided for the general subject of the search. This knowledge can be very helpful in later studies of database usage, but it does have a potential for creating a breach of confidence. One safeguard is to never record any specific details such as the name of a company. For example, the subject for a patron researching True Fidelity Products, Inc. will be logged as "Company Info." The same process can be used to make the subject in other searches as general as possible while still recording enough to be useful. Care is always taken to protect the confidentiality of the search log just as circulation records are protected.

Cost Overruns

Does the kind of free and open database use described in the preceding discussion create a potential for disastrous budget overruns? Probably no more than exists for any library that assigns book ordering responsibility to more than one librarian. The same sound principles that control overspending on book budgets can also control overspending on database searching. Just as one must monitor the amount of money encumbered for books and stay within the allotted budget, the online services coordinator (or department head) must closely monitor the amounts being expended for online searching. A computer spreadsheet is a very useful item for doing this budget record keeping and is highly recommended. If the library charges patrons for searches exceeding some fixed amount, then reaching an understanding with the business office to ensure reimbursed searches are put back into the online budget, not into the library's general fund, is also very important.

The primary mechanism for controlling costs before the fact is a workable searching policy that is clearly understood by staff members involved and easily explainable and justifiable to patrons. In developing a policy for public library use of online databases, the first step requires resolving some philosophical issues. As a frequent columnist on the subject has pointed out: "A library needs a consistent policy based on a sound philosophy of service rather than a policy that discriminates either by category of resource or by the financial resources of the patron" (Roose, 1987, p. 65).

The following policy (with editorial comments in brackets), while not suggested as a model for all situations, represents the best compromise the staff at Northbrook has been able to produce.

Database Policy

Online databases are an integral part of reference services and, like other resources, are used when most appropriate in the professional judgment of the reference staff. [Primary importance is attached to fully integrating online searching in the reference process. In order to control usage, decisions about when to use this source are made by the professional

involved.] To make this service available to the maximum number of patrons, individual users will be limited each month to a total of \$20 online search time at no charge. [To equalize the budget over the maximum number of users, a cap on the amount for any one patron is set. This is similar to limiting manual staff research time on any one question.] If it appears the cost of a search will exceed the monthly maximum, the patron will be offered the option of terminating the search below this limit or paying for all charges above this amount. Payment by cash or check at the termination of the search (before delivery of the results) will be required.

Depending on frequency of use and financial constraints as determined by the head of information services, nonresidents who specifically request database searches may be required to pay the full online cost—i.e., the library will not subsidize the first \$20 of search costs. [To ensure primary service to the taxing area should budget problems develop, the department head retains the right to reevaluate service to nonresidents.]

The other important factor in controlling costs is the training and abilities of the searchers. If a commitment is made to include online searching in the reference process on the same level as any other reference source, it will be necessary to have people at the reference desk who can use the online databases. Any librarian working at a public reference desk is expected to be familiar with the tools of his/her trade. An online database is just another tool, but, except for librarians who have graduated in the past few years, the techniques of online searching are probably not within most staff members' repertoire. Consequently, some form of training will be required.

While public library usage may not require the expertise of literature searchers in academic or special libraries, all searchers must have some basic competencies. Typing is an elementary prerequisite since the keyboard is the primary communication device with a computer. Searchers must be able to log on to an online vendor, select the desired databases, input search terms, print out results, and log off. It is important that at least every full-time reference librarian be able to use the computer easily. The two methods normally used are either vendor training, which can be costly, or in-house training, which depends on the skill of the trainer for its success. The best combination, as one writer points out, is probably a combination of vendor and in-house training (Tenopir, 1984, p. 871). Online experimentation time is essential for new searchers. While *DIALOG* offers a number of *ONTAP* files (scaled-down versions of full databases at a reduced cost), these often prove less than satisfactory because the material coverage is so small. Vendors, with their training experience and limitless access to online time, are probably in the best position to provide the introductory training for completely new searchers. However, if the person has had some exposure in library school or elsewhere, in-house

training can be satisfactory if the trainer has a good background in searching. If possible, attendance at database producer workshops (if the cost is reasonable) can help maintain search skills.

Continuous reading in the field of online searching is also important. The major vendor newsletters offer searching tips, and there is a continually increasing flow of "how to" articles in library magazines. Attendance at conferences can also be helpful. Local user groups with searchers sharing problems and solutions can be an important factor in the flow of professional searching information. Simple tricks like maximizing the use of database indexes (DIALOG's DIALINDEX and BRS's CROS databases) can save significant amounts of money. Temporarily saving search results to disc or a RAM disc while printing is a form of insurance, and will almost assuredly save money at some future point when the printer runs out of paper or the ink cartridge goes dry halfway through an expensive search.

Conclusion

It is possible to theorize that had online vendors hidden their individual search costs by selling online searching in the way that major business services—e.g., the Standard and Poor's investment packet—are sold, then the newly available precise cost data might not have produced such feelings of shock that many libraries experienced and which may have prevented them from getting into online searching. The vendors of CD-ROM versions of online databases seem to have taken a lesson from the business services providers and are selling the product on a subscription basis. This may reflect a market realization that too much knowledge about individual usage may be unhealthy for the vendors.

Librarians should be grateful that costs of information services can be identified so precisely. It is also very helpful to know that one is paying for information, not something that will gather dust waiting for some potential future use. Nothing in the earlier discussion should suggest that online searching can replace manual sources. Rather, the argument has been that both have a place in the reference department just as the microfilm version of the *Magazine Index* (or InfoTrac II) and the old green *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature* can both be utilized effectively in reference. Online ready reference does expand the horizons of a reference librarian and offers new ways to locate information. However, *Poole's Index to Periodical Literature* also expanded horizons and offered new access to material in 1882. It is hoped that more public librarians will begin to take advantage of online searching just as librarians were able to adapt to the intricacies of *Poole's*.

In some cases, an online search is the *only* way a question can be answered. In other cases, *Famous First Facts* is the only way a question can

be answered. As information providers, librarians need to have and use the right source to answer the question and not worry about whether that source is electronic or paper.

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