Best Free Reference Websites
Thirteenth Annual List

RUSA Machine-Assisted Reference Section (MARS) contributing members: *Amy W. Boykin and Kay Cunningham, Co-Chairs, Erica Danowitz, Matt Lee, Sarah Lehmann, Clark Nall, Donna Scanlon, Colleen Seale, Kristen Shuyler, and Alec Sonsteby*

Welcome to the thirteenth annual "Best Free Reference Websites List." In 1998, the Machine-Assisted Reference Section (MARS) of RUSA appointed an ad hoc task force to develop a method of recognizing outstanding reference websites. The task force became a formal committee at the 2001 ALA Annual Conference, and now it is appropriately named the MARS Best Free Reference Websites Committee.

Like previous lists, the 2011 list of winning sites is being published in this year's Fall issue of *RUSQ*. A link to this year's list is on the MARS webpage along with a link to the "Best Free Reference Websites Combined Index," which provides in alphabetical order all entries from the current and previous twelve lists. Succinct and insightful annotations for the Best Free Reference Websites List entries were written by committee members in the years the particular websites were selected for the lists. These annotations provide guidance for using the websites as reference tools.

Once again, the committee considered free websites in all subject areas useful for ready reference and of value in most types of libraries.

The committee has established the following criteria for nominations:

- Quality, depth, and usefulness of content
- Ready reference
- Uniqueness of content
- Currency of content
- Authority of producer
- Ease of use
- Customer service
- Efficiency
- Appropriate use of the web as a medium

More detailed explanation of the criteria can be found on the MARS webpage (www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/rusa/sections/mars/marspubs/marsbestrefcriteria.cfm).

As in previous years, the committee worked virtually, using e-mail and the online bookmarking site called Diigo (www.diigo.com). The process went smoothly, especially given that several of the committee members have served on the committee for several years. Each member nominated five to seven websites using the criteria specified above and then wrote brief annotations that would assist fellow committee members with reviewing and voting for their favorite nominated websites. The goal of this year's committee was to produce a final list with approximately twenty-five to thirty high-quality reference websites. After careful review,

the committee members decided to recognize twenty-five new Best Free Reference Websites for 2011.

Winning sites were notified electronically with a letter of recognition from the MARS Best Free Reference Websites Committee, and they were invited to link to the online version of this list. The annotations for winning websites were also edited by the co-chairs to ensure that they are of optimal use to librarians and fit the criteria listed above.

Biodiversity Heritage Library, www.biodiversitylibrary.org.

The Biodiversity Heritage Library is the result of the efforts of natural history and botanical libraries (including the Smithsonian, the Royal Botanic Gardens, Harvard University Botany, and others) to make accessible the "legacy literature of biodiversity held in their collections." With 32 million+ digitized pages about plants and animals from publications from 1484 to the present, the site is available for anyone, though biologists, gardeners, and conservationists may find it most useful. Multiple searching and browsing options are available. The interface for browsing the digitized books and journals is easy to use, and the scanned images are of high quality and in full color. Well-designed and easy-to-use, BHL makes it possible to explore some of the world's great science libraries, museums, and botanical gardens.

Author/Publisher: Biodiversity Heritage Library (BHL), a consortium of 12 natural history and botanical libraries
Free/Fee-based: Free
Date Reviewed: February 21, 2011

BlackPast.org: Remembered & Reclaimed, www.blackpast.org.

BlackPast.org is "dedicated to providing information to the general public on African American history in the United States and on the history of the more than one billion people of African ancestry around the world." Over 1,500 encyclopedia entries—written by historians, independent researchers, and students—chronicle significant events, places, and people. Other resources include full-text transcripts of speeches and primary source documents, dating back to the 18th century; bibliographies, accompanied by links out to Amazon; and links to digital archives, museums, and other websites about African American and global African history. While the lack of a consistent sidebar can make navigation a little confusing, the content is excellent.

Author/Publisher: BlackPast.org
Free/Fee-based: Free
Date Reviewed: February 24, 2011

Butterflies and Moths of North America (BAMONA), www .butterfliesandmoths.org.

A lovely site, BAMONA provides images of and information about the butterflies and moths of North America. Search by scientific or common name, or browse the taxonomy. The image gallery is also browsable, with limiters like life stages, views (ventral or dorsal), species types, and families. Available information includes accounts of insects' life histories, wing spans, habitats, diets, ranges, and more; Google Maps has been incorporated to display verified sightings. Enlargeable photos of insects are available, as are text descriptions. Users are invited to record sightings and upload photos; registration is required to utilize interactive aspects of the site. Links to other identification tools are provided.

Author/Publisher: BAMONA, Montana State University
Free/Fee-based: Free
Date Reviewed: February 14, 2011

Cornell Lab of Ornithology, www.birds.cornell.edu.

Perhaps the most complete and authoritative source for free information about birds available, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology provides information ranging from birding basics to ornithological research and conservation efforts. Most visitors will probably be first drawn to the section, "All About Birds," a rich, lush, and searchable database including identification, life history, range maps, conservation status, plus sounds and videos, for 585 species of birds. Name phrases including the search term appear as queries are typed. Links are provided out to the more comprehensive, but subscription-based resource, "The Birds of North America Online." This is a perfect site for avid birders, students, conservationists, and casual backyard observers.

Author/Publisher: Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Cornell University
Free/Fee-based: Free (Memberships available at varying levels of contribution)
Date Reviewed: February 25, 2011

Current Value of Old Money, http://projects.exeter.ac.uk/ RDavies/arian/current/howmuch.html.

The Current Value of Old Money website collects links "to inflation statistics, price indexes, and sources of data on changes in the value of money." Resources are divided both geographically: International, United Kingdom and Europe, Australia, Canada, Mexico, and the United States; and thematically: TransAtlantic Passenger Fares, Historical Exchange Rates, Prices in the Ancient World, Financial Costs of the World Wars, and Changes in the GDP, etc. Even more information is available through special sections: History of Money, Money in Fiction and Financial Scandals. If you have ever been asked, "How do I adjust for inflation?" or "What did a sack of flour cost in medieval England?" then you know this site is worth its weight in gold. A bibliography of print sources is also included.

Author/Publisher: Roy Davies, former Librarian, St. Luke's Campus, University of Exeter
Free/Fee-based: Free
Date Reviewed: March 11, 2011

Google Translate, http://translate.google.com/#en|es|.

Translate words, texts, websites or entire documents in over 50 supported languages, from Afrikaans to Yiddish, using Google Translate. If you can't identify the language, use the "detect language" feature. You can listen to the translation in synthesized speech for 20 of the languages. "Did you mean?" suggests corrections to spelling errors

whenever possible. Key in the native language using the virtual keyboard, or enter words phonetically. No, as their informational video explains, Google Translate is not operated by a room full of bilingual elves. Instead, the process is accomplished via statistical machine translation, a process that generates translations based on patterns found in large amounts of text. Quality varies by language. Already an amazing work in progress, Google Translate will undoubtedly improve with time.

Author/Publisher: Google
Free/Fee-based: Free
Date Reviewed: February 24, 2011

International Business Statistics Database | globalEDGE, http://globaledge.msu.edu/resourcedesk/dibs.

Created by the International Business Center at Michigan State University (IBC), globalEDGE is a knowledge web-portal that connects international business professionals worldwide to a wealth of information, insights, and learning resources on business activities. Partially funded by a U.S. Department of Education Title VI B grant (CIBE program), globalEDGE offers information on a global scale. More than 5,000 online resources are available, including in-depth analysis of selected industries and an international business blog with information from around the world. With a free registration, you can become part of the globalEDGE Network. The site also provides research and teaching resources and decision support tools for managers.

Author/Publisher: Michigan State University
Free/Fee-based: Free (Additional access with free registration)
Date Reviewed: March 11, 2011

The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, www.iucnredlist.org.

The Red List is a compilation of information on plant and animal species threatened with extinction. Each species in the list is assessed at one of the following levels: extinct, extinct in the wild, critically endangered, endangered, vulnerable, near threatened, and least concern. Other useful information provided per species includes taxonomy, geographic range, population, habitat, ecology, threats, and conservation actions. Searching and browsing options make the list easy to use. The list is updated once a year by the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources. A small advertisement on some pages somewhat detracts from the experience of using the site, but overall, this is an authoritative, comprehensive, and usable source about an important topic—the extinction risks of thousands of species.

Author/Publisher: International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources
Free/Fee-based: Free
Date Reviewed: February 21, 2011

KIDS COUNT Data Center, http://datacenter.kidscount.org.

KIDS COUNT provides statistics about children and their well-being. Among the indicators are race and ethnicity counts, household incomes, numbers living in poverty or in single-parent homes, numbers enrolled in special education, and much more. Users can find data for individual states, compare data across states, or see measures for every state in the Union. Community-level data profiles are available within states, and raw data can be downloaded from the cross-state comparisons. Yearly data goes back to 2006. Data are displayed in map, tabular, and graphical forms. A "How-To" tab includes a FAQ with answers to common questions about using the site and its data. KIDS COUNT can be followed on Facebook and Twitter; a mobile site is also available.

Author/Publisher: Annie E. Casey Foundation
Free/Fee-based: Free
Date Reviewed: February 22, 2011

The Mark Twain Project Online, www.marktwainproject.org.

The Mark Twain Project Online "offers unfettered, intuitive access to reliable texts, accurate and exhaustive notes, and the most recently discovered letters and documents. Its ultimate purpose is to produce a digital critical edition, fully annotated, of everything Mark Twain wrote." This website makes the work of the Mark Twain Project, which has been ongoing since the 1960's, freely accessible online. The extensive annotations that accompany each letter, text, and document represent the work of scholars for more than four decades. One drawback is that this site is still a work-in-progress: not all texts are available online yet. Overall, the MTPO's intuitive design, (ultimately) exhaustive content, and meticulous annotations make it an excellent resource for students, Twain scholars, and interested members of the public.

Author/Publisher: "MTPO is produced by the Mark Twain Papers and Project of The Bancroft Library in collaboration with the University of California Press; the site is hosted by UC Berkeley's Library Systems Office. During 2005–8 the California Digital Library collaborated in MTPO's creation and initial development."
Free/Fee-based: Free
Reviewed: February 24, 2011

morgueFile, www.morguefile.com.

A source of free, high-resolution images, morgueFile's purpose is to provide "free image reference material for illustrators, comic book artists, designers, teachers and all creative pursuits." Users can search by keyword or browse by categories (such as animals, business, nature, objects, etc.). Results can be filtered by size, color, and other aspects. Each image includes rights granted, page and image URLs, and technical information about the original photograph. Photographers can upload photos to share, create portfolios, and discuss photography in the community section of the site. According to the site's creators, morgueFile is named after a term used in the newspaper business to describe the file that holds past issues.

Author/Publisher: Kevin and Michael Connors; Johannes Seemann
Free/Fee-based: Free
Date Reviewed: February 22, 2011

National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, http://nccam.nih.gov.

The National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) is the "lead agency for scientific research on the diverse medical . . . practices . . . and products that are not generally considered part of conventional medicine." The Center's site is a trove of information both for consumers and health professionals. For example, the page on aromatherapy links to an easy-to-read article titled "Aromatherapy May Make Good Scents, But Does It Work?" as well as to citations for reviews and randomized controlled trials in PubMed. Also on the site is information about research currently being conducted or sponsored by NCCAM, grant funding, and continuing education opportunities. This is an authoritative, easy-to-navigate, and up-to-date website for people wanting quality information on complementary and alternative medicine.

Author/Publisher: National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, National Institutes of Health
Free/Fee-based: Free
Date Reviewed: February 25, 2011

Open CRS, http://opencrs.com.

The Congressional Research Service produces policy analysis and briefs for members of Congress on a wide range of issues, but does not distribute these reports to the general public. Open CRS therefore attempts to gather and provide access to these CRS Reports through its website. The reports have wide appeal, with some recent titles being "US-China Relations: Policy Issues" and "The Federal Food Safety System: A Primer." Unfortunately, there does not appear to be an easy way to browse available reports; primary access is instead provided through a customized Google search and a list of "Recent Reports." Regardless, Open CRS is an important project that seeks to expand access to taxpayer-funded government information.

Author/Publisher: Open CRS, Center for Democracy & Technology
Free/Fee-based: Free
Date Reviewed: February 25, 2011

Open Library, http://openlibrary.org.

A project of the Internet Archive, Open Library seeks to create and maintain "one web page for every book ever published." In addition to bibliographic information, subject links, links to other editions of the work, and information about finding a physical copy in a library, the site provides full-text access (when available) to out-of-copyright titles, including the option to send the text to a Kindle. Open Library uses a wiki interface, so anyone can contribute to it. To date, the project has "gathered over 20 million records . . . , with more on the way." Records are search-able, and browse-able by subject; the site is also easy to navigate. This website is a great resource for readers.

Author/Publisher: Internet Archive
Free/Fee-based: Free
Date Reviewed: February 25, 2011

Plant Information Online, http://plantinfo.umn.edu.

Plant Information Online "offers a collection of databases of interest to plant and gardening enthusiasts and students, as well as professional botanists, horticulturists, and researchers." It contains information on where to buy over 100,000 plant varieties, contact information for over 1,000 North American nurseries and seed suppliers, a large collection of plant images, and links to websites on growing plants in different regions of the U.S. and Canada. This website will be of particular use to gardeners who grow unusual or heirloom varieties.

Author/Publisher: Richard T. Isaacson and Katherine Allen, University of Minnesota Libraries
Free/Fee-based: Free
Date Reviewed: March 11, 2011

ProCon.org—Pros and Cons of Controversial Issues, www.procon.org.

This site takes a look at both sides of 40 controversial issues in many areas, including business, education, health, law, entertainment, politics, religion, science, and sports. ProCon.org's mission is to promote "critical thinking, education, and informed citizenship by presenting controversial issues in a straightforward, nonpartisan, primarily pro-con format." For each issue, a core question is posed along with the top ten pro and con statements regarding the issue, little known facts, a historical timeline, and often a glossary. The sources of quotes are linked to individual biographies with additional information. A Teachers' corner provides lesson plan ideas, and tabs and facets make the site easy to navigate. Information provided is for multiple ages and reading levels.

Author/Publisher: ProCon.org
Free/Fee-based: Free
Date Reviewed: February 21, 2011

Public Library of Science, www.plos.org.

The Public Library of Science, or PLOS, "is a nonprofit organization of scientists and physicians committed to making the world's scientific and medical literature a freely available public resource." PLOS is comprised of seven peer-reviewed open-access journals including PLOS One, PLOS Biology, and PLOS Medicine. All articles are free "to read, download, copy, distribute, and use (with attribution)." This website provides a valuable repository of scientific scholarship and represents an innovation in open-access scholarly communication.

Author/Publisher: Public Library of Science
Free/Fee-based: Free
Date Reviewed: February 24, 2011

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, http://plato.stanford.edu.

"From its inception, the [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy] was designed so that each entry is maintained and kept up to date by an expert or group of experts in the field. All entries and substantive updates are refereed by the members of a distinguished Editorial Board before they are made public. Consequently, [the] dynamic reference work maintains

academic standards while evolving and adapting in response to new research." Also, the "Table of Contents lists entries that are published or assigned. The Projected Table of Contents also lists entries which are currently unassigned but nevertheless projected." This is an awesome site for students in philosophy or anyone with an interest in philosophical topics!

Author/Publisher: Metaphysics Research Lab, CSLI, Stanford University
Free/Fee-based: Free
Date Reviewed: February 20, 2011

Still Tasty, www.stilltasty.com.

Still Tasty, called "Your Ultimate Shelf Life Guide," contains information on how long food can be safely stored and the best way to keep it. The database compiles information from the United States Department of Agriculture, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, and U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The site allows the user to browse by food category or use a keyword search. The "Your Questions Answered" section includes a way to ask your own questions. An easy-to-use site allows consumers to find answers about food online or use the site's iPhone app. for information on the go.

Author/Publisher: StillTasty
Free/Fee-based: Free
Date Reviewed: February 23, 2011

TED: Ideas Worth Spreading, www.ted.com.

TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) provides access to the hundreds of presentations from the famous TED conferences. The conferences "bring together the world's most fascinating thinkers and doers" who all share a talk of no more than 18 minutes that relates to technology, entertainment, or design. New talks are added frequently to the site, and the videos themselves are fast-loading and accessible, with many having subtitles in several languages. Just as one can spend hours reading and learning new things in a print encyclopedia, so too can one spend hours here watching the videos, learning about everything from whistling as a career to the future of business.

Author/Publisher: TED Conferences
Free/Fee-based: Free
Date Reviewed: February 24, 2011

UNESCO Institute for Statistics, www.uis.unesco.org.

The UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) offers "global and internationally comparable statistics on education, science, culture, and communication." While reports, surveys, and publications related to the latter three areas are plentiful on the site, the area of education is where UIS's chief value to library reference seems to lie. UIS is the most comprehensive database for education statistics in the world, tracking everything from primary school enrollment to higher level graduation rates. It provides current as well as historical data. The Data Centre allows a researcher to view predefined statistical tables, country profiles, and global rankings; or select from a dizzying array of indicators to build custom tables and reports. This site is an excellent source for reliable statistics.

Author/Publisher: The UNESCO Institute for Statistics
Free/Fee-based: Free
Date Reviewed: March 11, 2011

UNT Libraries: CyberCemetery Home, http://govinfo.library.unt.edu.

Ever read a report from a government agency and then try to go back and find it? You might think you've gone crazy when it's just not there. Try checking the CyberCemetery from University of North Texas Libraries (UNTL). They have compiled "an archive of government websites that have ceased operation . . . " and that "features a variety of topics indicative of the broad nature of government information." Locate information with an easy keyword search, or browse by branch of government, date of expiration (my favorite), or agency name. The U.S. Government Printing Office and UNTL "created a partnership to provide permanent public access . . . , [and] this collection was named the 'CyberCemetery' by early users of the site."

Author/Publisher: University of North Texas Libraries & U.S. Government Printing Office
Free/Fee-based: Free
Date Reviewed: February 18, 2011

WikiLeaks, http://mirror.wikileaks.info.

No doubt a controversial selection! This site, the catalyst for so many news stories in 2010, offers an "anonymous way for sources to leak information" for the ultimate purpose of creating "a better society for all people." Users will find primary source material from governments and other institutions. Connecting to the site can be a challenge due to cyberattacks and government censorship, but it will continue to make headlines and provide access for citizens, scholars, and journalists to otherwise impossible-to-find information.

Author/Publisher: WikiLeaks
Free/Fee-based: Free
Date Reviewed: February 24, 2011

Wolfram | Alpha, www.wolframalpha.com.

Ready Reference from one URL, that's WolframAlpha. "The computational knowledge engine" provides answers to so many factual questions it's hard to conceive how much can be done with this site. Use the exploration features or read the blog for ideas. There are hundreds of topics and thousands of details—the usual suspects like demographics and statistics of cities or economies of countries—, but where else can you so easily find hexadecimal codes for colors, standard frequencies of musical notes, magnitudes of stars, which dinosaurs lived during the Jurassic period, as well as what the continental plates looked like at the time? All answer pages can be downloaded as PDFs, and page segments can be saved as images or plain text.

Author/Publisher: WolframAlpha
Free/Fee-based: Free (commercial products also available)
Date Reviewed: February 12, 2011

Worldometers, www.worldometers.info.

How fast is the population growing? How much are governments spending? How many e-mails have been sent—today? Drawing on data collected by dozens of international organizations (including the United Nations, UNESCO, the World Bank and more), the Worldometers site tracks real-time statistics answering these, and other, questions. Constantly updating tickers provide statistics related to population, economics, society and media, the environment, food, water, energy, and health. This is the place for "world statistics updated in real time."

Author/Publisher: The Real Time Statistics Project
Free/Fee-based: Free
Date Reviewed: March 7, 2011

CALL FOR EDITOR

Applications sought for the Editor of *Reference & User Services Quarterly* (*RUSQ*)

Deadline: November 15, 2011

The Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) seeks applicants for the position of editor or co-editors of *Reference & User Services Quarterly* (*RUSQ*). The term is for three years, with the possibility of renewal for a second term. The editor may not serve longer than six consecutive years.

Scope of *RUSQ*: *RUSQ*, the official publication of RUSA, has been published for fifty years. *RUSQ* publishes a blend of practical and empirically based articles on issues that widely impact reference and public services librarians. Beginning with the Fall 2011 issue (volume 51, number 1), *RUSQ* will be published in a digital format only.

Duties and Responsibilities: The *RUSQ* Editor appoints qualified members to the *RUSQ* Editorial Advisory Board, manages the submission and review process, takes responsibility for the final selection of articles accepted for publication, manages the work of column editors, edits manuscripts, reviews proofs prior to publication, works with ALA Production Services on layout and design, and communicates regularly to the RUSA Board of Directors.

Qualifications: Applicants should possess the following qualifications and attributes: previous publishing experience; reviewing or editorial experience; excellent organizational skills; an attention to detail; an ability to meet deadlines; strong communication skills; and the willingness to make a considerable time commitment.

Application Process: Interested individuals should submit an application that contains the following: (1) a current vita, (2) a vision statement offering ideas about building the journal online, (3) a statement regarding institutional support and resources, and (4) names of three to five references. Submit all completed applications to: Diane Zabel, Chair, *RUSQ* Editor Selection Committee; e-mail: dxz2@psu.edu.

The successful candidate will become Editor-Designate on February 1, 2012, and will assume the position of Editor on July 1, 2012. This is an unpaid volunteer position. However, financial support is provided for travel to the ALA Midwinter Meeting and Annual Conference.