

Taube New Visions

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ENCYCLOPEDIAS HAVE existed for more than 2,000 years in order to make available a summary of extant knowledge. The *Encyclopedia Britannica*, the largest and oldest in the English language, was first published in 1768 and has been followed by many competitors. Jews came relatively late to the production of encyclopedias. The first encyclopedia of Jews and Jewish culture, the twelve-volume *Jewish Encyclopedia*, which was published in the United States but conceived in Europe, did not appear until 1901. Traditional rabbinic scholars, with their close study of texts, had no need of comprehensive summaries. And the first academically trained scholars of Judaica in the 19th century had published research articles in journals dedicated to their fields and only gradually created a body of scholarship that could be synthesized.

Encyclopedias dedicated to Jewish subjects came into being only as acculturated and relatively prosperous Jewish communities desired to display, to themselves and a broader public, the accomplishments of Jews and the riches of Judaism. Jewish encyclopedias also depended on the existence of a sufficient number of scholars to sustain the ambitious endeavor of gathering a massive amount of biographical data and historical information. The early encyclopedias devoted to Jews and Judaism served as an argument for full integration of Jews in their respective societies and as a refutation of antisemitic vilification. During the past century a variety of Jewish encyclopedias has been published in English, German, Russian, French, and Hebrew, with the *Encyclopedia Judaica* the largest and most influential.

We now confront an explosion of encyclopedias, in Judaic as well as in general publishing. The driving force for the proliferation of this genre is not the academics who are recruited to construct the format of the encyclopedias and edit them. Academics still prefer books and articles as the most appropriate way to present their own scholarship to their fellow scholars and to a wider audience. But changes in the structure of the publishing industry, in reading habits, and in information technology have made the creation of encyclopedias a popular academic endeavor.

While scholarly monographs — the bread

and butter of academic publishing and careers — are purchased by fewer individuals and libraries, encyclopedias, in contrast, are reference works that are viewed as a necessity by university libraries. Moreover, universities that have multiple library venues are likely to purchase more than one set of an encyclopedia, whereas a single copy of a monograph is most often deemed sufficient. In short, academic presses, which rarely have a “best seller,” expect to make far more money from encyclopedias than they do from monographs.

I suspect that the economic rationales of publishing decisions point to a more fundamental change in the way we — and especially the younger generation — process information. Most Americans receive their news from television, and television news shows provide stories in easily digested “sound bytes,” rarely more than two minutes long. The rise of the Internet has made the “video byte” the equivalent of the sound byte, the standard form of information retrieval. Each website divides information into small components, and a Google hit is rarely longer than a page and a half. Internet sites, like encyclopedias, summarize knowledge; unlike journals or monographs, they are rarely refereed or carefully edited. Reading a book chapter, never mind an entire book, requires more time than most contemporary readers, including students, are willing to invest. Our cultural attention span has been truncated; in a sense we suffer from “Cultural Attention Deficit Disorder.”

Those of us who prefer books to the Internet are not simply intellectual Luddites who resent technological innovation. We use the Internet to find data that would otherwise require hours in libraries or archives. We recognize the value of encyclopedias, particularly in areas of Jewish Studies that have been relatively neglected, such as women and gender or Eastern European Jewry, to name the themes of recent or forthcoming encyclopedias. What we worry about is that students and other readers are seeking predigested knowledge. Both the academy and the Jewish community have long valued the intellectual struggle to understand the interpretation of a text or the nature of a complex argument. And for that there are no shortcuts.