Switching: creating reference works for Nineteenth-Century serials

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Abstract

When we consult a reference work instrumentally, we want help to find something we think might exist. The text, however discursive it may appear, is usually organised as a set of categories that lead from the more general to the more precise, and the reader is encouraged by a hierarchy of "switches" or choices to find what she wants. The question that we must address concerns how we, as initiators of reference works, want the reader the use the switches we supply: do we want the user simply to accept them by making them invisible and effortless, or do we want to highlight the difficulties that each switch actually involves. We might even ask the reader whether the answers she is searching for might result from a casual assumption of the deja connu? Must we ourselves choose the switch between rapid but problematic positivism and hesitant, clunky theory, or is there a way to combine them? The talk explores these questions by first discussing the standard reference works on nineteenth-century serials and then outlining the processes that went into the creation of The Routledge Handbook to Nineteenth-Century British Periodicals and Newspapers, its companion volume Researching the Nineteenth-Century Periodical Press: Case Studies and the as-yet-under-construction Work and the Victorian Press and BLT10.co.uk.

Keywords

Victorian press, nineteenth-century press, reference works, handbook, dictionary, literary theory, media theory, media history