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Linking to full texts

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IT HAS BECOME routine for librarians to help a patron compile a comprehensive customized bibliography from online or CD-ROM indexes. In fact, patrons no longer consider it sufficient to compile a list of resources. Although searching indexes and abstracts was never the end of the information seeking process, in the print world an index search was so tedious that users focused energy on the search process. Interlibrary loan could suffice for articles the library didn't hold. Now, as library users become familiar with the convenience of online searching and their expectations rise, they expect instantaneous access to full articles.

To fulfill these expectations, libraries must either provide access to full-text databases, or bibliographic databases must provide links to complete articles. Many online systems offer both full-text searching and bibliographic linking; others offer bibliographic searching only with links to selected texts.

OCLC's new linkages

This year OCLC has made its growing full-text Electronic Collections Online available through the FirstSearch online service. Electronic Collections Online was first available as a separate full-text database, but links from records in FirstSearch bibliographic databases will be made by OCLC over the next 12-18 months. OCLC will prioritize the linking of databases to full texts based on factors including how many titles in OCLC's full-text collections are indexed in the bibliographic database and how much the database is used. The first databases to be linked include ArticleFirst, MEDLINE, Econlit, Sociological Abstracts, Social Science Abstracts, and PsycINFO.

The Electronic Collections Online will include 1200 journals from 25 publishers. Most titles are scholarly or professional journals, because FirstSearch already makes many general magazines and business journals available online through databases such as ABI/INFORM, Business Dateline, EBSCO MasterFile, H.W Wilson Select, SIRS Researcher, and others. Journal title lists for Electronic Collections can be viewed at OCLC's Home Page <www. oclc.org/oclc/eco/publish.htm>. Scholarly publishers represented include Academic Press, Johns Hopkins University Press (Project Muse), Plenum Publishing, Jossey-Bass, Sage Publications, Blackwell Publishers, MIT Press, and the Institution of Mechanical Engineers.

Perpetual access

According to John Sullivan, director of OCLC's Online Reference Services division, "When FirstSearch was conceived in 1990, OCLC's vision was to create a service that allows end users to effectively search the information environment and ... help them obtain the full-text of ... items." Linkages in FirstSearch are made not only to online full-texts but also to library holdings, interlibrary loan forms, and third-party document suppliers.

When users link to an online full text, most often they will connect not to a publisher but to the Electronic Collections Online file maintained at OCLC's data center. OCLC prefers this centralized storage approach. "Libraries have made it very clear that without the promise of perpetual access, they will likely never move from print to electronic," said Sullivan. "Honoring this commitment becomes very problematic in a distributed environment. In those few instances where full text is accessed from remote locations, we have agreements from the affected publishers to maintain the archive at OCLC."

Most of the articles are stored in Portable Document Format (PDF); others will be in HTML or RealPage. RealPage is a proprietary format from CatchWord, an Internet publishing service provider that offers page replicas with navigational capabilities, much like PDF Currently, none of the Electronic Collections Online are full-text searchable (nor is the ASCII full text in other FirstSearch databases).

Libraries that wish to use Electronic Collections Online must purchase journal subscriptions directly from the publishers or through subscription agents. (Journal prices are set by the publishers, not OCLC.) Libraries then set up a journal access account with OCLC

and pay OCLC an access fee based on the size of its Electronic Collections account. Soon libraries also will be able to pay a per article document delivery fee if they want an article in a journal to which they do not subscribe.

Ovid one of the first

FirstSearch is the latest major online system to offer full-text linking from bibliographic records. Ovid Technologies was one of the first, when its BRS Online system introduced the "link" command from MEDLINE records to full texts of medical articles stored in another database. To access the full texts, a user could go directly to the searchable "Comprehensive Core Medical Literature" database or rely on the links in a MEDLINE search.

Ovid has expanded its linking feature in its Ovid Web gateway service and with a group of full-text biomedical Collections. Articles from the approximately 90 journal titles available in the Collections are linked to MEDLINE, CINAHL, or PsycINFO bibliographic records.

This spring Ovid will launch the more extensive Journals@Ovid system. It will include 350 journals, articles linked to records not only in the Medline, CINAHL, and PsycINFO bibliographic databases but also to Current Contents, EMBASE, and BIOSIS (see "Beyond the CD-ROM Model," LJ, September 1, 1997, p. 129-130). Ovid is aggressively adding many full-text articles, particularly in science, technology, and medicine. All of these full texts are being SGML encoded by Ovid for maximum searchability, linking, and flexibility in its Ovid Web system. Ovid's full texts may be purchased by subscription to the Ovid full-text collections, by subscription to individual journal titles, or articles can be purchased on an individual "pay-as-you-go?' basis. Like OCLC, Ovid prefers to maintain and store the full texts at its facilities.

More medical links with PubMed

Ovid is not the only online service to focus its linking efforts to the biomedical literature. PubMed, an experimental system developed by NLM's National Center for Biotechnology Information (NCBI) in conjunction with biomedical publishers (see "Medline on the Web: Databases for Free," LJ, October 1, 1997, p. 37-38), combines bibliographic searching with links to many full-text articles.

Publishers supply formatted citations to it articles to NCBI prior to or at the time of publication, and PubMed adds links to web sites where publishers have full-text articles. Although much of the PubMed database is the same as MEDLINE and PreMEDLINE, (the current update file), PubMed includes citations to all articles in each of the journals included, whereas MEDLINE may index selectively from these journals.

PubMed links to full texts from approximately 75 biomedical journals. Even though PubMed searching is free of charge and password free, most publishers charge when a link is made to their full-text web journals.

Unlike Ovid and OCLC, PubMed's links go directly to a publisher. This can be a bit confusing, as publishers may require passwords and the publisher's interface usually looks different from PubMed's. Librarians may worry about the continuing availability of archives.

UMI/ProQuest Direct

UMI offers full-text links to approximately 2800 magazine and journal titles in its ProQuest Direct online service, which represent 44 percent of the titles indexed in ProQuest Direct bibliographic databases. Users can choose to search either bibliographic fields, or search complete texts, or both. When a retrieved bibliographic record includes a link to a full-text article, ProQuest Direct offers the choice of several formats: PDF page images (2000 titles), UMI's Text+Graphics format (1800 titles), and/or ASCII text only (2700 titles). (For more information see "What's New with UMI?" LJ, November 1, 1996, p. 29-30.)

UMI converts full texts and images directly from print journals or, for some titles, receives electronic feeds from publishers. In either case, the full text is stored and maintained at UMI facilities so full-text links stay within the UMI system.

When to use linking

The debate over whether it is better to search full texts or to search just a bibliographic surrogate of that text has not yet been fully resolved. However, in Boolean logic systems without relevance ranking, full-text searching often retrieves too many irrelevant documents. One solution is to restrict searching to indexed bibliographic databases that include links to displayable or printable versions of complete articles. It's more precise to search on controlled vocabulary descriptors or subject headings (or even just words from titles and abstracts), which provide a list of fewer, more highly relevant, documents.

An Ovid spokesperson recommends "generally, if you have a broad topic that you're just beginning to delve into, the bibliographic databases are going to be most effective. They are by nature much larger and encompass more basic information than a full-text database would. Moreover, searching them tends to lead to faster results, since full-text data sometimes take longer to download. Once you've narrowed your search you can link to full-text."

Online systems do users a service when they also offer searchable full texts. The Ovid spokesperson recommends going to the full-text file first in certain circumstances. "If a user already knows the exact article s/he is looking for, a direct full-text search makes more sense. Similarly, if I am specifically interested in what Science magazine has on a topic, I will go straight there. Searching in a full-text database can save you time if you have a general idea of what you want or if you want to skip the bibliographic step entirely and find whatever full text is immediately available to you at your desktop."

A UMI spokesperson agrees that "the decision on whether to use full-text or index searching is really contingent upon the database and the information that's needed. Searching newspaper content, for example, one will probably find that full-text searching yields the best results."

A strong future for databases

Not long ago, many online experts felt the availability of full texts online would doom bibliographic databases. The popularity of linking, rather than full-text searching, points instead to a strong future for bibliographic databases.

According to a senior level executive at UMI, "the bibliographic databases will continue to be a key foundation of future electronic databases. The editorial process adds value for end users as a primary search tool even with advances in full-text searching. Databases such as ABI/INFORM are very popular with end users because of the editorial discipline that is used."

An Ovid spokesperson adds, "Bibliographic databases play an important role for searchers; their purpose is to abstract and index large quantities of data, and they do that well. Premier abstracting and indexing databases like MEDLINE, Current Contents, EMBASE, and the many others that we work with are key to Ovid's full-text strategy."

OCLC's Sullivan believes that "because of [their] broader scope (covering both print and electronic sources), bibliographic databases will continue to play an important role, especially in terms of supporting scholarly research, for a long time to come. As more electronic information becomes available, the need for tools, such as high-quality bibliographic databases, to find the `right' information will continue to grow in importance."

Abstracting and indexing services are not only not doomed, they have been revitalized in this age of full-text linking.

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