H. W. Wilson: Online At Last!

By Carol Tenopir

THE H.W. WILSON Company's 26 indexes are probably some of the most widely-used printed indexes in public and academic libraries. Many librarians have been frustrated by the fact that these well-known tools are not available online. The Wilson Company has seemed to lag behind many other indexing or abstracting services, causing many of us to turn to other sources, such as Information Access Company's *Magazine Index* or Data Courier's business database *ABI/INFORM*, for online searches. Wilson will at last join the online age with its own information retrieval service known as Wilsonline, a system that will eventually provide online access to all of the Wilson indexes and catalogs.

Testing the system

Wilsonline is scheduled to become available to libraries and the public at the end of 1984. Currently, 16 libraries are testing the system to help Wilson make improvements and work out problems. The two earliest test sites began in September 1983 and the others were added by the end of the year. Comments, problems, and use data from each test site are now being collected and evaluated.

The test sites represent a cross-section of library types, with public, school, special, and academic libraries of varying sizes and locations included. Libraries with online experience as well as those that have not previously offered online searching are among the 16 sites. Each test site library has agreed to confidentiality while the test is in progress, but Wilson promises that the final product offered at the end of 1984 will reflect many of the changes suggested by the test site libraries.

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Indexes included

By the time it is available in late 1984, Wilsonline will include databases corresponding to at least eight of the Wilson indexes, including *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature, Cumulative Book Index, Business Periodicals Index, Book Review Digest, Index to Legal Periodicals,* and *Applied Science and Technology Index*. Wilson hopes to have all of its indexes and catalogs available online by the end of 1985. Inclusive dates of the online version of each of these sources will vary from one year to four years, depending on when each began to be produced in machine-readable form. No database will be provided online with less than one year of data. Indexes will be updated twice a week, making for a timeliness that will be one of the most important reasons for using the online versions rather than the printed indexes.

Although Wilson has no specific plans at present for retrospective conversion, according to John Regazzi, Vice President of Computer Services, they are looking into selective retrospective conversion on an index-by-index basis. Some of the test site libraries have indicated that retrospective information is important for some indexes. The availability online of as little as one year of data will limit the initial usefulness of Wilsonline. Information Access Company's *Magazine Index* includes information back to 1959 and other online databases often include information from at least the early 1970s to the present. To be truly competitive online, retrospective conversion seems necessary for at least the most popular indexes like *Reader's Guide* that have direct online competition. Regazzi believes Wilsonline has an adequate core of material even though it does not have the retrospective of *Magazine Index*.

Although it is primarily a system with databases from only one publisher, the LC MARC bibliographic records will also be made available on Wilsonline. Currently the Wilson Company uses MARC data from 1977 to the present for internal processing and that data will be made available to Wilsonline customers as well. The Company is exploring making UK MARC available online also.

Authority files

Searching on Wilsonline will rely heavily on controlled vocabulary and use of authority files. Authority files available online will include systemwide authorities for periodical titles, publishers, and names. The Names Directory File contains personal author and subject names, corporate author and subject names, uniform titles, and series. Only personal and corporate name subjects are controlled across all indexes; the rest are controlled for *Cumulative Book Index* and *Book Review Digest* only. Systemwide consistency of terminology in some fields and online availability of the authority lists will be a welcome help for searchers.

Subject authorities vary for each Wilson editorial unit, however, so each database will have its own subject terms, just as each printed index does. *Business Periodicals Index,* for example, uses the Business Periodicals Index Subject Authority File, and *Reader's Guide* uses the Reader's Guide Subject Authority File. The *Cumulative Book Index*, however, uses the Library of Congress Subject Authority,

which will also be available on Wilsonline.

Authority files will mostly be used to develop or refine search strategy. Users can find related, broader, or narrower terms online through the "EXPAND" command, which also shows how many postings there are for each word in the database being searched.

The Wilson Company expects that searchers will most often search the Wilsonline databases using the subject fields, although all fields can be free text searched. Controlled vocabulary features are especially emphasized and a particularly nice feature is the automatic switching function that will search the preferred form of a subject heading if an unauthorized form is entered. When a subject term is entered that has a "see" reference in the controlled vocabulary, a message appears telling the user that another form of the term is being searched instead.

Multidatabase searching

Another strong feature of the Wilsonline system is its multidatabase searching capability. A searcher can specify that multiple databases be automatically searched in turn. Subject forms are checked in each database in a multidatabase search and the automatic switching function is implemented if necessary in any database or databases. Search results from multiple databases are not now merged, but results from each database can be sorted by several fields, including author, date, and first subject.

The records in the Wilsonline databases contain the same information found in the Wilson printed indexes. This includes an average of three subject index terms per record in most indexes. Search strategies will have to rely heavily on keywords in the subject field due to the small number of subject headings, the lack of abstracts, and the often short titles in some of the general-interest periodicals. Fortunately, Wilson sees the need for abstracts in some databases and there are plans to begin adding abstracts to at least one database in the near future. A new subsidiary, "Wilson Cambridge," has just been announced as the abstracting arm of the Company. The addition of abstracts should make Wilsonline more competitive and improve retrieval.

Search protocols

The search protocols on Wilsonline will be easy for experienced searchers to learn because they parallel existing online systems. The Elhill MEDLARS II software was used as the base; the same software used in both the MEDLINE and Orbit systems. Wilson has indicated that although they have made enhancements to the Elhill software, they have tried to parallel the original commands. Searchers unfamiliar with Orbit or MEDLINE will have to learn still another online system if they wish to access the Wilson indexes online. Wilson does have a program for microcomputers or intelligent terminals that allows built-in function keys to be used in lieu of commands.

Wilsonline has most of the standard search features we have come to expect, including the Boolean operators "AND," "OR," and "AND NOT" and single character and multiple character truncation. Retrieving articles with dates earlier than a specified date, later than a specified date, or within a range of dates is possible. A major omission in the first release of the system is the absence of word proximity searching. Wilson originally justified this omission by explaining that due to the reliance on controlled vocabulary searches word proximity would be unnecessary, but the test site libraries felt it was a major problem. Word proximity capabilities are now being programmed and should be available early in 1985. Nested Boolean logic capabilities will be added at the same time.

Print out options

Searches default to searching all fields or an individual field can be specified. Each field is given a two-letter mnemonic code, which can be specified for searching or for printing. Print options for online or offline prints include preset formats as well as the capability of user-specification of elements to be printed. Mnemonics can be printed as is or they can be spelled out. One format that is useful for bibliographies prints data elements across the page rather than the default of one data element per line. An interesting print feature for CBI and MARC files prints records in standard catalog card format.

Wilsonline, like other online bibliographic search services, will carry online news messages, help messages, and explain statements. Online helps will be augmented with documentation and a training program. Training will be offered on-site or in conjunction with national conferences, both for a fee.

Marketing plans

The Wilson Company is now determining their exact marketing plans. They are considering making the databases available through other search systems in addition to their own, but initially you will have to access the Wilson indexes through the Wilsonline service. Pricing will be a "pay as you go" connect time option with volume discounts for a subscription option.

Can still another online search system compete in the library market? The H.W. Wilson Company believes it can for several reasons. Many libraries have been waiting for a long time for online access to Wilson products. The indexes are familiar and widely used. Wilson is obviously counting on this familiarity to overcome searcher's hesitency to learn another online language. They hope the contents of these databases is so desired in libraries that librarians will be eager to use Wilsonline.

The familiar Elhill software is another advantage, as is the planned access through the standard telecommunications networks of Telenet and Tymnet. Searchers who now search MEDLINE or Orbit will recognize the Wilsonline commands, although some training will be necessary to become familiar with added commands and the Wilson controlled vocabularies. There is a disadvantage in using the Elhill software, however. It means the Wilsonline system is very much like other online systems. There are few features that make searching Wilsonline easier than searching other systems or that will attract end users or new searchers.

Possibly most important, Wilson sees that ultimately their market for Wilsonline will include the many small and medium-sized libraries that are not currently doing online searching. Wilsonline will be their initiation into the world of online searching and perhaps, temporarily at least, their total exposure. The Wilson name, reputation, and the widespread use of the company's products in these libraries is the most important reason the company expects the system to succeed. Wilson has decided to go with their own system so they will maintain direct contact with their users, so they can maintain editorial control over the data, and so they will control the timeliness of their data.

Wilson enters an online market in which there is existing competition with several of its databases. On DIALOG, *Magazine Index* includes all of the journals indexed in *Reader's Guide* and more, plus the fact that it includes 25 years of data. *ABI/INFORM* indexes the business literature from 1971 to the present and includes abstracts. *Legal Resource Index* is updated daily in the Newsearch database. *Book Review Index* includes reviews from 1969 to the present. Remarc and LC MARC together provide over 85 years of LC MARC records.

Can Wilson attract customers for Wilsonline without offering more information, enhanced search features, software that is easier to use, and lower costs? Can this single publisher bring new libraries into the online marketplace? It will be interesting to follow this new online offering from a publisher who is so familiar in the traditional library world.

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