

LJ INFOTECH

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BY CAROL TENOPIR

A Second Look at FirstSearch

IN A SURVEY I CONDUCTED in 1991, only 45 percent of university libraries offered end user online searching, and few of the others planned to in the future. The majority of libraries relied on CD-ROM and locally loaded databases to meet the search needs of end users; in these libraries, online searching was reserved for intermediaries.

This year I surveyed university research libraries again and found markedly different results: Now, more than 65.6 percent of the schools are offering end user online searching on commercial systems, but they continue to purchase CD-ROMs, load databases locally for searching via their online catalogs, provide intermediary online searching, and are beginning to offer patron access to the Internet. Contrary to the earlier trend, these services have not replaced or substituted for access to traditional end user online systems.

Credit for the resurgence of end user online searching must go to OCLC's FirstSearch. Soon after OCLC launched FirstSearch in October 1991, libraries were drawn to the service by its reasonable per search costs and its ease of use. FirstSearch became more attractive as OCLC added other databases, and when a yearly subscription option was added in 1993 (see "Flat-Fee Pricing and Other Choices," *LJ*, February 1, 1993, p. 58,60), it became a viable option for unlimited online access by end users.

Who's on FirstSearch?

Today, FirstSearch is used in almost 2000 libraries worldwide, about 75 percent academic and eight percent public. According to OCLC, more than 9.1 million FirstSearch searches were con-

ducted between October 1991 and May 1994. As of this past summer, more than 40,000 searches are conducted each day.

The system now includes nearly 50 databases—mostly bibliographic, with some directory and full-text files—and OCLC plans to double that number in the next few years. Notable bibliographic offerings include exclusive access to OCLC's huge shared cataloging database, WorldCat; OCLC's ArticleFirst and ContentFirst databases; all of the H.W. Wilson files; and MLA Bibliography. FirstSearch also includes INSPEC, ERIC, ABI/Inform, AGRICOLA, MEDLINE, BIOSIS, PAIS, GPO Monthly Catalog, and other familiar bibliographic standbys.

Full text

Full text and directories are still a small percentage of database offerings but are high on librarians' priority lists for the future. Currently, FirstSearch has just five nonbibliographic databases, including the Concise Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia; Disclosure Corporate Snapshots; Worldscope GLOBAL; EventLine; and Business Organizations, Agencies, and Publications Directory. According to Tam Darymple of OCLC, "Libraries want full text, and we have plans for other full-text databases. We want to make it available by whatever means will make it easier for libraries."

The most ambitious full-text project will be launched this month when substantial numbers of full-text articles will be accessible through FirstSearch. OCLC has contracted with UMI, which will provide ASCII text versions of articles from more than 1500 journals and magazines. The articles will be linked to the indexing/abstracting records of various bibliographic databases, including Periodical Abstracts, ABI/Inform, Business Dateline, and ArticleFirst. Eventually, the linkages will be expanded to databases from other producers.

This is a fast and automatic document delivery option only, because the UMI-supplied full texts will not be made searchable. When users locate a desired article in a bibliographic search,

if the full text is available, it will be noted in the record. Users can then request the ASCII full text (text only) for viewing, downloading, or printing.

ILL and document delivery

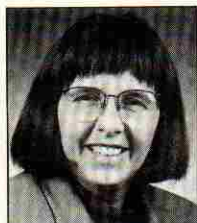
Full-text documents online is a brand new service, but FirstSearch users have been able to request interlibrary loans (ILLs) since 1993. A library may choose to provide a link between FirstSearch and OCLC's PRISM ILL system, allowing users to send ILL requests for anything cited in any FirstSearch database automatically to the library ILL department.

FirstSearch also provides document ordering for articles not available online. At the document order screen, patrons may order documents by FAX, overnight mail, or first-class mail from most FirstSearch databases. The Fast-Doc service provides FAX delivery of articles in one hour or less for a charge of \$10.50 per article in North America or \$15.50 internationally.

Prices

Per search prices vary according to how many blocks of searches a library purchases up front. Libraries may purchase "open block searches" (where multiple simultaneous logon capability is provided under a single access number) or "card block searches" (where each card has a unique password that allows either ten, 25, 50, or 100 searches per card). The cost per search under either plan is between 50¢ and 90¢, depending on how many blocks the library purchases. One block of 500 searches, for example, will cost 90¢ per search. On the other end, purchasing 80 blocks or more (40,000-plus searches) will drop the per search price to just 50¢. Research has shown that most users need to perform several searches for a given topic.

Subscription prices vary according to how many simultaneous logons and which databases are ordered. The lowest price per year on the Base Package Subscription is \$6500 for up to two simultaneous logons and unlimited access to



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eight databases (WorldCat, ArticleFirst, ContentsFirst, ProceedingsFirst, PapersFirst, MEDLINE, ERIC, and GPO Monthly Catalog). The cost increases for each additional database selected.

Customized subscription plans allow libraries to choose which databases their patrons want and the number of simultaneous users. Yearly prices range from as low as \$5000 for access only to FactSearch or Business Organizations, Agencies, and Publications to more than \$100,000 for 20 simultaneous users or more to most of the databases on FirstSearch.

A library may purchase access to the linked UMI ASCII texts as part of its yearly subscription plan. Subscribers to Periodical Abstracts may purchase the corresponding full text for \$11,000–\$14,000 per year depending on the number of ports. Subscribers to ABI/Inform may get the full text for \$19,000–\$30,000, while Business Dateline's full texts cost \$8000–\$24,000. FirstSearch users who pay on a per search basis may purchase full-text articles for five searches each.

Easy searching

Besides having prices that encourage use, FirstSearch has a relatively easy-to-use menu interface. Easy-to-use does not always equal capability, however, so enhancements are being made. Version 3.0, which is being released this month, will finally add the feature of using the Boolean OR "in response to strong demand from the library community." "Holdings Control" in Version 3.0 will allow each library to customize information about which libraries hold each item. Holdings information is now displayed in a standard format in the FirstSearch record for WorldCat and several other databases. In the new version of the software, libraries may elect to display regional or group holdings. Version 3.0 also allows the links from bibliographic databases to full texts. OCLC will supply a Windows-based graphical user interface in 1995.

Libraries react to FirstSearch

Many librarians have expressed their enthusiasm about their experiences with FirstSearch. Libraries use FirstSearch in a variety of ways but most commonly as an option to their online public access catalog (OPAC) systems, either as a transparent online connection to OCLC, where users search using the FirstSearch search software, or as a Z39.50 connection, where users search

using their native OPAC search mode. Other libraries may have a dedicated FirstSearch station in the reference area for patron or librarian use. Here are some examples of use, with further details available from OCLC or the libraries mentioned:

- The Cleveland Public Library makes FirstSearch accessible from all of its 250 OPAC terminals in the library and one dedicated terminal in the reference room. In addition, dial access is provided to anyone with a library card.
- Columbia University Libraries made FirstSearch a service option on its online catalog in February 1992. By February 1994, it was reporting more than 9800 searches per month on FirstSearch, accounting for 17.4 percent of searches conducted via its catalog.

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- Library users at the University of Minnesota (UM) have free access to FirstSearch through 52 ports. They will search FirstSearch between 550,000 and 600,000 times this year. Such overwhelming success is not without expense, however. To reduce costs, UM will be forced to scale back on both the number of ports and number of FirstSearch databases.

Pilot projects

Many libraries begin using FirstSearch as a pilot project. Consortia of all types are finding it especially beneficial to work together to get the project underway. OCLC may assist with technical support or provide discounts for large groups. Some projects are funded with Library Services & Construction Act (LSCA) Title III funds. State libraries in Arkansas, Georgia, Arizona, Florida, California, and others have launched pilot projects.

Surfing Peachnet

Recently I had the opportunity to visit Georgia and meet some of the public librarians involved in their Peachnet/Internet Pilot project. FirstSearch access is just one aspect of a two-year pilot project that is seeking to deliver Internet access to public libraries throughout the state.

All hardware, software, telecommunications, and costs of searching are covered by the pilot project. The pilot librarians worked with state library personnel to get the project started. However, the librarians utilized their familiarity with their local communities to design training, marketing, and other enhancements.

Susan Stewart of the Chattooga County Library in Summerville, GA, reports that "we are using FirstSearch as a backup to our traditional print sources and in-house electronic CD periodical and book indexes . . ." She said that users range from library staff members who are searching reference information to middle school students who are searching articles for current events reference information. "For a small public library, the information access seems limitless."

Making online palatable

Alan Kaye notes that for the staff at Roddenberry Memorial (Cairo), although the Internet is astounding in its variety of current resources and potential for future development, OCLC's FirstSearch goes a long way toward making the idea of online access "palatable to the novice user." FirstSearch provides a concrete example of an "immediately advantageous, easily understood information service," said Kaye. As a result, he said, the library staff have been giving FirstSearch authorization cards to dial-in users, so they can search the many databases offered by the service from their homes.

According to Rita Linker, the Bartow County Library (Cartersville) passes out search cards to patrons who need to do research. "I do much searching myself on FirstSearch for various reference questions that patrons present to us, and I am almost always able to find the information for them."

For technical details and more information on the Georgia public libraries pilot project, contact JoEllen Ostendorf, Assistant Director, Public Library Services, 156 Trinity Ave. SW, Atlanta, GA 30303-3692; 404-657-6237; jostendo@libris.pub.lib.ga.us.