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New Versions of Old Favorites

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Abstract:
Many electronic database systems popular with libraries have migrated to a Web-based interface. Dow Jones Interactive, DialogWeb, LEXIS-NEXIS, and STN have all recently come out with Web databases or new versions of existing Web products. Brief evaluations of each are presented.

Full Text:
RESOURCES FOUND ONLY on the web are an important part of nearly every search for information that librarians make as intermediaries or to help end users find answers for themselves. Yet many experienced online searchers hesitate to switch from the familiar versions of their old, faithful online systems. Power searchers can get what they need quickly by telneting to the command versions of Dialog or STN or by dialing up through the proprietary online front-end software for LEXIS-NEXIS or Dow Jones.

While most librarians stick with the old ways, they send their end users to web versions of these systems. Now online services hoping to lure power searchers to the web have produced new web versions. In some cases we may have no choice but to switch.

Dow Jones Interactive

Dow Jones announced last year that beginning in March 1999 it would no longer support telnet access through proprietary Windows software. The mainframe computer that runs Dow Jones's old online system is not Y2K compliant, and the company doesn't think it worth updating.

However, information professionals complained that the web version does not offer the full functionality of the old system, in particular in the options for manipulating sets, saving searches, formatting, and printing articles. Experienced searchers want powerful search and manipulation features. Besides, many intermediaries are accustomed to the old system.

In response, Timothy M. Andrews, VP of Dow Jones Interactive Publishing, announced a compromise. While the move to a web-only world will continue, by April 1, 1999, Dow Jones will create a special Windows interface to the web that mimics the current powerful system. According to Andrews, "The product will look and function like the current software version, while offering improvements in article formatting and printing." It will provide access only to the Dow Jones Publications Library and supports only TCP/IP connections.

Andrews explained that this new hybrid of proprietary software with the web platform will be marketed only to "the small core of information professionals who demand different functionality and have to do things you can't do in the web browser." Dow Jones hopes that this software will be needed only for a year or two, until the company produces a more powerful web browser version.

Advantages of web versions

Dow Jones seemed surprised over experienced searchers' hesitation to switch to the web version. The company's November/December 1998 DowLine newsletter announced the new Windows software but mostly provided a list of "21 Reasons to Upgrade to Dow Jones Interactive on the Web."

Both traditional online versions and web versions of systems have their advantages. A big advantage of any web version can be the availability of images, graphics, and better-looking documents. Versions of full texts in PDF, SGML, or HTML are much more readable than in old-fashioned ASCII. Dow Jones, for example, offers image versions of articles from the Wall Street Journal and 1200 other publications. The trade-off here may be in response time to download or view the image file.

Web versions often offer better document viewing. While formatting options may not be as customizable or flexible, web versions often provide nicely formatted screens listing the titles retrieved by a search. The per hit charges are often waived in the short

displays on web versions, which rely instead on higher costs for full text delivery. Dow Jones Interactive, for example, displays titles, source information, and lead sentences for free, charging only for full text.

Trade-offs on the web

The new model of online research--more interactive, relying on many different types of resources--meshes with moving between web sites and web versions of different systems. Without leaving the web browser, an online searcher can check a free web site, move between sections of a commercial service, or even switch between online services. In the Dow Jones environment, this means switching "seamlessly" to the Wall Street Journal Interactive Edition or the Company & Industry Center, which are not part of the Publications Library. The trade-offs may be slow response time and long waits, especially in the middle of the day.

Web versions may offer better connections to an organization's intranet or allow librarians to set up personal interest profiles easily for customized dissemination of information. This requires a clientele with predictable and recurring research interests.

Information professionals appreciate how the web offers access to the latest versions of all system documentation. Experienced Dialog searchers, for example, may be accustomed to searching with Dialog Bluesheets, the database catalog, and the user manual spread out near their computer. It didn't take long to sell me on the idea of fully accessible Bluesheets online. The web version of Dialog allows easy surfing between a search and the documentation. Dialog has long been known for excellent documentation, but the web version to date hasn't drawn rave reviews from information professionals. Two new web versions deserve a second look.

DialogWeb version 2.0

In early February, version 2.0 of Dialog's system came online. DialogWeb provides two search modes--the "guided search," for users who are not familiar with Dialog commands, and the "command search" for experienced searchers.

DialogWeb Command Search provides the familiar Dialog commands, along with some of the advantages (and disadvantages) of the web environment. Regular Dialog commands are entered in a command input box at the bottom of the Command Search main page. This pretty much resembles old-fashioned Dialog searching. One big difference: you can click on either "databases" or "product support" to view database details or system documentation.

Expanded versions of database descriptions--including price, field tags, and field descriptions--help to formulate and refine search strategy. A new feature in DialogWeb 2.0 presents common fields on the search screen, incorporating some of the Bluesheet information.

DialogWeb also eases database selection by providing access to DialIndex through the Databases option. As with DialIndex in the old command mode, it allows searching for words in the indexes of multiple databases, but the web version gives more convenient access to subject clusters. Databases are pregrouped into descriptive subject hierarchies in DialogWeb, so the searcher doesn't have to remember or look up the obtuse DialIndex subject code words.

Bringing new users

Dialog hopes that the improved Guided Search mode will bring new users to DialogWeb. According to a Dialog spokesperson, the users of the earlier version of DialogWeb "tend to be those with less experience searching classic Dialog. Most are information professionals. Some are market researchers, paralegals, scientists, or engineers." Since the first version of DialogWeb required some knowledge of commands, "the end users have a fairly high level of sophistication" in searching. Dialog expects "to start seeing users with much lower levels of search expertise and experience" using the Guided Search mode of version 2.0.

Guided Search will seem painfully slow to experienced command searchers, as users must first go through several subject focusing screens to select a database. The search process then progresses through search forms, pull-down menus, and check boxes that are translated behind the scenes into search commands, field or other limitations, and output features.

Guided Search is not for experienced searchers or anyone who wants control over the search process, but it does instill a kind of logical order to searching, and the fill-in-the-blanks templates take the place of memorizing features and commands. If you already know Dialog, select Command Mode to get the advantages of a web version (including access to documentation and HTML-formatted output).

DialogClassic

For diehards, DialogClassic is a browser interface to the Dialog mainframe and old system. This retains Dialog's features and good response time, but it's not pretty. It uses frames to impose a web search box on top of the old text-based Dialog. Output is straight text-only, except for patent and trademark drawings.

The combination of the web and mainframe access does offer some real advantages. Trademark and image files are of higher quality than those found with telnet connections through DialogLink software. It's faster to display and download many text records, since DialogClassic sends the records in HTML format to your computer. Then you browse through the records.

LEXIS-NEXIS

LEXIS-NEXIS started developing its web version with products aimed at end users. The Universe family of LEXIS-NEXIS products provides web-based searching of selected files for particular end user audiences. Academic Universe offers site license pricing for

academic institutions; Corporate Universe does the same for companies.

Many librarians in these organizations use Universe along with their customers, but a majority of information professionals still search with the LEXIS-NEXIS proprietary front-end software to get all the power searching features. (Some experienced searchers even use the LEXIS-NEXIS command language, which is not an obvious option.)

According to Jean Fisher, product manager, information professionals, at LEXIS-NEXIS, "Our web offering is not-quite-ready-for-prime-time with the info pros yet." LEXIS-NEXIS is working on building a list of product requirements for information professionals, aiming for early in the year 2000. Universe changes and (usually) improves quickly, as new versions are released every 90 days. Fisher says the March 31, 1999 release includes "enhancements which in some cases go way beyond what `classic' LEXIS-NEXIS could do. It meets many of the requests we've been hearing from info pros."

Those enhancements include real-time news filtering and alerts, an option to have the system translate a LEXIS-NEXIS search to launch a web search, and the capacity to specify a customized group file for searching. The new release also will allow librarians to control procedures such as validation of project D numbers, creation of E-mail distribution lists for alert results, and the addition of company logos to search screens.

STN and beyond

STN On the Web debuts this spring, providing all of STN's 200-plus scientific and technical databases through a web browser. Selected STN databases have been available in an end user web product (STN Easy), but this will be the first web version aimed at STN power searchers. STN On the Web will combine the command language used by experienced STN searchers with a graphical user interface for Help features. All of STN's specialized searching features, notably chemical structure searching, will be available on the web version.

As with other online systems, the web platform for STN users will improve by offering images and full-text articles. STN will include hyperlinks from Chemical Abstracts records to full articles on selected publishers' web sites. Full texts will be in either HTML or PDF formats, varying by publisher.

The web is clearly the platform of choice for online searching by end users and information professionals. In most cases, these new versions of old favorites succeed--to a point. First versions often disappoint. They improve only after lots of input from expert searchers who are willing to try the new versions and provide the benefit of years of searching expertise.

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