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Online Meetings of Minds

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Abstract:
The National Online Meeting (NOM) of 1998 focused on Dialog's new pricing structure, developments in search and retrieval software for the Internet, and how online systems are faster than the World Wide Web.

Full Text:
IN AN ERA OF tight budgets, a conference devoted entirely to online databases may seem a luxury. Still, no general conference or even listserv or teleconference can substitute for the intense experience of attending a specialized online conference and meeting with fellow online searchers. After nearly 20 years, the big two online conferences in the United States remain the National Online Meeting (NOM) (sponsored by Information Today, Inc.) and Online World (sponsored by Online Inc.). Learned Information, Ltd.'s Online Information meeting held in London every December is the biggest online show in the world.

National Online Meeting 1998

Pricing was the main topic of conversation in the hallways and the exhibit area at NOM in New York in May. Causing a furor among longtime Dialog aficionados, Dialog had just announced its new pricing policy that replaces connect time with "DialUnit" charges (see "Furor Over Prices," Online Databases, LJ 7/98, p. 40-41; a DialUnit is a measure of computer resources used to process each part of your search strategy and varies from $3 to $12 in most databases).

The topic has been exhaustively reported since then (see e.g., Reva Basch, "DIALing for Dollars: Dialog's New Pricing Structure and the DialUnit Debacle," Online 9/98, and Mary Ellen Bates, "Dialog's DialUnits: A Price Increase in Sheep's Clothing," Searcher 9/98). It has also been a major topic on listservs such as BUSLIB-L and AIIPL (Association of Independent Information Professionals), but the meeting in New York was the first time many searchers could meet in person to discuss the issue.

At the conference, Dialog CEO Dan Wagner got an earful. I suspect the heated and personal response at this meeting influenced, at least in part, Dialog's June announcement that it would cut the cost of a DialUnit by 50 percent in some databases and the August announcement that it will charge partial DialUnits rather than round every search up to the nearest full DialUnit.

Although the issue of Dialog pricing was at the top of NOM attendees' minds, invited plenary speakers took a longer term view or discussed big-picture issues. Each year, conference organizer Martha E. Williams of the University of Illinois presents trends and highlights concerning the database industry. This year she cited the continued growth in the number of records in databases and the emergence of full text as the predominant format.

The three most-used traditional online vendors in the library and information center marketplace are now Lexis-Nexis, Westlaw, and OCLC FirstSearch. Dialog is fourth, moving out of the top three for the first time, replaced by FirstSearch. In terms of revenue, however, the top three are LexisNexis, Westlaw, and Dialog, since FirstSearch's prices are low. It will be interesting to see next year if customers' unhappiness over pricing will further affect Dialog's rankings.

Information wizards

Pointing to the future, longtime information industry pundit Stephen E. Arnold and his son Erik S. Arnold (both now of Arnold Information Technologies) presented fascinating examples of forthcoming developments in Internet search and retrieval software. They demonstrated systems that use linguistic analysis to allow natural-language queries and responses, others where agents (wizards) "watch the actions of a particular user and automatically take steps to provide current or changed information" to that user.

They also discussed agents that use visualization, a potentially improved way to present results than statistical and relevance-ranking search engines. The Arnolds believe that "graphical representations of large amounts of data will be increasingly important adjuncts

to linguistic and statistical analysis, morphological stemming, on-the-fly data collection, and the other features finding their way into search-and-retrieval software." Such graphical representation will vary but could include concrete things like a map or a graph, or more abstract things such as clusters of shapes that change in proportion to the number of documents retrieved.

NOM contributed papers

The real strength (and occasional weakness) of NOM is its full program of contributed paper sessions. Those papers provide a forum for searchers from all types of organizations to present their ideas, search tips, or research. With over 50 sessions, the choice was sometimes difficult, and no one could attend everything. (The Proceedings volume helps.)

Several speakers described how they make decisions among CD-ROM, commercial online, and "free" web resources (and some even included print). As the first step in this decision-making process, Gregory Crawford told how the librarians at Penn State' s Harrisburg campus developed an electronic information resources collection development policy. Their overarching guidelines for purchase decisions include: 1) purchase information in one format only; 2) prefer the electronic version of information; 3) examine new technologies thoroughly before committing to buy them; and 4) treat requests for electronic resources equally with print.

Like most university libraries, Harrisburg continues to support a mix of CD-ROM, online, and print, but it is moving toward more web-based versions of commercial products. Unlike CD-ROM use, this frees librarians from software maintenance, provides a familiar interface for patrons, and allows access from outside the library.

Web or online?

With a collection development policy in place, librarians still must decide which versions may yield the best results and also must justify paying for commercial sources when the web offers so much for free. Susan E. Feldman, an independent consultant, described her "Internet Search-Off" experiment in which she asked experienced intermediaries to conduct real searches on either Dialog or Dow Jones Interactive and at least one web search engine.

Overall, relevance for the information found on Dialog or Dow Jones was higher than that found on the web. Also, in the aggregate, it took twice as long to find information on the web as on traditional online systems. Feldman concludes that "organizations that insist on using the WWW as a sole source for their information may not be saving themselves anything, once they add double labor costs to the equation." She recommends using the web to find pictures, information directly from companies, technical product information, current medical statistics, full texts of recent academic articles, and information likely to exist on a specific site. For everything else, she said, it's better to use traditional resources or a mix of traditional and web resources.

Web benefits and frustrations

Hong (Iris) Xie of Rutgers University asked students in her advanced online searching class to compare web and nonweb interfaces for commercial online systems such as Dialog, DataStar, Wilson, Ovid, ProQuest, Lexis-Nexis, and others. They found that web interfaces have many advantages, including ease of database selection and access, availability of help, and printing or downloading choices. But online searchers beware: the most experienced searchers of traditional online interfaces noted the most problems with web versions, due to the inherent limits on search power and flexibility of the web platform.

Amanda Spink (University of North Texas) reported on a major study of how people use the Excite search engine. She and her coauthors are analyzing more than 50,000 queries from over 18,000 users of Excite in conjunction with information from 357 Excite users who responded to a questionnaire that the researchers posted on the system.

Spink found that most Excite users find relevant information on their topic. Search strategies are mostly simple, with an average of just 3.34 terms per query. Most users rarely use search engine features such as multiple search terms, Boolean operators, or query modifiers. Many respondents conduct subsequent searches on the same topic, but almost half of them were not modifying their search terms or strategies.

Soo Young Rieh of Rutgers is studying how librarians and end users interact in end user searching at the library. Since such interaction typically only occurs when the user encounters a problem, Rieh observed several such interactions, then conducted interviews with a librarian and a user. She discovered that the "end users experienced mixed feelings of fear, intimidation, apprehension, and hopelessness." These signs of anxiety happen when the online system doesn't work as anticipated or, for more experienced searchers, when familiar things are changed.

Librarians as tech assistants

Unfortunately, many end users do not ask for help, even when having obvious difficulties; those who do approach librarians tend to ask about mechanical difficulties rather than search strategies. Librarians may therefore feel reduced to technical assistants. Rieh's conclusion should be heeded by all reference librarians: "It is important to note that the computer...intervenes in the traditional user-librarian relationships, bringing anxiety to the users and role conflict to the librarians. This situation often leads to a gap in assistance."

I reported on a study that Peiling Wang and I did, looking at how graduate students search the web to find answers to factual information. The results suggest that the most effective strategy for fact-finding is to begin with an educated guess of a likely web site and follow links from there. Starting with a search engine or directory takes longer and usually doesn't yield a correct answer. Half of our searchers failed to find a correct answer. For more details on these papers and the full 50 presentations, Proceedings of the

Nineteenth National Online Meeting, New York, May 12-14, 1998 (as well as past volumes) is available for $59 from Information Today, Inc., 143 Old Marlton Pike, Medford, NJ 08055 <http://www.infotoday.com>.

Upcoming meetings

NOM is always in New York, but Information Today has added another conference more convenient for those on the West Coast. This November 1-5, the second annual Internet Librarian Conference will be held in Monterey, CA. Those who attended the first conference were enthusiastic, and this year's meeting promises to be bigger. Sessions will cover a range of issues including, metadata, copyright, web-based instruction, digital archiving, and more.

Next year's NOM is scheduled for May 18-20 at the New York Hilton. Abstracts for potential contributed papers will be accepted through October 15, 1998. For more information, contact Martha E. Williams, NOM Program Chair, University of Illinois, Computer & Systems Research Lab, 1308 W. Main, Urbana, IL 61801 <mwill13@uiuc.edu>.

The Online World conference will meet October 12-14 in Washington, DC, for the third year in a row after moving around the country for its previous 15 incarnations. Sessions are organized into six tracks, including Practical Searching, Intranet Development, Trends and Technology, Resource Management, Content Reviews, and Roundtable Discussions. The practical searching sessions and round table discussions are especially useful as ways to get into real learning, discussing, and sharing practical ideas. For example, a session entitled "The Way We Search Now" promises that "expert searchers from different kinds of libraries" will "share their thought processes [and] trade tips and strategies with each other."

Other sessions will explore web search engines, filtering agents, blending external and internal information to the desktop, and natural-language systems. For more information, contact Online Inc., 213 Danbury Rd., Wilton, CT 06897 <www.onlineinc.com>.

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