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What’s New With UMI?

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What's New with UMI?

UMI HAS BEEN in the information business for a long time. Sixty years ago Eugene Power founded University Microfilms to microfilm scholarly English books at Oxford's Bodleian Library, aiming to sell the microfilm collection to American libraries. In the 1940s the company expanded to microfilm newspapers. UMI was purchased by Xerox in 1962 and by Bell & Howell in 1985; along the way it has expanded microfilming operations, moved into indexing, and was a pioneer in CD-ROM databases.

Its launching of the ProQuest Direct online service a year ago and its September acquisition of DataTimes now make UMI a major force as an online service provider. To update its image as it diversifies, UMI last year truncated its name from University Microfilms International.

Adding DataTimes

DataTimes is an online service provider based in Oklahoma City, best known for its full-text regional newspaper and business databases, including over 5,200 newspapers, newsletters, television news transcripts, journals, magazines, and wire services (see Online Databases, LJ, September 1, 1995, p. 124,126). Its EyeQ software made headlines in 1995, as it pioneered a graphical user interface (GUI) coupled with a relevance ranking search engine.

For now, DataTimes will remain in Oklahoma, and both DataTimes EyeQ and ProQuest Direct will remain up and running, according to Bonnie Lawlor, senior VP and general manager of the Academic and Public Library Division of UMI. "We are keeping our options open" about ways to "cross-pollinate" the two services, says Lawlor.

One such example of synergy will be the loading of UMI databases onto DataTimes and vice versa. The two services overlap only slightly in content and even less in customer base. For DataTimes, corporations are the main customers. By contrast, 60 percent of ProQuest Direct trials and about 45 percent of its revenues come from academic and public libraries. School libraries and special libraries make up the rest of its customers.

Despite the merging of content, both ProQuest Direct and DataTimes for now will be run as separate systems. "The most important thing is that customers continue to get what they paid for," says Lawlor. "We will proceed expeditiously, but cautiously."

Developing ProQuest Direct

ProQuest Direct is one of the new breed of online search services that feature bibliographic databases linked to full-text article delivery (see Online Databases, LJ, April 1, p. 31,33). Together with its main competitors (EBSCOhost, Information Access Company's SearchBank, and OCLC's FirstSearch), ProQuest Direct provides a way for libraries to offer end user online searching at a subscription or transactional rate, supplementing journal collections and interlibrary loan.

Like its competitors, ProQuest Direct was developed to help libraries provide online searching to end users through an attractive GUI. The World Wide Web version was scheduled to be officially unveiled on October 17, 1996, along with a Z39.50 compatible version and a new version of its Windows front-end that will allow credit card payment.

UMI expects the web version to be the most popular because it overcomes the need to develop separate versions for differing computer platforms, uses the standard Netscape Navigator web browser interface, and will be most attractive to users. Although UMI would eventually like to market directly to end users (particularly at the corporate desktop), for now it recognizes that marketing through the librarian is the best tactic.

The new credit card payment feature in the Windows front-end version will be most appealing in public and academic library settings. Libraries that subscribe to a group of the most frequently used databases can allow patrons to access additional specialized databases with their credit cards. Alternatively, a library might subsidize bibliographic database searching but ask patrons to pay to get full-text documents.

Lawlor says that a Z39.50-compatible version has become a necessity, although she can't project how many libraries will use it. Requests for Proposal for library online catalog software and database provision now consider Z39.50 compatibility an expected feature.

CD-ROM continues

In last month's column I posed the question: "Has online made CD-ROM obsolete?" (LJ, October 1, p. 33-34). Although UMI has seen a decline in the domestic growth rate of CD-ROM, Lawlor reports that the medium still "serves a purpose very well," particularly in the overseas market—or anywhere the telecommunications infrastructure is problematic—and for niche databases. In the United States, CD-ROM "has lost its glamour because everyone wants the web," she notes, but both large universities and smaller institutions still provide databases on CD-ROM.

Since its entry into the CD-ROM database market in 1987, UMI has been a big player in both bibliographic and full-text image CD-ROM databases. It is both an original database producer and a provider of hardware and software through the ProQuest and PowerPages systems. Bibliographic mainstays such as ABI/INFORM and Dissertation Abstracts still sell well on CD-ROM, as do UMI image collections such as Business Periodicals OnDisc.

PowerPages combines a CD-ROM jukebox, a local area network, and laser printers to provide full article images for hundreds of journal titles. PowerPages' customers include library consortia such as OhioLink, and school, public, academic, and special libraries.

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ONLINE DATABASES

Full-text databases

Since its early days as a periodical microfilmer, UMI has been associated with full-text aggregation and distribution. The company now provides full text online through ProQuest Direct and DataTimes and on CD-ROM through ProQuest or PowerPages.

UMI has cultivated relationships with primary publishers that must provide permissions for the transformation and reuse of their content. This process has gotten much more complex in the last decade, as database producers seek digitization rights for both ASCII full text and image full text available on both CD-ROM and online systems. Recently, authors and photographers have joined the process, demanding a say in permissions and pricing of derivative versions of their intellectual property.

This new awareness and assertiveness by authors and publishers complicates the full text conversion process. Very few publishers now grant exclusive rights or blanket rights for all distribution or digitization options. If the author denies permission or requires special compensation, UMI (and others that convert full text) now may have to block out an individual article or photograph from a periodical issue, or even an entire issue from a volume. Some journal titles may be available only in ASCII form, others only in image.

UMI has an entire department to deal with such issues and has built up a huge inventory of derivative rights with publishers in over 8000 contracts. It will have online rights to approximately 2000 serial titles by the end of this year and aims at 3000 titles by the end of 1997.

Lawlor believes (as do I) that the best solution for online full text is “searchable ASCII text with the full image behind it.” She sees a growing demand for images because users want an exact replica of the material of lasting value. In the online world, slow transmission speeds have inhibited image delivery, but transmission speeds increase every year. Lawlor says UMI “is doing things on our end to increase the speed of delivery” and to gain both ASCII and image rights.

New databases

Earlier this year UMI and the H.W. Wilson Company agreed to combine Wilson’s bibliographic databases with UMI’s full-text databases. By January 1997, the first combination database will appear. It will include bibliographic citations from the 384 magazines indexed in Wilson’s Applied Science and Technology database, with images from more than 100 of the titles for which UMI has acquired rights.

This agreement covers all of the Wilson bibliographic files. New UMI/Wilson databases will appear throughout 1997, first on CD-ROM and then on ProQuest Direct online. The online versions will probably include both ASCII and image versions of the full texts.

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Is there a future for indexing?

UMI acquired the DataCourier Company in 1986. DataCourier, based in Louisville, Kentucky, is now UMI’s indexing arm and was the original producer of many of UMI’s most important bibliographic and ASCII full-text databases, such as Business Dateline and ABI/INFORM.

UMI will “definitely continue as a bibliographic database producer,” according to Lawlor. It is investing in natural language software that will help produce abstracts more automatically and more efficiently, but will continue to rely on its staff to add value by selecting the material of lasting scholarly value.

John Riedel, UMI’s senior VP of operations, believes “there is no substitute for the human mind.” Lawlor agrees that “web access does not relieve the need to have secondary indexes.” Indexes created by people add value by “aggregating data, choosing the best resources, and providing pointers” to information.

Lawlor also thinks abstracting and indexing services will do more to provide access to the many valuable electronic-only primary resources now available as listservs, web pages, and other electronic journals. “Traditional abstracting and indexing (a and i) providers can’t ignore this growing source of data. An a and i service can evaluate material and maybe serve as the archive for serious content.” A UMI group is now devising policies on how to integrate this material into UMI’s bibliographic databases and how to select and preserve material of lasting value.

Looking ahead

UMI is growing aggressively in several aspects of the information business. In no area does UMI seem to be scaling back—it plans to grow as a bibliographic and full-text database producer, a preserver of archival content, and as an online host.

According to Lawlor (who moved to UMI from the Institute for Scientific Information last March), “some say that technology and their delivery system is the answer, others say it is content. For us, it is the marriage of delivery and content.”

UMI will continue to produce and deliver content. “Our focus will make sure technology is just a little ahead of our users’ imagination but not too far ahead,” says Lawlor. “Our focus on content will stress UMI’s strength in data aggregation. We will continue to serve as both an electronic and microfilm archive.”

Riedel, who has been with UMI since 1973, says, “We still hold the attitude that we will deliver the product in whatever format the customer requires. For many institutions, stand-alone imaging on CD-ROM is adequate, and we will still offer microforms.”

UMI’s microfilm archive vault is full of materials that are not widely available beyond the 200 large research libraries that subscribe. The original microfilming operation at the Bodleian continues to this day, with the goal oflocating and filming every English-language title or book produced in England between 1470 and 1700.

UMI is now devising ways to digitize this incredible microfilm archive. Market research conducted this year will help determine priorities for digitization; the first digital products will appear in 1997. UMI’s Research and Development group is exploring the feasibility of using the new high-density CD-ROM (DVD) technology for these products.

Still, some libraries require microfilm as a proven preservation format. Although “microfilm” is no longer an official part of its corporate name, UMI will still produce and provide microfilm. For now, at least, microfilm will stand beside diverse delivery technologies that will enhance access to UMI’s growing collection of books, magazines, newspapers, and other materials.