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Author's Privilege

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ONLINE DATABASES

BY CAROL TENOPIR

Author's Privilege

TEN YEARS AND two months ago, on February 1, 1983, my first Online Databases column appeared in *LJ*. None of us expected the column to continue for ten years. In fact, when the editors first asked me to write a column about online searching, they thought there probably wouldn't be enough material for me to write something every month. They worried that I might run out of things to say in less than one year!

Not only has there been plenty to say every month for ten years, but I consider and discard three or four ideas for every column that finally gets printed. The issues, practices, technologies, and specific products surrounding database searching in libraries continue to change and evolve, providing a wealth of interesting topics.

Reminiscing

Since 1993 is my tenth anniversary with *LJ*, this month I claim author's privilege to reminisce and ruminate about the last ten years, during which time I've changed jobs and states (Illinois to Hawaii), had a child (who is now seven), finished my Ph.D. in Library/Information Science, and started a teaching career. I've seen and written about new developments in the field, including CD-ROM, local loading of tapes on ubiquitous online public access catalogs (OPACs), the growth of Internet, 2400 and 9600 baud searching, and the movement of database searching from a few highly trained intermediary searchers to the masses. I've attempted predicting the future, occasionally reviewed the past, but mostly tried to describe what's happening in the present.

Some firsts

Many of the changes in our industry can be traced to when they were

first covered as a new topic in *LJ*. End user search services such as Knowledge Index and BRS/After Dark were first described in April 1, 1983. Many subsequent columns on end user online systems concentrated on the problems and successes of end user search services in libraries.

End user searching did not take off as quickly or as successfully as vendors had hoped. Ten years later, end users still account for a minority of use on most major online systems, although that is slowly changing. To DIALOG and BRS's credit, they stuck with their end user offerings as they gained a slow but steady following over the years. Some libraries are reporting a resurgence of interest in end user online as patrons get accustomed to database searching on CD-ROM and OPAC databases. Some patrons want the additional and up-to-date resources that end user online systems can provide.

Text retrieval software

Early in 1983, I also first wrote about text-retrieval software, at the time called software for in-house databases. My occasional updates on the many new software packages for building textual databases on microcomputers always have been popular. Librarians are building in-house databases like never before.

Much of the innovation in software development is coming at the microcomputer text-retrieval software level, making micro-based in-house databases often more powerful than online or CD-ROM systems. Search features such as relevance feedback, hypertext, ranking by word occurrence, and natural language input are all available on text-retrieval software. The major online systems are just beginning to follow the lead.

CD-ROM

CD-ROM didn't make it into the column until May 15, 1985, mixed into an article on "Database Subsets." It didn't rate a full column of its own until March 1, 1986. Since then, CD-ROM has fallen within the purview of this column, as do other electronic reference options. Partly because of this col-

umn, *LJ* now reviews CD-ROMS. Reviews of specific products appear in Cheryl LaGuardia's CD-ROM Review column while Online Databases will continue to discuss the issues, developments, and trends surrounding CD-ROM. Lately, CD-ROM has been called an "interim technology" and "the technology of the moment." If this column lasts another ten years, perhaps CD-ROM will be obsolete.

Full text and pricing

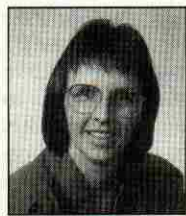
Full-text databases appeared early in Online Databases (June 1, 1983) and have continued to be covered on a regular basis. This was before many librarians searched full text, except perhaps on LEXIS/NEXIS or Westlaw. In the intervening years, full text has become the most prolific type of database, bypassing even bibliographic. The full impact of electronic full texts is just beginning to be felt, as libraries look for document delivery alternatives to high-priced journal subscriptions.

Some fundamental issues have yet to be resolved but appear repeatedly and will continue to appear in this column. Dissatisfaction with online pricing policies has been covered since 1984. The industry is gearing up for a widespread revolution in online pricing and the pricing for CD-ROM full texts—watch for more on that as the decade unfolds.

Concerns for the quality of databases is percolating as well. I first devoted a column to quality control in 1987 and will continue to do so occasionally. Searchers are getting more vocal and more militant, with online vendors and database producers at last beginning to respond to something that has been of concern for years.

Internet

New technologies and new means of information access take hold every few years. Although it has been around for many years, Internet has taken off just in the last year or so. I mentioned Internet in passing earlier but didn't write a full column about it until December 1992. I will continue to cover Internet as it concerns elec-



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tronic reference services, but *LJ* will cover it in depth with the debut of an Internet column this summer.

Best sellers

Every year there are one or two columns that seem to strike a chord with a variety of readers. I call these my "best sellers"; these are the columns that get the most reprint requests, that generate the most letters or phone calls, and that seem to get cited the most frequently. They are not always predictable, though.

Columns on text retrieval-software are always guaranteed to be best sellers, but that is probably because people need help deciding what software package to buy for their applications. Best sellers that make people think are those that get to the heart of changes in the daily work done by reference librarians.

When I asked "Is It Any of Our Business?" (April 1, 1992) how well end users are doing in their CD-ROM search strategies, reference librarians from all types of libraries responded. Many had their own horror stories to relate, although there is no consensus as to whether end users' strategies really are our business or not. The problem is exacerbated with remote dial-in capabilities for CD-ROM and locally loaded databases. Instruction in libraries is changing to reflect electronic resources, but concern remains on how to tap those users who access library resources only through remote hookup.

"Changes Wrought by CD-ROM" (December 1991) struck a chord with many reference librarians. Many related their fears, followed ultimately by enthusiasm over the changes they are seeing in their daily duties. Electronic reference may be more hectic at times, but it can also be more satisfying and certainly never dull.

Last year's "CD-ROM Best Seller Lists" (September 1, 1992) elicited responses from publishers and librarians. Both feel manipulated at times by dubious lists of best-selling CDs, and both feel the need for better reporting on what is useful and what is used by all types of libraries.

I'm not always right

Not everyone agrees with me, thank goodness! I have been accused of being an apologist for a so-called dying breed (intermediary searchers), of being "librarian-biased" (I plead guilty), of dwelling on the obvious,

such as flaws in current systems, without looking far enough into the future to help design better systems. Whenever I do a column such as "Predicting the Future" (October 1, 1991) or "... Five Years into the Future" (April 1, 1988), someone is bound to put forward their own, differing opinion of what is coming down the road.

I don't always get things right, either. When wrong, I can be sure someone will let me know—usually the parties most directly involved. For example, in July 1992 in a column called "Full Text on CD-ROM," I described companies that sell CD-ROM products from many different publishers or software vendors. I compared these with book jobbers, because, like book jobbers, these CD jobbers have nothing to do with any aspect of the creation process. As it turns out, I was wrong.

The president of Udata Publications, Inc. wrote in detail about the expanded roles a CD-ROM distributor plays, including mounting all the CD-ROM products in-house, helping customers figure out how to search each software product, and suggesting spin-offs to CD producers. My oversimplification did not do justice to the much more complicated job of distributing electronic products.

Guaranteed to get mail are any reviews or criticisms of books or database contents. Publishers are very protective of their creations! "The Database Press" in March 1, 1989 generated both plaudits and cries of anguish.

Getting ideas

Where do my ideas come from? For starters, I go to many conferences. Each year I try to attend two or three from among the specific online/CD-ROM conferences such as the National Online Meeting in New York in May, the Online Inc. meeting in the fall, the International Online Meeting in London in December, or MicroSoft's Intermedia show held in March; plus the conferences of professional associations such as the American Library Association, the Special Libraries Association, the American Society for Information Science, the Information Industry Association, etc. Thanks to all of you who approach me at these conferences and tell me what you would like to see covered in *LJ*.

I am on the press mailing lists for all of the major online companies and many of the database companies.

Some companies call me or send me a personal note in advance of a big announcement, but I can't always count on that. "Tips" from friends often help more.

Like you, I read a lot, including *RQ*, *American Libraries*, *Online*, *Database*, *Online Review*, *Database Searcher*, *Information Today*, *CD-ROM Professional*, *CD-ROM Librarian*, etc. My first column was called "Catching Up and Keeping Up," and keeping up continues to be a daily activity. I am online nearly every day.

Most importantly, I get ideas from librarians like yourselves. I get letters, phone calls, E-mail messages from many readers from all over the world. My favorites are from people who take the time to think about issues and comment on how database searching has changed their libraries and their jobs. Often these letters suggest an idea for a column, either directly or indirectly.

The "Is It Any of Our Business?" column evolved out of thought-provoking comments from the database searching coordinator at the University of Tennessee. A Wheaton College librarian and a corporate special librarian each wrote several pages of personal experiences for "Library Use of the Source and CompuServe" (April 15, 1985), while a Chicago public librarian inspired "In-house Training and Staff Development" (May 1, 1984).

A request for help

Not all of the letters you write get immediately answered, but I do read them and think about them. What would you like to hear about in the future? What issues, trends, products do you think are the most important or most interesting? What changes do you see coming or are feeling now? I would like to hear from people who are dropping printed products in favor of electronic, those who are dealing with end user training either through instruction or better software interfaces, those who are successfully combining intermediary and end user search services, and anyone who has an idea for a future column. Send ideas or comments to Carol Tenopir, School of Library and Information Studies, University of Hawaii at Manoa, 2550 The Mall, Honolulu, Hawaii, 96822; FAX 808-956-5835; BITNET: tenopir@uhunix; Internet: tenopir@uhunix.uhcc.hawaii.edu; Dialmail: Carol Tenopir.