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## Is It Any of Our Business?

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# ONLINE DATABASES

BY CAROL TENOPIR

## Is It Any of Our Business?

I RECENTLY surveyed research libraries in the United States and Canada to find out what percent offered mediated online, end user online, CD-ROM, and/or reference databases on their online public access catalogs (OPACs) (see "Options for Accessing Databases," *Online Databases, LJ*, November 1, 1991, p. 73-75). As I reported, CD-ROM and OPAC searching are expanding at a dramatic rate and are very popular with library patrons. These are undeniable trends in academic research libraries and many other libraries as well.

### Hard questions

Reference librarians see these trends as overwhelmingly positive, but as users' interactions with reference sources change, some hard questions are being asked. The comments from one librarian especially keep coming back to me. Sandra Leach, database searching coordinator, University of Tennessee-Knoxville, raises several interesting questions. Leach says:

Technology has done wondrous things for bibliographic access during the 15 years I have been involved with libraries, but similar changes have taken place throughout society. Libraries now often show how and what can be done, much to the amazement of our clients. Catalog access remains central to our mission, and allowing printing, manipulating, and format choices from distributed locations is a wonderful service.

Online mediated searching allows access at the next level, usually to contents of journals, and is a very expensive, sophisticated process. It will always exist, as long as there are specialized, low-demand information sources. End user (self-service) online searching should always incur a charge,

or some other control mechanism such as time limits, to prevent user abuse, either intentional or not. The reality is that online access is very expensive, and we have a duty to communicate this information to people who are to learn to manage resources.

CD-ROMs have greatly complicated the picture. They too are very expensive, to purchase and to use, but we libraries appear to be ignoring that fact. Users love them and do not want to be helped with them. Very few are using them efficiently or effectively. Their most important characteristic is that they are free.

I asked a woman using PsycLIT yesterday if she wanted me to help her reduce the 803 citations she was reviewing to a more manageable number more targeted to her interests. She replied that this was exactly what she wanted, although she didn't have time to look at them now and would have to come back. *Is it any of my business if she wants to waste her time?* [Author's emphasis]

Another on ERIC today wanted to print several hundred citations. Her search strategy was "school and drug." *Is it my business that she is wasting my paper and ink?*

Several years ago I heard a presentation on a research project involving naive end users; results suggested that users were as happy with citations produced through their own searching as they were with those produced by trained intermediaries, even though there was virtually *no overlap* in results! Americans value independence above all, I guess.

When I talked to Sandra Leach several months after she wrote these comments, she wanted to elaborate on her statement that "very few of them are using [CD-ROM] efficiently or effectively." "My attitude has evolved a little bit—if they are satisfied with it, I guess they are doing okay. Some of them are doing okay." But, at least at the University of Tennessee, "I believe that we don't have the resources we need to teach them enough."

### Just what is our business?

Leach's comments bring up several issues. Just what is our business

when it comes to CD-ROM and OPAC databases? Is it to teach search strategy? Help users to choose the most appropriate databases? Foster independence? Be an active participant in the searches for as many people as possible? Make students realize the monetary value of information? Keep control over paper and ink? Or generally keep hands off? Librarians all over are grappling with these questions to which there is no consensus.

### Search strategies

Ever since the first InfoTrac optical disc workstation went into a library almost seven years ago, the response from patrons has been enthusiastic. People who never used the library before came in to see the new machine and, for the most part, went away satisfied. Long lines developed at some libraries. Surveys of database users revealed an enthusiasm rarely found for library products or services.

Also, almost since the first workstation went in, librarians have been amazed at some of the terrible search strategies used by patrons. What is even more amazing to some librarians is that many users don't know or don't care that their strategies are bad by librarian standards—they simply are satisfied with their results.

Walter Zimmerman, online services librarian, the D.B. Weldon Library, University of Western Ontario, spoke to me of the "generally poor quality of end user searching when the students (mostly undergrads) perform their searches unsupervised." He finds "some of the search strategies are hair-raising! It's too bad that students don't perceive the difference in quality or don't learn how to ameliorate the situation."

He tells of the student who searched the term "children" in Sociofile and retrieved over 11,000 citations. She had read through 250 of them when he asked what she was really looking for. It turns out she wanted information on the fairly specific topic "parental freedom," but couldn't think how to search for that. If he hadn't interrupted, she would have gone away (much later) satisfied,



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because buried in those 11,000 items were a handful of relevant ones.

Other searchers forget to pluralize or truncate, rarely think of synonyms or other ways to express concepts, and conclude there is nothing on their topics. In either scenario, Zimmerman reminded me that "when [a searcher] does a bad job, it tends to take longer."

Many librarians feel it isn't their job to interfere. An often-heard argument is that we have never worried about how good the strategies are when people are using printed resources, so why should we with electronic resources? I can argue both sides of this issue, but with CD-ROM and OPAC databases it is easier to do a really bad (and more time-consuming or more paper-consuming) search than it is with print.

Yet those of us who have been searching for a long time know how subjective database searching can be. There really isn't any one best strategy; if ten searchers search the same topic, they will likely come up with ten different strategies. Even when a search is done and citations are retrieved, librarians and end users may differ in their interpretation of the expected relevance of the items. Recent studies have shown that end users may be much more tolerant of looking through long lists of nonrelevant items than the clients of online search services ever were.

Even if there isn't one best strategy, there are certainly better strategies and ways to improve a search. Is it our business to teach these to users? Of course it is, and failing to do so in the past with print sources is no excuse to continue to fail users. But there isn't just one way to teach.

### Our job to teach

In an academic environment, better formal instruction is now more important than ever and, potentially, now better than ever. The best CD-ROM instruction uses special facilities or laboratories so the instruction can be hands-on (for more details and quotes, see Carol Tenopir and Ralf Neufang's "Impacts of Electronic Reference on Reference Librarians," *Online*, May 1992). Classes can directly involve the students and are much more meaningful to students than the old "bring in a book truck full of books" technique. Good instruction interactively teaches concepts, search strategy, and a new way of thinking about finding information, in addition

to system-specific commands and features.

Sara E. Williams, coordinator of online services, Howard-Tilton Library, Tulane University, New Orleans, feels philosophical about the quality of some searches and the partial solution offered by good instruction. "I believe most patrons prefer performing their own searches—even if the librarian can do a better job. Sigh . . . (we do have a well-developed instructional program in information technology that aims to teach basic searching principles and guidelines. It helps a lot.)"

In any kind of library, increased demands for point-of-use instruction bring new challenges to reference librarians. For a large percentage of database users, this may be the only instruction they receive. Point-of-use shouldn't be viewed as interrupting—it is instruction in another, less formal form.

It is most definitely our business to assist at the moment patrons are trying to solve their information needs. Good printed or on-screen user aids don't replace the need for human help. That means a big time commitment, but some librarians are finding ways to meet the challenge. It may mean reassigning staff, changing priorities, enlisting peer helpers, recruiting "high-tech" volunteers, and the like.

Still, some people don't want help and resent it when asked. Some people will happily use CD-ROM databases as long as they aren't "bothered," but will leave if a librarian approaches them. With electronic resources, just as with print sources, there will always be a certain proportion of users who don't want to be taught. Then, as long as they are not hurting anything, it is our business to leave them alone.

### Choice of appropriate database

One librarian voices the observation of many when she notes, "most patrons would rather do a free search in a 'marginal' database than pay a small fee for a search in a more appropriate, subject-specific online database." Is it our business to point out the better resource? Once again, I think the answer is yes.

Users can't expect to know about all of the electronic resources available through a library. Sometimes the highly visible workstations convey the message that these are the only indexes, when much more appropriate

sources are accessible online. Online is unseen potential; CD-ROM, like print, is visible, immediate reality.

The sticking point here is cost—most users take the free (to them) option. As Sandra Leach points out, all resources cost money and we've managed to hide the high costs of CD-ROM from patrons. It is easier to charge for an online search because we get an itemized bill for each search, but does that make it correct? It is time to once more reconsider our discriminatory pricing policies and budget for information acquisition, not just materials in the building. Fixed-fee pricing options from online vendors, of course, help all concerned with making budgets in high-use libraries.

A compromise solution is being offered in some libraries. Sara Williams at Tulane sees that "most patrons prefer CD-ROMs [because] they're easy to use (at least seem that way) and free (to the patrons)," but they encourage fee-based online use as well. "We've instituted, and expanded, a free ready-ref online service. Sometimes patrons will pay for a search after receiving the benefits of a free, but incomplete, ready-ref search."

### Foster independence

With CD-ROM workstations in prominent places in the library, it is easy to assist users. Databases on OPACs and dial-in access to CD-ROM mean more users will be searching from outside the library. Dial-in access guarantees anonymity and fosters independence, aims of both patrons and librarians alike. Unfortunately, the chances to help patrons develop better search strategy skills will be limited.

Perhaps we should learn a lesson from Telebase Systems' Easynet Gateway service. By typing in SOS at any time during an online session, a user calls up a real-live librarian in the Telebase office. Anonymously and remotely (but humanly), the SOS librarian provides point-of-use reference. Such an SOS service should become a part of more library dial-up OPAC services. Independence in searching does not have to mean intellectual isolation.

Is it any of our business? What is our business if it isn't teaching, assisting, and fostering educated independence? Yes, Sandra Leach, it is our business, but only to a point.



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