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How Up-To-Date is That Update?

Carol Tenopir
University of Tennessee - Knoxville

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ONLINE DATABASES

BY CAROL TENOPIR

How Up-To-Date Is That Update?

ARE YOUR FAVORITE databases updated quarterly, monthly, weekly, or daily? Updating schedules are an important selling point for both online and CD-ROM databases. You may pay more for a CD-ROM database that is updated monthly rather than quarterly, or you may choose to use an online database with weekly updates.

But database updating does not always mean that a database is *up-to-date*. Backlogs in indexing or time lags between publication date of a journal and its availability electronically may mean that at each update old information is being loaded. Even if a database producer sends its update tape to the online or CD-ROM vendor on time, and even if the ven-

eral major databases (*CD-ROM Software, Dataware, Hardware: Evaluation, Selection, and Installation, Libraries Unlimited*, fall 1991). Jacso describes the simplest way to check the currency of a bibliographic database: "make a few searches by journal title and look at the results which are usually (though not always) presented in backward chronological order. Use weekly and biweekly publications to pinpoint differences more sharply." This technique can be used to compare how similar databases keep up on the same magazine titles. Jacso compared, for example, titles covered by both EBSCO's Magazine Article Summaries and UMI's Resource/One and found that "Re-

tently several months ahead of LISA. According to Jacso, "there might be reasons for this difference; for example, LISA adds a good-quality abstract to each record, and that takes significant time."

The majority of the titles in his test were U.S. journals, but since LISA is a British database, those are foreign titles to LISA. They may take longer to arrive at the indexing site or may be given lower priority. (Ironically, however, Library Lit is more current for the British bimonthly periodical *The Electronic Library*.) Jacso feels that "covering foreign sources is often a delaying factor in any database. If sources include materials from developing and faraway

The Timeliness of Online Databases

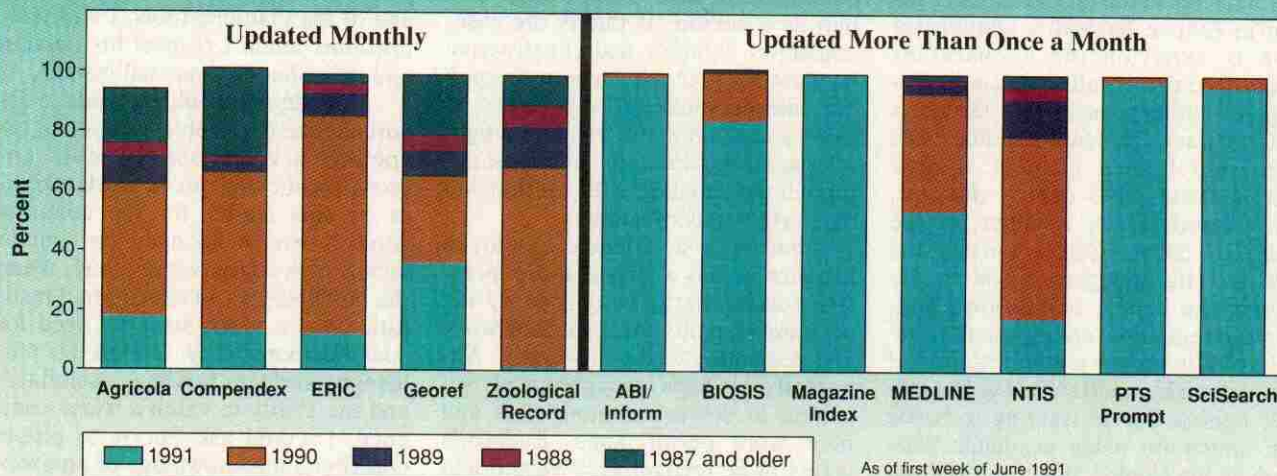


CHART BY ANNABELLE CARTER

dor loads it on schedule without problems (two big ifs), the update may include only records for items that are six months old or older.

In a forthcoming book on CD-ROM evaluation and selection, Peter Jacso analyzes the timeliness of sev-

source/One is somewhat ahead of Magazine Article Summaries in all the titles examined." Both databases include short abstracts and indexing.

LISA and Library Lit on CD-ROM

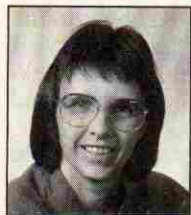
The difference in currency between CD-ROM versions of Library and Information Science Abstracts (LISA) and Library Literature is even more pronounced. LISA is produced by R.R. Bowker-Saur Ltd. in London and is available on CD from Silver-Platter. Library Literature is produced and vended by H.W. Wilson.

Although they index many of the same journals, Library Lit is consis-

countries as LISA does, the delay is likely to be even longer. These sources also are most vulnerable to publication delay." LISA indexes materials from 60 countries.

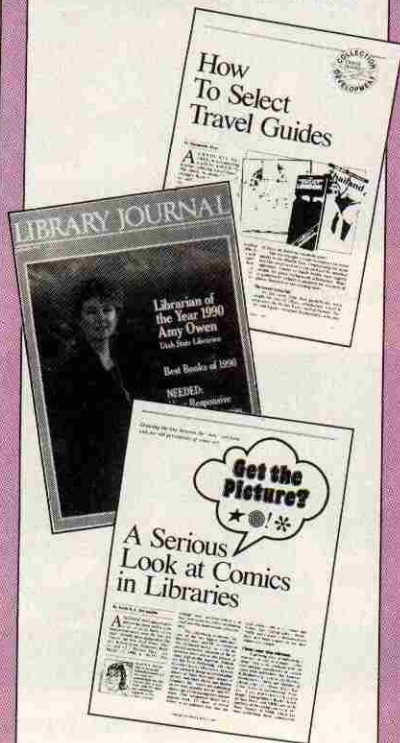
The types of materials included may also result in indexing delays. If a database covers research reports or conference proceedings, timeliness may be difficult, as these materials are notoriously late. Foreign-language articles may take much longer to index and abstract for English-language databases.

Even when just looking at a single database, users should be aware of how up-to-date (or not-up-to-date) the



Carol Tenopir is Associate Professor at the School of Library and Information Studies, University of Hawaii at Manoa, Honolulu

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ONLINE DATABASES

information they retrieve is likely to be. Jacso found that the March 1990 issue of the LISA CD-ROM database did not contain any citations for 1990. "Given the semi-yearly update of LISA on CD-ROM, this means that the user has to wait a minimum of nine months to get a record in the database. This seems excessive, even if abstracts are added to each record."

Online LISA is updated monthly on DIALOG, but I found much the same pattern. In June 1991, the most current update tape was loaded in April 1991. This update included only one record with a 1991 publication date! The other 574 records were from 1990 (410) and 1989 (164). Actually, this isn't too bad for research databases, as I discovered when I checked updates of other online databases.

Updates for a dozen databases

I wanted to verify timeliness of databases that do not cover the same journals or even the same types of materials. I searched each database on DIALOG for the most current update (UD=9999) and then ANDED that set with each publication year; I found how many records in the current update were of articles published recently. (If a database producer happened to be doing massive retrospective conversion for the current update, the results would be skewed.)

The databases I checked are some of the most popular bibliographic ones in libraries, but vary considerably in size, subject matter, research focus, cost, amount of information in each record, types of materials indexed, and update frequency.

Five are updated monthly (ERIC, Agricola, Zoological Record, Compendex Plus, and GeoRef); two twice a month (BIOSIS and MEDLINE); three weekly (ABI/INFORM, Magazine Index, and SciSearch); one bi-weekly (NTIS); and one daily (PTS Prompt). The date of the most current updates the first week in June ranged from April 1991 for GeoRef to July 1991 (!) for MEDLINE and NTIS. The rest were dated May or June 1991.

Sizes of updates ranged from 909 records for ABI/INFORM's weekly update to 13,956 records per month for Compendex Plus, with an average update size for these 12 databases of 6,301 records. These are mostly big databases, ranging from a low of one-half million records in ABI/INFORM to over ten million in SciSearch, with an average of 3.25 million records.

Variations in timeliness

The chart shows a wide variation in the timeliness of these databases. Not surprisingly, the databases updated more than once a month are, on the whole, much more current. Magazine Index is the most up-to-date, with all records in the week 1 June update from 1991. Currency is one of Information Access Company's claims for Magazine Index, and it can live up to its promises for several reasons. Records are only indexed (no abstracts), the magazines covered are all English-language and mostly U.S. sources, and indexing is done in-house. There is little retrospective indexing; magazines are indexed essentially cover-to-cover right after they arrive at IAC. Presumably if an article is missed, it is lost forever.

The two business databases (PTS Prompt and ABI/INFORM) are also very up-to-date. This is encouraging news for users of these databases, since currency is essential to many business uses. It is also impressive because these databases cover research as well as popular business literature, include international sources, and have lengthy abstracts.

The biggest of the databases, SciSearch, is also one of the most timely and for an obvious reason. It contains bibliographic information and citations only; no indexing or abstracts are added. At the bottom end are NTIS, Agricola, ERIC, and Compendex Plus. The former three are U.S. government-sponsored databases. Under 20 percent of the mid-1991 updates were to items published in 1991.

At first glance Zoological Record seems extremely out-of-date, but longtime users will recognize what an improvement this time lag is over its currency before BIOSIS took responsibility for the database. BIOSIS itself, which includes extensive indexing and abstracts and covers worldwide research literature, is amazingly up-to-date compared to other huge research databases.

Searchers need to be aware that current updating does not equal current citations, and that, in some databases, it takes several years to cover the literature of the field. In those databases that are especially behind, the most current publication dates are not displayed first; rather, the last articles entered are displayed first. Searching with publication year as a delimiter is thus important to ensure currency.

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