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# □ ONLINE DATABASES □

BY CAROL TENOPIR

## Why Don't Librarians Use Full-Text Databases?

ACTUALLY, THE TITLE of this column should be "why don't *more* librarians use *nonlegal* full-text databases *more often*?" Law librarians or those whose organizations regularly deal with legal issues are frequent and long-time users of the legal full-text systems such as Westlaw and LEXIS. In addition, full text of news information, especially on the NEXIS system, is accessed regularly by a faithful following of special librarians and a smattering of academic, public, and school librarians. But the majority of database use in libraries is on bibliographic or referral databases.

When academic law school libraries or law firms are excluded from usage statistics, databases used more than 3000 hours per year in the library/information center market include 12 business files, 11 news/general files, 26 science files, and four social science files. These are mostly bibliographic, and a few referral—NEXIS is the only full-text database reported to have heavy use in the non-law library environment. (And counting NEXIS as a database is not really comparable, since all NEXIS files are counted as one database, while all full-text files in other systems are counted individually.) The databases that are most used by libraries include (in alphabetical order): BIOSIS, Books in Print, CA File (Chemical Abstracts abstracts file), CA Search (Chemical Abstracts bibliographic file), Chemical Abstracts Registry file, ERIC, Magazine Index, Medline, National Newspaper Index, Newsearch, NEXIS, NTIS, PsycInfo, Predicasts files, Social Science Citation Index, Sociological Abstracts, and World Patent Index.<sup>1</sup>



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### Increased use of full text

Continued reliance on bibliographic databases comes at a time when the January 1989 issue of the Cuadra/Elsevier *Directory of Online Databases*<sup>2</sup> shows an increase of full text (in whole or part) to almost 34 percent of the over 4000 databases listed in the directory. This is up from approximately five percent for full text in 1980, 18 percent in 1983, and 25 percent in 1986. Full text is clearly the fastest growing type of database in the 1980s and will soon predominate in the textual database world. Even those systems that began as bibliographic services are adding many more full-text databases. Roger Summit, president of Dialog, has said that offering more full-text databases is a major goal of his system in the near future.<sup>3</sup>

A more meaningful way to count full-text databases is how many sources are available online, since some full-text databases include many different sources while some are made up of a single title. This number is difficult to come up with for many kinds of texts, but for periodical sources it is now available. A new publication, *Fulltext Sources Online: For Periodicals, Newspapers, Newsletters & Newswires*,<sup>4</sup> lists all such sources by title whether they are included in a multititle database or available separately (or both).

Almost 1700 sources available on 16 online systems are listed in the first issue of *Fulltext Sources Online*, with nearly 2000 predicted by the second (summer) issue in 1989. Legal journals are listed, but legal citations, opinions, cases, and codes are not. The periodicals are available on 16 different online systems, including all of those mentioned above.

This is a simple directory; each periodical is listed alphabetically by title with only the online services and database name on the service given. The first issue contains no indexes or cross references, so the only ap-

proach to the information is if a user knows a current periodical title and wants to find out where it can be accessed in full text. In the first issue there is no indication of timespan or how much of each journal is included in the online versions. The summer 1989 issue will correct some of these deficiencies and include a subject guide, date coverage, and beginning and ending dates for each periodical on each system.

One reason full-text databases are not used more often in more libraries is that libraries' intermediary search services have traditionally been bibliography-based. The most common product delivered to patrons over the years is a list of documents about a subject, often in support of research. Libraries can use their own collections, ILL, and telefacsimile to provide document delivery in support of bibliographic search services and are thus a natural location for such services. Online bibliographic searching has long been a natural extension of the printed finding aids that help patrons better exploit printed document collections. Individual end users searching at home do not have this natural relationship between database and collection and are less likely to be satisfied with a bibliographic search.

### Deficiencies of full text

Related to this are the deficiencies of current full-text products. A bibliographic or referral database is as good as, and usually better than, its print equivalent, but electronic full-text products are not as good as the printed equivalents since most do not include any of the graphic parts of the originals. Their advantages lie in increased access points and ready availability, but they are imperfect substitutes. If the printed version is not available, as is often the case when end users are searching from their homes or offices, then full-text databases are an exciting way to get easy access to information. In a li-

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brary environment, however, presumably many of the print sources are available. For the ones that can be identified in a bibliographic search, a photocopy of the printed version with all of its graphics and aesthetic advantages is better than a printout of the electronic version.

There are also not yet enough unique full-text titles available online. Journals available on databases such as Magazine ASAP, McGraw Hill Business Background, Harvard Business Review, ACS journals online, etc., are readily available in library collections. Many librarians do not see the enhanced search capabilities offered by accessing the electronic full texts to balance the increased cost. Only in areas such as legal research is the enhanced access seen by nearly everyone as an overwhelming advantage over print.

### Uses of full text

The real advantages of full text come from use beyond mere bibliographic-style compilation of a group of documents on a subject. Finding peripheral mention of something or someone, browsing through articles on a broad topic, or downloading relevant bits from many different sources are unique uses of full-text online. These uses are more dependent on an end user searching, where the person with the information need is reacting to documents or parts of documents throughout a highly interactive search process. Library intermediary search services are not set up to function this way. Even if the patron is present at a search, the search is usually highly focused with the intent of devising the right search strategy to get the best set of citations or list of names and addresses. Librarians tend to get into and out of databases quickly, conducting cost-effective and efficient searches. Full text is best used more interactively.

### Cost

That brings us to the issue of cost. Right now the pricing systems for most online systems do not support the best use of full-text databases. Browsing requires thinking and reading time online; highly interactive searching may require many iterations of a search statement; printing or downloading complete texts requires long stretches of time online. Connect-based systems such as DIALOG and BRS inhibit creative uses of

full text. At \$96 per hour plus telecommunications, Magazine ASAP on DIALOG is an online luxury that many cannot afford. Most librarians would rather guide a user to bibliographic sources (or many patrons would just as soon browse the print periodical issues). Only LEXIS and NEXIS charge a minimal connect charge with the major cost being a per database access fee, but their monthly subscription costs are seen as prohibitive by many libraries.

Full-text databases are especially good for ready reference and fact retrieval in library reference work. Unfortunately, many libraries are not funded to use online sources routinely for ready reference. Online searching is seen as a charge-back operation rather than as an extension of the reference tools available for use at the discretion of the librarian. Today many reference librarians are still constrained from going to an online source even when it could more quickly yield an answer.

### Some don't know about full text

Finally, lots of intermediary searchers just don't know much about full-text databases. They may have learned to search on DIALOG or BRS at a time when those services didn't have any full-text databases. (When legal use and law schools are excluded from online systems use statistics, the most frequently used systems in libraries are DIALOG, BRS, National Library of Medicine's Medlars, and STN International.<sup>5</sup>) If they work in a public or small- to medium-sized academic library, they might never have had direct exposure to LEXIS, NEXIS, or WESTLAW.

At an online conference I attended a year or so ago, I went to a panel discussion made up of representatives from all of the major online systems. A representative from Mead Data Central (LEXIS and NEXIS) paused at one point and said, "How come when I go to a meeting with librarians I always feel like the new kid on the block?" Mead has the highest revenues of any text database system, but most general librarians use DIALOG and BRS.

### Future use

Indications that full-text databases will see increased use in the library environment are already around us. Legal full texts have been readily accepted, demonstrating that if there is a powerful need for full-text

databases (and financial support) they will be used. There are also indications that when new products are uniquely available online they will have more appeal than many of the imperfect print clones available today. In end user studies conducted over the past several years, end users consistently recognized the advantages of full text, but the lack of graphics was seen as a real barrier to use. A new trend is to mix different types of full-text materials, creating a product available only online. Some of these include some previously unpublished information, mixed with published texts and with other types of materials such as software or bibliographic citations.

Full texts on CD-ROM encourage more browsing and more creative uses because they are typically used by the end user and because the threatening cloud of high connect-time costs are not hanging over the user's head. (CD-ROM products do not, of course, completely solve the cost problems for the libraries that must purchase them.) CD-ROM products are also where much of the addition of graphics is taking place. With good monitors and good printers, full texts on CD-ROM are becoming more aesthetically appealing. The ability to merge sound, still graphics, and motion pictures to text with videodisc peripherals and hypermedia techniques makes the emerging electronic full texts even better in many cases than print.

### References

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2. *Directory of Online Databases*. Cundra/Elsevier, 1989. Quarterly.
3. See also: Tenopir, Carol, "Searching Full-Text Databases," *LJ*, May 1, 1988, p. 60-61.
4. Orenstein, Ruth M. *Fulltext Sources Online: For Periodicals, Newspapers, Newsletters & Newswires*. Needham Heights, MA: BiblioData, 1989. \$60/issue, \$110/2 issues.
5. Williams.

CORRECTION: My February 1 column reviewed two journals devoted to CD-ROM. Nancy Melin Nelson, editor of *CD-ROM Librarian* and contributor to *CD-ROM Review*, tells me that *CD-ROM Review* ceased publication as of December 1988.

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