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BY CAROL TENOPIR

The EasyNet Gateway

EASYNET, the gateway system to multiple online vendors, has elicited excitement among information professionals since it debuted two years ago. EasyNet had several things that made it especially attractive from the beginning: credit card billing at each use so no contract was needed; an 800 telephone number so there were no extra telecommunications charges; the ability to access many different vendors without learning different search protocols or without signing contracts; the ability to access the system with either a dumb terminal or microcomputer; the system's capability of choosing appropriate databases for novice users; and the credibility of sponsorship by the National Federation of Abstracting and Information Services (NFAIS).

In the last two years, EasyNet has continued to make modifications and enhancements. Librarians who haven't looked at EasyNet since its debut may want to give it another look now, either for end user searching or as a supplement to their own searching.

Vendors

EasyNet can connect a user to any of 13 online vendors that together provide access to over 700 databases. In addition to the original six well-known vendors (DIALOG, BRS, SDC Orbit, Newsnet, VU/TEXT, Pergamon InfoLine, and Questel), EasyNet now connects with some systems that many users would not have access to otherwise. The new vendors are: Data-



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solve (England), Datastar (Switzerland), Datatimes (United States), G. Cam Serveur (France), QL Systems (Canada), and Timeplace (United States). With the addition of these systems, EasyNet has available many Canadian, British, and French news,

legal, and business databases. There are many full-text files as well as statistical and bibliographic.

A searcher might not use many of the available databases enough to warrant accessing them directly, but using EasyNet as a gateway allows occasional access without learning each system's commands or contracting with each vendor. A library or individual that uses a system regularly would still want to go directly to that vendor. But for the occasional question requiring access to different databases, going through EasyNet is a simple solution. On EasyNet you may directly select the database you wish to search or allow the system to help you select one as you answer a series of questions about your topic.

The EasyNet system

To access EasyNet, a user may have either a dumb terminal or a microcomputer with modem and communications software. Since the EasyNet computer does all of the search assistance and switching to the different vendors, you don't need to purchase any special equipment or front-end software.

EasyNet is available in all states except Alaska by dialing 800-EASYNET. Optionally, access can be made via Telenet (enter C 21549 in the United States as the host address) or Tymnet (enter EASYNET as the network address).

Once you have logged onto EasyNet you may choose either EasyNet I service or EasyNet II. EasyNet I leads the user through a series of diagnostic questions, resulting eventually in the system selecting an appropriate database. Not all databases are available through this automatic service. Most times the system selects one of the major databases on BRS or DIALOG. EasyNet II lets the user select any of the 700 databases directly.

EasyNet makes the connection to the online vendor, translates the search query into the appropriate format and syntax, and reports the results. Although system commands

and field labels are supplied by EasyNet, searchers are expected to enter correct Boolean operators, including parentheses, and to eliminate stop words. An online Help (labeled IMPORTANT) gives examples of all of these, but if the user does not read the examples and gets an unsatisfactory search, EasyNet attempts no automatic diagnosis.

What the system does do is provide an "SOS" service. At any time during a search session (24 hours a day) a user may type SOS and receive online help from a librarian at the other end. According to an EasyNet spokesperson, the most common types of problems via SOS are searching in an appropriate database, using stop words in a search statement, or entering incorrect Boolean operators.

Once a search is run on a host system, EasyNet downloads the first ten records, logs off, and presents the ten citations to the searcher. If a searcher wants to see more than ten, EasyNet must log back on to the host and run the search over. If the searcher chooses to see abstracts or full text instead of just citations, EasyNet has to once again log back on and rerun the search.

Costs

Automatic logging off and on keeps the costs to EasyNet low. Costs to the searcher are based on citations received plus connect time. The costs are generally low but they can mount up quickly if more than ten citations are desired, if abstracts are requested, or if the database has a surcharge.

If the credit card billing option is chosen, no prior contract with EasyNet is required. Users simply dial the number and enter their American Express, Visa, or MasterCard number when prompted by the system. The credit card option has no start-up costs or ongoing charges; the user is billed just for the online session.

A basic search retrieving up to ten references costs \$8 plus 20¢ per minute teleconnect charge. The next

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ten cost an additional \$8. Abstracts cost \$2 each. Some databases have a surcharge but EasyNet does not charge if no documents are retrieved. I did one author search on the *Sci-Search* database that retrieved 12 citations. To see the first ten cost \$8 plus a \$5 surcharge and approximately \$1 connect time. I requested three abstracts at \$2 each. To see the next two citations (one of which turned out to be a duplicate record) cost another \$8 plus \$5 plus about 40¢ connect time. This simple search cost over \$33. Another more complex search on *Management Contents* cost only a little over \$8 because I was satisfied with ten records and there was no surcharge.

Library options

Some public libraries have chosen the credit card option as an easy way to offer adult end users access to database searching without the library having the hassles of passwords or record keeping.

A better option for most libraries is to subscribe to one of EasyNet's special options. For public or academic libraries, the Public Access Database System is an attractive option. For an annual subscription fee of \$550 the library gets \$100 in introductory searches, ten passwords, charge-back billing, plus a variety of user aids. A nice feature is the ability to create customized welcome screens. Searches that retrieve references are billed at \$5 each plus 20¢ per minute with prepayment discounts available of up to ten percent.

Special libraries may want to become full commercial subscribers. For \$600 per year EasyNet supplies

ten passwords, charge-back billing, \$150 worth of initial searches, the ability to create customized screens, user aids, and a 20 percent discount if the subscriber dials EasyNet via his or her own long distance service. Prepayment discounts of 5-18 percent are available to full commercial subscribers.

An especially attractive feature for large special libraries is the ability to customize the system to integrate EasyNet with an organization's in-house databases or electronic mail system. Small special libraries might choose the \$100 per year single-password subscription with fewer special features.

School libraries may select a special Secondary Schools subscription program. Seventy databases have been selected that will be of most interest in secondary schools. A special version of the "reference interview" menus that lead to the database choice is geared to the secondary student.

In this subscription option, one search is defined as five citations plus one abstract or full-text article or two no-hit searches. Passwords work for a single search only, with a cost for each of \$3.50. The annual subscription rate is \$250 plus the single-session passwords purchased in blocks of 100.

Alanet

Librarians might choose to access EasyNet another way. As of this fall, ALA has joined forces with EasyNet's parent company, Telebase Systems, to offer EasyNet access through Alanet. The new service, Alanet Plus, allows Alanet users to

connect to EasyNet and to a selection of ALA databases and newsletters with no additional subscription or password required.

Like the regular EasyNet service, Alanet Plus has two levels of service: 1) where a series of menus leads the system to select the database to be accessed, or 2) where the user directly selects the database.

The arrangement with ALA is not the first such special access arrangement made by Telebase Systems. Access to EasyNet is also available through CompuServe as IQuest, through Western Union's Easylink service as InfoMaster, and through iNet in Canada.

Evaluation

EasyNet isn't perfect. Costs can mount up if you are not careful and the system does not automatically help if no hits are retrieved. The system does try to overcome these problems by warning about surcharges, abstract costs, etc., and by offering instantaneous SOS help.

EasyNet is attractive for end user searching in the library. The system is easy to use and many unique library options allow for a customized service. For information professionals EasyNet is one way to search seldom-used online vendors or databases without an up-front commitment of time or money. For more information about EasyNet contact: EasyNet, Telebase Systems Inc., 134 N. Narberth Ave., Narberth, PA 19072; 215-649-2171. For more information about Alanet Plus contact: Joel M. Lee, Alanet, American Library Association, 50 E. Huron St., Chicago, IL 60611; 312-944-6780.

