



9-1-1986

InfoTrac: A Laser Disc System

Carol Tenopir
University of Tennessee - Knoxville

Follow this and additional works at: https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_infosciepubs



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Tenopir, Carol, "InfoTrac: A Laser Disc System" (1986). *School of Information Sciences -- Faculty Publications and Other Works*.
https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_infosciepubs/288

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Information Sciences at Trace: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in School of Information Sciences -- Faculty Publications and Other Works by an authorized administrator of Trace: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange. For more information, please contact trace@utk.edu.

BY CAROL TENOPIR

Infotrac: a Laser Disc System

OF ALL THE databases on laser disc that are now available, only Information Access Company's *InfoTrac*™ has been used long enough in enough libraries to provide data on customer satisfaction and usage. Nearly 300 libraries now use the *InfoTrac* system, 85 percent of which are academic libraries and 15 percent of which are public libraries. Several libraries have monitored usage or surveyed users.

Info on InfoTrac

InfoTrac provides bibliographic records from over 900 business, technical, and general interest magazines and newspapers. One 12-inch laser disc contains records from the current year plus retrospective records for three years. A newly available back-file disc contains retrospective information back to 1980.

Subject headings are based on the Library of Congress Subject Headings; there are no abstracts. The full text of many of the articles is available on microfilm with subscriptions to IAC's *Business Collection* and *Magazine Collection*.

Most subscribers to *InfoTrac* elect to lease a complete turnkey system from IAC, which includes from one to five microcomputer workstations and inkjet printers, a laser-disc player, retrieval software, and the monthly updated database on laser disc. Prices per year vary with the hardware configuration, but a two-workstation system is \$14,000 annually. An optional package comes equipped with modem and software

to allow connection to online databases and downloading to floppy disk.

Users' reactions

The opinions and information reported here are taken from surveys and comments from several libraries: Roesch Library, University

of Dayton; Hamilton Library, University of Hawaii; Salt Lake County Library System; Colorado State University Libraries; University of California, San Diego Library; Indiana University Libraries; and Meriam Library, California State University, Chico.

All of these libraries report overwhelming user acceptance of *InfoTrac*. Typical comments from various sites include: "It's fantastic, great. I love it!"; "Fast, easy to use"; "I think this *InfoTrac* is fantastic. I hope it'll be here permanently"; "It's fast, easy, and prints the citations needed quickly and quietly. It's great!"; "Please keep it! This is the best. In fact, if possible, get more." And my favorite: "YAHOO!"

Waiting lines at *InfoTrac* workstations developed at several libraries, causing some to impose time limits of between 10 to 30 minutes.

Most academic libraries found that the heaviest (and most enthusiastic) use comes from undergraduates who are using it instead of general printed indexes. A wide majority of undergraduate users in all libraries indicated they found useful references on their topics and that they preferred *InfoTrac* over printed indexes.

Graduate students and faculty users are more often critical of the system. Although a majority in all surveys are positive about *InfoTrac*, these research-oriented users are more likely to question the journal coverage in the system, to complain about the lack of retrospective material, and to ask for similar systems with different subject focus. *InfoTrac* is used as a supplemental tool, not as a complete research tool.

Most librarians agree with this perception. Several librarians commented that the journals indexed in *InfoTrac* make it appropriate for general topic searches and business searches, but most of the journals are not research sources.

The University of Hawaii has placed a cautionary note near the *InfoTrac* terminals. It warns users: "ATTENTION: To achieve a comprehensive search for references

please use other appropriate printed subject indexes. Please see the reference librarian for help."

Several librarians indicated they felt uncomfortable with the unquestioning assumption by many students that a computer tool must be comprehensive and of higher quality than a printed index. One librarian commented, "I am torn. Students like *InfoTrac* so much and seem to be pleased with their results. Yet I know what they are *not* getting by relying on this one source."

Still, for most users, what they do get is sufficient. Some librarians commented that *InfoTrac* seems to be bringing users into the library who never used the printed sources anyway. A university library director believes "the public relations value of the system overcomes any shortcomings and is well worth the cost."

Document delivery

Many users asked that call numbers of the journals be displayed in the *InfoTrac* citations or wished it only indexed the journals held by their library. There seems to be some confusion among users over just what is included in the system. Several users in each library obviously confused it with the library card, COM, or online catalog; others couldn't understand why something found on *InfoTrac* couldn't be found in the library. (IAC says that to master a custom disc that would just contain one library's collection and call numbers would be prohibitively expensive. Perhaps this will be a viable option for large library systems in the future or perhaps the *InfoTrac* data can be linked with a library's journal holdings via the online catalog.)

One faculty member in a university library had bigger plans: "This is great. Now if you can only get the journal article to pop up on the screen." Libraries that use *InfoTrac* in conjunction with IAC's microfilm document collections (about 20 percent of all *InfoTrac* subscribers) report enthusiastic response. Many *InfoTrac* citations contain a microfilm collection access number that corre-



Carol Tenopir is Assistant Professor at the Graduate School of Library Studies, University of Hawaii, Manoa

sponds to the full text of the article on the *Business Collection* or *Magazine Collection* film.

Stan Workman of the Salt Lake County Library System comments on the use of the microfilm collections in conjunction with *InfoTrac*:

We are presently operating with a central Periodicals Resource Center at headquarters which is equipped with two *Magazine Indexes*, two *Magazine Collections*, one *Business Index*, one *Business Collection*, and four *InfoTrac* stations. This area is staffed during most of our service hours with clerks who provide service to our branches by receiving requests by telephone from patrons, obtaining articles from these services and sending the article(s) via high-speed telecopiers.

Thus far we have reduced our periodical subscriptions by about 25 titles, eliminating unnecessary duplication with *InfoTrac* and *Magazine Collection* coverage. We are committed to expanding these services to other branches as quickly as budget will allow. Being able to deliver full text on the spot is very gratifying after years of checked out, lost, or mutilated periodicals.

Ease of use

Almost all users, even those who have never used computers before, found *InfoTrac* easy to use. Librarians observed that once *InfoTrac* was "discovered" by someone, they would often bring in their friends and teach them how to use it. One academic librarian commented "I think we have overestimated the need for training on this type of system. Minimal written instructions and peer teaching seem to be working fine."

InfoTrac is simple to use. It uses subject heading access and displays records under a subject heading plus subject headings alphabetically near the chosen heading. No Boolean combinations of terms of free-text searching are allowed. Printing desired citations is done by hitting a print key.

This simplicity of searching imposes some limitations, of course. Because terms cannot be combined, complex searches are not possible. There are many subdivisions of subject headings, necessitating entry at the correct alphabetical spot and paging through screens of references or the thesaurus to find the precise subject desired. Librarians note that this is not always realized by users. Users have been observed reading through long lists of citations under broad

"Searching InfoTrac is basically the same as searching a printed index, but with the convenience of a printer attached Some users and librarians point out that serendipity is easier in a printed index"

subject headings to find those few citations exactly on their topic. (They don't seem to mind, however.)

Searching *InfoTrac* is basically the same as searching a printed index, but with the convenience of a printer attached. (This convenience should not be underestimated. It was mentioned many times by users in all surveys.) Some users and librarians point out that serendipity is easier in a printed index. More cross-references are needed in *InfoTrac*, as is better quality control of spelling and subject formats. (Salomon Brothers Inc. is entered in at least eight different ways.)

Most libraries report that *InfoTrac* installation is relatively easy ("especially if you have a systems office"). Start-up and shut-down each day take from between five and ten minutes, but at least one library has elected to leave the system up 24 hours. Most have found the hardware to be reliable if in-house wiring is reliable. There are the occasional users who remove the *InfoTrac* software from the floppy drives and use the computers for word processing, but no libraries report continual problems.

The one equipment inconvenience mentioned by many users of *InfoTrac* is the Hewlett-Packard Thinkjet printers. Although the printers are quiet, problems with paper jams, dirty print heads, and ink cartridges that frequently have to be replaced are annoying to reference librarians.

Other products

IAC has added other laser disc databases since the success of the *InfoTrac* system. These other systems use the *InfoTrac* software and are

compatible with *InfoTrac* hardware.

A backfile disc of *InfoTrac* takes the citations back to 1980. This first backfile will eventually contain four years of citations, while the current *InfoTrac* system will always include the current and three previous years.

LegalTrac provides indexing to over 700 law journals, newspapers, and other legal publications from 1980 to the present. It is the laser disc equivalent of IAC's *Legal Resources Index* database. *Government Publications Index* (GPI) includes eight years of *GPO Monthly Catalog*. Updates to both *LegalTrac* and *GPI* are monthly. They may be purchased on the same or separate discs. If a library already has *InfoTrac*, *LegalTrac* can be leased for \$3000 a year and *GPI* for \$2000 a year. The full text of the *Wall Street Journal* is also available on laser disc from IAC.

Conclusion

Any shortcomings of the *InfoTrac* system are not apparent or not important to most users. Users are almost universally enthusiastic about their first encounter with a laser disc system. The system makes library research more interesting and tolerable, and the potential for additional systems with broader subject coverage is exciting to users and librarians alike.

Such in-house laser disc databases provide an attractive alternative or supplement to printed indexes. They also provide a way to introduce end user searching of databases, but with a predictable cost.

Further Reading

- Beltran, Ann Bristow. "Use of *InfoTrac* in a University Library." *Database*, June 1986, p. 63-66. (Indiana University Libraries).
- Earnest, Douglas J. & Jennifer Monath. "User Reaction to a Computerized Periodical Index." *College and Research Library News*, May 1986, p. 315-318. (Colorado State University).
- Pease, Barbara & Post, William. "*InfoTrac*: a Review of an Optical Disc-Based Public Index." *Serials Review Winter 1985*. (California State University, Chico).
- Stephens, Kent. "Laserdisc Technology Enters Mainstream: Easy-to-Use Periodical Index Gets Heavy Use at California University." *American Libraries*, April 1986, p. 252. (California State University, Chico).

