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## Library Use of the Source and CompuServe

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# Library Use of "The Source" and "CompuServe"

By Carol Tenopir

I DIDN'T expect many responses when I asked librarians, twice last year, if they were offering access to either the Source or CompuServe. The two consumer information systems are marketed primarily to home computer users. The lack of enthusiasm for the systems in the responses I did get from librarians was a surprise. Some feel their patrons should access these systems without the library. Others consider the type of information available on the Source and CompuServe to be inappropriate to library use. Still others do not have time to think about adding the consumer information online systems to the many services they now offer.

## The Source & CompuServe: services

The Source (1616 Anderson Rd., McLean, VA 22102; (800) 572-2070 or (703) 734-7500) is owned by Reader's Digest Association. CompuServe (500 Arlington Centre Blvd., POB 20212, Columbus, OH 43220; (800) 848-8990; (614) 457-8600), is a subsidiary of H.&R. Block. Howard Falk compares the two systems in his "The Source v. CompuServe" (*Online Review*, June 1984, p. 214-224), and describes nine categories of service both offer:

- communication services (electronic mail, bulletin boards, special interest group user conferences, informal communication via "CB" simulator or "chat" features);
- news and publications (news-wires, newspaper extracts, limited access to some periodicals);
- business and financial features (daily business news, securities and commodity trading information, investment portfolio management, stock and bond trading information, investment information);
- education features (quiz-

zes on academic subjects, an encyclopedia, college planning information);

- online publication and information (online authorship, access to an information broker);

- personal service features (book ordering, shopping, swapshops and trading, job services);

- travel (airline schedules and booking, restaurant guides, travel planning, information on foreign countries);

- remote computing services (word processing, editing, programming, business applications on system computer);

- entertainment, "other services" to Falk (video games, movie reviews, Hollywood gossip, recipes, sports).

Although they offer basically the same types of services, Falk sees differences in emphasis between the two systems. He feels the Source emphasizes personal information for the at-home user, while CompuServe is oriented to professional and business needs. Both, Falk adds, "reach an audience of well-educated and affluent micro/personal computer users," fulfilling their personal consumer and business needs at home. According to Don Picard ("Inside CompuServe," *Link-Up: Communications and the Small Computer*, January 1985, p. 7-11), 60 percent of CompuServe's revenues come from its Business Information Service. Bev Smith ("The Source—Will Its Menu Spell Success?," *Information Today*, June 1984, p. 11-13) says 60 percent of the Source customers use its business offerings, although the communication services are also popular.

The variety of information offered on CompuServe and the Source is almost overwhelming with hundreds of services available through a maze of hierarchical menus. Both find printed subject guides necessary so the user can go directly to specific services.

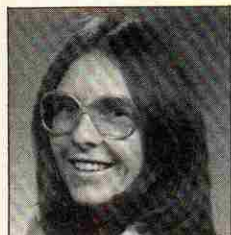
Librarians used to the research-oriented online systems such as DIA-

LOG, BRS, or ORBIT will find the search capabilities of CompuServe and the Source limited and rather primitive. In most instances, the user selects a number for the service desired or reaches it through a series of subject menus. On CompuServe, once the user has reached the text of the *Academic American Encyclopedia*, for example, the articles must be scanned or read as they would in the printed work. The only access is by the title of each article. On BRS or DIALOG the same encyclopedia can be searched word by word or by any combination of words anywhere in the text. Such sophisticated search and retrieval cannot be done on CompuServe's encyclopedia where the means of access is more like the table of contents of a book, while BRS and DIALOG provide the searching power of a very full index.

The Source does offer some elementary search capabilities in a few databases. In the UPI newswire file, searchers can link as many as three terms with the Boolean "AND" or "OR." In most cases, however, the Source, like CompuServe, offers only simple, menu-driven read or scan capabilities.

Although CompuServe is newer than the Source, Picard says it is growing more rapidly with over 150,000 subscribers as of January 1985, up from only 15,000 in January 1982. Revenues neared \$52 million in 1984. The Source, which does not release revenue figures, has 65,000 subscribers.

Both offer inexpensive nonprime time (evening and weekend) rates. CompuServe at \$6 per hour for 300 baud access or \$12.50 for 1200 baud access and the Source at \$7.75 per hour for 300 baud access and \$10.75 for 1200 baud. Daytime costs go up to \$15 per hour 1200 baud access on CompuServe (\$12.50 at 300 baud) and \$25.75 per hour 1200 baud access on the Source (\$20.75 at 300 baud). Surcharges are



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added for some databases. Both charge a start-up fee (\$39.95 for CompuServe, \$49.95 for the Source).

Both can be accessed with the same dumb terminal or microcomputer and 300 or 1200 baud modem that is used for research services such as DIALOG, BRS, or ORBIT and they utilize the same online technologies.

CompuServe and the Source are often called "information utilities" or "videotex" services, but I call them "consumer information systems." "Utility" implies essential services and government regulation. "Videotex" usually means a static, page-oriented, non-ASCII service such as the British "Prestel." Neither term describes CompuServe and the Source, which are distinct from the research-based or "encyclopedic" online services in the type of information they provide, their customers, and their less sophisticated search software.

### Library use

Although CompuServe and the Source are marketed primarily to home computer owners, I thought more libraries would offer them, since a growing number provide end-user access to DIALOG's Knowledge Index and BRS/After Dark, newer research information services for end-users. I found the opposite trend. Some libraries that once offered the Source or CompuServe have suspended the service.

The Library at Wheaton, a small Christian college in Illinois, is a case in point (see Phillips, Roger, "A Public Access Videotex Library Service," *Online*, September 1982, p. 34-39). The Wheaton librarians had hoped the Source would "ease apprehensive librarians into more complex information retrieval systems such as DIALOG" and provide a "bridge" for library clients to the bibliographic retrieval services. They also wanted to enhance the image of the library as a place to find any type of information service. The UPI national and international news was a prime attraction.

While they charged for intermediary-run DIALOG searches, Wheaton decided to absorb the lower costs of the Source at first. They became one of the heaviest Source users. Jonathan Lauer, former Head of Public Services at Wheaton, tells what happened: "It was with considerable dismay . . . given our expectations, that we observed large numbers of students logging-on to games—online football and Adventure and other time and money wasters . . . There were times when the library and Source became a mere extension of the College game room. Further, as we later discovered, no number of 'No Games' signs can conquer the insatiable desire to play them when they are available free. And the role of the li-

brarian as policeman is one we reject out of hand . . .

"National and international news was not what our students wanted. Hometown football scores were much more interesting . . . I question whether it is the role of the academic library to underwrite online access to high school sports scores . . .

"As the semester progressed . . . our director had some alarming news. We were spending three to four times what we had budgeted for Source. Student response to the new service had been greater than anticipated. That was good. But the use being made of the system was far more trivial than we had hoped . . .

"We decided to put a money box next to the terminal and recover our costs. Users were asked to pay for their time at the rate of 10 cents a minute. A funny thing happened. When the service became a cost recovery operation, use plummeted to ground zero. Mighty Wheaton College, one of Source's 50 steadiest customers, dropped out of the running entirely. What our students seemed to be telling us was that when it came from their pockets, 10 cents a minute was too much to pay for games and hometown football scores! This reaction took us all by surprise."

Wheaton suspended student access to the Source. While the students were "more than willing" to pay for DIALOG searches they would not pay for Source consumer information.

Lauer feels that because "the Source and similar systems have been developed for the home computer market . . . their place in and adaptability to the academic library remains . . . questionable." (He is now at Aurora University, 347 S. Gladstone Avenue, Aurora, IL 60507.)

Dan Bowell, Head of Public Services at Wheaton, says he has been thinking of exploring the Source again and reexamining its potential value for a small college library. For the last six months, their main source of intermediary searching has shifted from DIALOG to BRS/After Dark because of its bargain rates. Staff intermediaries and two student assistants perform the After Dark searches. Students are charged on a cost-recovery basis.

While a public library might not have the same criteria for the appropriateness of consumer information, Ken Dowlin, Director of Pikes Peak Library District in Colorado Springs, points out another negative consideration from their experience: "the Source requires users to be very familiar with the system, in which case they usually have their own contract. The occasional users do not have much use for it. For all practical purposes, we are no longer promoting this to our users."

The maze of menus and services

does not seem to lend itself to casual, occasional users who do not have a specific information need. The most faithful users of CompuServe and the Source spend many hours at home interacting with the systems or use a few specific services regularly.

More libraries maintain accounts with the Source or CompuServe for internal use than for public access. Responses to me suggest that the electronic mail services are, by far, the most popular in libraries. Frequently accounts are maintained to send messages between libraries or between information brokers and library clients.

B.C. Stryck of the Amoco Research Center, Standard Oil Company (Indiana) wrote: "occasionally we use the UPI files on the Source, and we use the bulletin board features once in a while also. Almost all of our usage, however, is with the electronic mail system." They record all online orders on disk transmitted via the Source to their information broker and upload the orders to the order file maintained on the company mainframe computer.

While electronic document ordering via electronic mail can save time and money and could justify the use of such systems in libraries, electronic mail is available from many other sources that have lower costs per transaction and do not charge a start-up fee.

Is there a library place for CompuServe and the Source beyond electronic mail? The low cost of such research end-user systems as BRS/After Dark may be making the Source or CompuServe unnecessary to academic libraries. BRS/After Dark and Knowledge Index provide types of information that may be more appropriate, more in demand, and at reasonable per hour costs.

CompuServe and the Source provide some valuable information services not available on research systems. Airline booking, hotel information, stock quotes, and up-to-date information on the computer industry may interest users of any library. If CompuServe or the Source offered a password feature allowing subscribers to lock out trivial, unwanted services, and those that carry extra premium charges, more libraries might consider offering and subsidizing public use of the systems. Some libraries might target their online marketing efforts to specific services to attract specific users. The Source and CompuServe are easy to use if a user has a specific information service in mind and clear instructions on how to gain access to it.

As more libraries provide public access to online search equipment and users become more aware of libraries as a place for self-service online access to information, more libraries will re-examine the information offerings of these consumer information systems.

