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Online Searching in the Popular Literature

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By Carol Tenopir

POPULAR magazines have discovered online databases in the last two years. Many are publishing articles aimed at home computer users to introduce them to online database searching. Others target specific professional groups to describe the benefits of database access on personal computers for their professional development. Libraries report an increasing number of inquiries from patrons who have seen advertisements or articles about databases. The inquiries range from confusion about what databases can do to inquiries asking which is the "best" online system.

Unfortunately, the readability, accuracy, and overall quality of articles in the popular press vary tremendously. Of the dozens I have read, only a handful are accurate and clear.

Diodato's article in the May 1984 *Online* (p. 24-30) provides an extensive bibliography of popular magazine articles about databases from 1980 through 1983. He includes articles that discuss all types of database systems including CompuServe or the Source, Dow Jones News/Retrieval, DIALOG, BRS, and Orbit. Forty of the 55 articles concern the Source or CompuServe.

Replacements for libraries

Although Diodato does not individually review each of the articles, he offers an interesting analysis of the articles as a group. Especially disturbing in most of the articles Diodato examined is their failure to mention the role of libraries or search intermediaries. Most articles fail to mention libraries at all; those that do mention them often tout databases as replacements for libraries.

Popular articles also tend to exaggerate the benfits of online database searching without providing any comparison of systems, search strategy development, or search techniques for difficult searches. Many articles never define databases (or do so inaccurately referring, for example, to DIALOG as a database.) Many never make it clear that bibliographic databases only supply references or abstracts to articles. Most do not include sample searches.

Intermediaries can provide a valuable service by recommending the popular articles that best convey accurate information. I reread many articles, judging them by the Diodato's criteria. Then I compiled a list of the best articles that discuss research systems such as DIALOG or BRS, excluding those that discuss only consumer services such as CompuServe or the Source.

Overview articles

General articles that clearly explain online searching, online systems, and databases are the hardest to find. The overview article, more than any other type, exaggerates, makes factual errors, and provides a limited amount of information.

One well-written overview article for the home searcher is "Online: a Smorgasbord of Services" by Steven K. Roberts in the November 1983 issue of *Today* (p. 24-29, 48). Roberts does a good job of defining databases by separating them into three categories: full text, bibliographic, and "just the facts." For each category, he gives sample databases, the online vendors that make the databases available, and search strategy hints. Potential problems are mentioned throughout this balanced and realistic article.

Unlike many overviewers, Roberts emphasizes that "there is more to using on-line services than buying a terminal and signing a contract with a vendor." He mentions the inconsistencies among databases and the problems of keeping up with many different databases. The company librarian and other intermediaries are mentioned as viable alternatives to doing it yourself (but to Roberts the "competence" that allows an intermediary to really "draw you out" is "rare" and "expensive").

"Online: a Smorgasbord of Services" is the second of two *Today* articles by Roberts. The first, "On-Line Information Retrieval: a New Business Tool," in the October 1983 issue (p. 14-20, 48), targets a business audience. In it, Roberts defines online systems, discusses the advantages of searching, and tackles such issues as pricing. It is unusual to find a popular magazine article that discusses the fee vs. free issue in libraries. Roberts even quotes the 1977 ALA policy on fees.

"On-Line Information Retrieval" discusses other issues as well, including gateway software, full text databases, the growth of data communications networks, and copyright. After the initial focus on business, this article assumes a more general tone. It is recommended for potential end users, although I prefer the second *Today* article for its more specific information and straightforward style.

Unfortunately, *Today*, a magazine for CompuServe users, may not be widely available in libraries although it has a wider appeal. In 1984, the title became *Online Today*, and it is priced at $30 a year from CompuServe Inc., 5000 Arlington Centre Blvd., P.O. Box 20212, Columbus, OH 43220. As an alternative, there is an acceptable article by Roberts in the December 1981 issue of *Byte* ("Online Information Retrieval: Promise and Problems," p. 452-61).

Specific systems

It is easier to find well-written popular articles that focus on a specific search system—*if* the system you are interested in is DIALOG. Besides the consumer information systems such as CompuServe, popular articles mostly focus on DIALOG, occasionally mentioning BRS and, even less often, Orbit.

One excellent one is Jeremy Joan Hewes' "DIALOG: The Ultimate On-Line Library" in the September 1983 issue of *PC World* (p. 74-88). Hewes includes almost everything I look for in a popular article. In addition to a short history of DIALOG, there are accurate definitions of online systems and databases, price information, discussions of

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search strategy, and hints for better searching. Public libraries are mentioned as search service providers, as are information brokers. Several sample searches are shown and annotated. Unlike most articles, this one explains Boolean logic using Venn diagrams.

Hewes manages to instill excitement about online searching, while cautioning that the DIALOG training, study of the manuals, and searching experience are necessary to become a good searcher. I like Hewes' tips for better searching, especially her first and second: "learn to think like a librarian" and "plan your search strategy in advance."

Knowledge Index is mentioned as a low-cost alternative to the full DIALOG system. BRS and BRS/After Dark are discussed only as DIALOG's competition. The short portion on BRS is not as well-researched as the rest and seems to be an afterthought.

In addition to the Hewes article, Stan Miastkowski's "Information Unlimited: The DIALOG Information Retrieval Service" in the June 1981 issue of *Byte* (p. 88-108) provides a good introduction to DIALOG. Miastkowski includes definitions of systems and databases, plus a short history of DIALOG, followed by a discussion of search strategy development, price information, and a tutorial of DIALOG commands. Librarians are mentioned as the primary users of DIALOG (but their potential role in helping users with difficult searches is not).

The Miastkowski article was written before Knowledge Index began and it does not discuss BRS or Orbit. DIALOG is differentiated from consumer information systems, however, and its primary purpose of "finding references to information" is emphasized. The strongest feature of Miastkowski is the clearly labeled sample searches. All DIALOG commands are labeled in the context of a search, including Expand and Search/Save. Another nice feature is extended information on selected databases.

The Hewes and Miastkowski articles stand out as two of the best articles on DIALOG searching and on reference systems as a whole in the popular press. A more recent article, "Researching On Line With DIALOG," in the August 1984 issue of *Business Software* (p. 60-64) is tempting because it is so recent. It provides a tutorial on DIALOG commands, defines databases and systems, gives information on costs, shows a sample search, and discusses search strategy. It contains some errors, however, including the claim that DIALOG has 340 separate databases and an incorrect use of internal truncation. The article makes no mention of bibliographic databases, librarians or search intermediaries, or of Knowledge Index. The Hewes and Miastkowski articles, although older, are more accurate, better written, and more complete.

Target audiences

Many of the best articles on online searching are aimed at a specific end user target audience rather than at the general user. There are too many articles in too many specialty magazines to review in detail, but several have a wide appeal.

The target group for articles on online searches in business is a large one. In addition to the articles by Stephen Roberts in *Today* mentioned above, Howard Karten's two-part overview in *Management Technology* "Getting Smart: Public Databases" (August 1983, p. 49-53) and "Getting Smart: Public Databases II" (September 1983, p. 34-39) is a good introduction for the business community. Karten defines online systems and databases, differentiates between bibliographic, full text, and directory databases, and talks about problems with search strategy development. These two articles emphasize business databases on DIALOG and the Dow Jones News/Retrieval Service, but other databases and systems are mentioned.

The corporate library is recommended as a source for online searches. Karten describes his failures as well as his successes with searching (but probably could have had more successes if he had taken his own advice and asked the corporate librarian for help).

More good online searching articles are written for medical professionals than for any other group. Two new journals about computers and medicine have included overview articles. Articles written by librarians such as "Your Computer Puts the Literature At Your Fingertips" by Gretchen V. Naisawald, in the 1983 "Premiere Issue" of *MEDCOMP* (p. 34-39) and "The Library Connection—Information Retrieval" by Priscilla Mayden and Carol Tenopir in the July/August 1984 issue of *Update: Computers in Medicine* (p. 24-37) introduce health science professionals to online searching on their home computers. Naisawald points out that home computer systems such as BRS/After Dark and Knowledge Index are relatively easy to use but do not include all of the databases available on the full systems. She defines databases and systems, gives sample search strategies, and provides general information on several vendors. An especially nice feature is a chart that shows which systems include medical databases.

Dwight R. Tousignaut's "Online Literature Retrieval Systems: How To Get Started" in the February 1983 *American Journal of Hospital Pharmacy* (p. 230-239) is a good explanation of how to begin online searching with clearly labeled sample searches.

Good books aimed at the end user are even harder to find than good articles. The online searching textbooks used by search intermediaries may be the best sources for all readers although they are aimed at intermediaries.

The *OMNI Directory*

Although it is not perfect, the *Omni Online Database Directory* by Mike Edelhart and Owen Davies (Collier Bks, 1983) is a good source for home computer users. It includes short chapters on "What Is a Database?," "Equipment for Life Online," "Choosing an Online Service," "Database Software," "How To Use a Database," and "The Costs of Operating a Database." Each chapter is easy to read and conveys basic information for beginning home searchers. Especially welcome are the guidelines for comparing and choosing an online service. Such comparisons are rarely found in end user articles.

Most of this book is a database and system directory. Databases are listed alphabetically within subject categories. Given for each is: a description of database contents, anecdotal user's comments, the online service(s) providing access, and the database supplier. Selected systems are listed at the end of the directory with lengthy sections on the Source and CompuServe.

Librarians should be forewarned about the rather simplistic first page explanation of online systems and databases in the *Omni Directory*. Online systems are described as a library that "comes equipped with an untiring librarian who will make your searches for you—at incredible speeds—and will report the finding in any form you need." The explanations do get better in the rest of the book and, on the whole, the *Omni Directory* is a good source for end users.

The library role

Among the many articles in the popular literature there are several that provide accurate and interesting descriptions of online searching for the home computer user. Any library can begin to take a role in end user searching by recommending them. The next easy step is providing the latest information on databases and systems and distributing information on the hardware and software requirements for going online (DIALOG, BRS, Orbit, and NLM all provide fact sheets for searching with a microcomputer). Assisting new users with search strategy development, problem searching, and even online training logically follows.