

ONLINE DATABASES

BY CAROL TENOPIR

The Database Press

THE PROLIFERATION of books, journals, and AV materials about database searching comes as no surprise to librarians. Although lots of companies publish some items on the topic, two specialized publishing firms concentrate their efforts most on serials publications about database searching and actively promote the interests of professional searchers.

Online Inc. in Connecticut and Learned Information of New Jersey and Oxford, England each produce notable journals and other valuable materials for database searchers. A third firm, Meckler Corporation, has recently entered the database searching area with several noteworthy titles. Complete product lists and catalogs can, of course, be requested from the publishers themselves.

Online Inc.

Online Inc. was founded by Jeff and Jenny Pemberton in the mid-1970s and is still a family-run business. (Their son Adam is now also a part of the organization.) Jeff Pemberton was an active member of the information community with the *New York Times* InfoBank before starting his publication venture. Online Inc.'s original magazine was *Online*, which is still the most popular and consistently readable magazine for professional searchers.

Online includes a variety of high-quality articles on all aspects of database searching, mostly written by practitioners and of consistently high quality. News pages, regular columns, editorials, and book reviews round out each issue. Two spin-offs, *Database* and the new *Laserdisk Professional* (reviewed in "What's Hap-

pening with CD-ROM, Part 1," *LJ*, February 1, p. 50-51), reflect the growth in the database field as well as the popularity of the Pembertons' publications.

Online Inc. also sponsors an annual conference for database searchers, usually held in October or November, that combines contributed papers from "in the field" searchers with invited speeches from recognized experts and exhibits. Usually around 2000 people attend, a majority from corporate and academic libraries. Proceedings and audiotapes are available.

The tone of the Online conferences and all of the Online Inc. publications tends to be practical and firmly grounded in reality. Searching tips and techniques are shared with other searchers; software packages and databases that are available on the market are reviewed; and trends that affect working searchers are examined. Professional searchers and in-house database builders are the audience for Online Inc., and the focus is on how they can do their jobs better today.

Online Inc. has a few other products, including the occasional publication of printed directories and other books. A recent venture is the Best of Online and Database Series—a set of compilation volumes reprinting "the most practical articles and columns in both journals from 1985 through early 1988." They produce the file SOFT database available on BRS, which is a microcomputer software directory.

One of my favorite other publications from Online Inc. is the *Online International Command Chart*. It is published every two years or so; the 1988 edition is in two volumes and has commands and search features for 31 U.S., Canadian, and European online, end user, and CD-ROM systems. Each system is listed across the top of a flip-chart-like volume, with a description of system functions down the side.

In the chart, each system's commands to do each function are given (e.g., for the function "exit the sys-

tem," the chart shows you "Logoff" for DIALOG, "Stop Y" for ORBIT, ". . . off" for BRS, etc.). Searchers can prop the chart up by its sturdy cardboard covers next to their computer and search several different online systems without worrying about trying to remember all of the appropriate command languages. The command chart is a kind of front-end translator in book form! (When is all of this going to be possible automatically in a truly good and comprehensive front-end software system?)

Learned Information

Learned Information, Inc. is a publicly held corporation that was established in 1979 as the U.S. "sister" of Learned Information, Ltd. in Oxford, England. The U.S. company publishes some of its own things, plus distributes the publications originating in England. Thomas H. Hogan is the president of the American "sister." Database searchers in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere in the world read both the U.S.- and British-based publications of Learned Information, so it makes sense to talk about their publications together.

Online Review is Learned Information's bimonthly journal aimed at the professional database searcher. It includes news about databases worldwide, software reviews of packages of interest to information professionals, plus articles written by searchers around the world. The tone and style of the articles vary more than those in *Online*, because the focus of *Online Review* is often on research results rather than how-to-do-it searching. This means the articles are often more scholarly (and sometimes less readable) than most of the articles in *Online*, but perhaps sometimes of more lasting value. In addition to the articles and news, in the last few years *Online Review* has placed increasing emphasis on software reviews. Many of these reviews are also published in Learned Information, Ltd.'s *The Electronic Library*, another bimonthly publication.



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Like Online Inc., Learned Information, Inc. sponsors an annual conference for database searchers. The National Online Meeting began in 1980 and has been held ever since in New York in April or May. Contributed papers, invited speeches by experts, and exhibits attract the attention each year of more than 2000 information professionals. The focus is mixed between practical state-of-the-searching-art presentations and reports of ongoing research that will influence searching and searchers in the future.

Many of the research presentations are similar to those given at the annual meetings of the American Society for Information Science. This is not surprising since the two National Online Meeting conference organizers (Martha E. Williams and Thomas H. Hogan) are recent past-presidents of ASIS. Learned Information, Ltd. in Oxford sponsors a similar (but larger) annual "International Online Information Meeting" in London each December. Proceedings for the current and past national and international online meetings are available.

Learned Information, Inc. publishes one of my favorite sources for news about the database industry. *Information Today* is a monthly newspaper filled with short articles about the latest happenings in the industry, introductions to new databases, and interviews with important people in the information industry. It is a great, inexpensive source for keeping current or for finding out the latest gossip. It is best to be read then thrown away because its poor-quality newsprint and tabloid size are not meant for archiving. A companion newspaper called *Link-up* is targeted to database end users.

Learned Information has entered the indexing/abstracting/database publishing arena with its recent acquisition of *Microcomputer Index*. *Microcomputer Index* abstracts approximately 70 of the "most important" journals, magazines, and trade publications in the microcomputer field. It is available online on DIA-LOG (file 233) and is updated monthly. The print version is published quarterly.

Learned Information publishes or distributes many different books, proceedings, directories, and videos. Its international focus reminds all of us how much database searchers around the world have in common.

Meckler Corporation

Although Meckler Publishing was organized in 1971 by Alan Meckler, this small publishing firm didn't begin publishing things of interest to database searchers until the 1980s and only entered the topic of online databases in the last few years. Unlike Online Inc. and Learned Information, Meckler still publishes more materials on subjects other than databases than they do about databases. I include Meckler here because several of their recent publications about online, in-house, or CD-ROM databases have attracted notice from searchers.

Database Searcher, a monthly news magazine-cum-journal about the online database industry, is the Meckler publication of most direct relevance to online searching. It began in 1986 under the title *Database End-User*, but was changed to the present title because the intended audience of experienced searchers found the old title confusing.

Each slim issue of *Database Searcher* includes news about the database industry, announcements of new databases, and several short articles or product reviews by invited authors. A nice feature at the end of each month's issue is contact information for all companies mentioned anywhere in the issue.

Its layout is uninspiring and the articles often lack polish, but what makes *Database Searcher* special is its editor. Barbara Quint, a well-known and outspoken "searcher's searcher" sets the tone and style throughout her magazine. She is not afraid to criticize (or praise) the online industry as a one-woman advocate for online searchers. Her editorials in the front of each issue are always candid and entertaining, plus the phrase "[editorial comment]" or the initials "b.q." can be found sprinkled throughout the news items and other information. Quint sees herself as the online industry watchdog, and Meckler describes the result as "a proactive, consumer advocate medium."

Meckler also has some recent books of interest to online searchers. A 1987 book, *Microcomputers for the Online Searcher* by Ralph Alberico, is a practical handbook covering everything searchers need to know about their microcomputer as an online searching machine. It is a nice addition to Meckler's many microcomputing publications.

For librarians who are creating in-house databases or using microcomputers for any purpose, the magazine *Small Computers in Libraries*, the annual Small Computers in Libraries Conference, the magazine *Library Software Review*, and books like the annual *Micro Software Evaluations* are all of interest. Meckler's magazine *CD-ROM Librarian* and the directory *CD-ROMs in Print* (LJ, February 1, p. 50-51) are good sources for information about CD-ROM databases.

Selected List of Publications

Online Inc.
11 Tannery Lane
Weston, CT 06883

- Online*. 1977. 6/yr. \$85 (discounts for individuals or small libraries).
Database. 6/yr. \$85 (discounts for individuals or small libraries).
The Laserdisk Professional. 1988. 6/yr. \$78. Pemberton Pr.
The Online International Command Chart. 2 vols. \$88.
The Best of Online and Database Series.
#1: *Library Microcomputing*. 2 vols. \$25; #2: *Business and Finance/Current Affairs*. 2 vols. \$25; #3: *Science and Technology*. \$15; #4: *Life Sciences*. \$15; #5: *Search Strategy and Tips*. \$15; #6: *End Users and Public Access*. \$15.
Proceedings of the Online Annual Meetings. annual.

Learned Information, Inc.
143 Old Marlton Pike
Medford, N.J. 08055

- Online Review*. 1977. 6/yr. \$85.
Information Today. 11/yr. \$27.50.
Link-Up. 6/yr. \$24.
Optical Publishing Directory. 3d ed. 1988. Richard A. Bowers, ed. annual with separate updates for sale. \$45.
Proceedings of the National Online Meeting Conferences. annual; most years are \$50 ea.
Proceedings of the International Online Information Conferences. annual; most years are \$70 ea.

Meckler Corporation
11 Ferry Lane West
Westport, CT 06880

- Database Searcher*. 1986. 11/yr. \$59.90.
CD-ROM Librarian. 1986. 10/yr. \$65.
CD-ROMs in Print. 2d ed. 1988-1989. \$37.50
Microcomputers for the Online Searcher by Ralph Alberico. 1987. \$24.95.

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