ACCESSING DIALOG USING YOUR OWN MICRO OR USING PUBLIC ACCESS SERVICES

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It's been only about ten years since online database searching has become a part of reference work in most libraries. Reference librarians have studied extensively to perform the intermediary role between the person who needs information and the vendor who produces the databases. Experience using indexes, accessing library resources, negotiating reference questions, operating computers and coping with the intricacies of databases contribute to the skillfulness of the online searcher. These skills must be maintained through regular practice, continued training in database contents and search techniques, and keeping up to date with developments in the field.

As microcomputers proliferate and individuals learn to do their own searching, librarians will be particularly needed as knowledgeable consultants. For complex and comprehensive searches the best, most cost-effective results will be obtained through the combined efforts of the skilled and experienced librarian and the subject knowledge of the scientist, engineer or business person.

The need for information in a field covering such a broad scope as marine sciences and services can best be served by utilizing a variety of databases to extend the resources of the library, to find a specific bit of data not easily secured from a printed source and to provide a timely individualized service.

Online searching has become an integral part of reference service in all large libraries and in most small specialized libraries as well. Like using copy machines it is difficult to remember how we handled in-depth information retrieval before we could feed our keywords into a terminal and print out a biblio-
graphy for a library patron on their specific subject of interest. Certainly there are marine science librarians who when asked for particular information know the exact bit of data in a journal article or report precisely pertinent to the topic. Possibly in most cases time can be taken to search out a bibliography using a printed index or key paper on the subject. However, even the most diligent librarian cannot come up with the comprehensiveness or the most up-to-date information that is possible to retrieve quickly online. On the other hand, there are still some subjects, often historical or general, for which a database search is not appropriate or would not retrieve a manageable or comprehensive amount of information. These still need an individual's time with printed resources.

In a large general university or research library there isn't time to give extensive personal help to a patron. Usually it's "Try this index, or this handbook," and we take up the next question. With online searching we can offer individualized service - a one-to-one consultation with the researcher, engineer, businessman or student writing a term paper.

In order to manage this additional reference service, we have gone to workshops, training sessions, update sessions, online users programs and now we not only feel pretty comfortable sitting in front of a computer terminal, but also probably know much more about the indexes we have used in paper form for many more years. We've purchased vendor manuals by the shelf-full, thesauri, database manuals, outlines of concept codes and journal lists. We are gratified when the person we are helping says "Wow! That's just what I wanted!" and we deplore the fact that there are so many people who could utilize our help and/or
a database search and don't know about them or can't afford it. It's true that for the first time for many of us, we are charging a fee for service, an alarming trend for many librarians.

At the University of Rhode Island almost exactly ten years ago, two of our reference librarians received their first training in this bewilderingly complex business of computers and information retrieval. One of them, Carol Winn, later moved on to become a marine science librarian managing another information retrieval operation here at Woods Hole. Who would have dreamed ten years ago that we would by this time have some 200 databases to choose from, half a dozen online vendors marketing them and microcomputers everywhere we look with the potential of going online. In those ten years not only do we have more databases to choose from, but the original group we learned on is still there, multiplied in size, with more search languages and more choices - bibliographic files, encyclopedia files, full text files, data files and directory files. Access points have increased and if all this is not enough, we can choose to scan the databases, save a search, sort and print or type in a variety of formats, and if we stop to think about the procedure it's costing us money. At the same time we certainly have friendlier systems, more reliable computers and terminals (usually), faster speeds, better manuals and more people to consult when help is needed. Even our own patrons can give us advice about techniques after searching at home.

The variety and depth of database files offered by online vendors have given us access to resources that restrictive budgets have kept out of reach for us in print form. Find-
ing a list of articles is no longer a problem even though tracking down the documents is something else. Even here computers have opened the door to more efficient interlibrary loans or the purchase of documents difficult to find and borrow.

Now, for those who are not searchers, why would you do an online search and what questions can be answered? First, an online search will cost you money, but it will save you time. It may provide a source of information that could not be found any other way and it is usually more up-to-date. Second, examples of some specific questions that we've grappled with are:

-- What measures have been used to control vandalism in marinas?
-- What work has been done on composite fish products using crab or lobster?
-- Are there any recent publications on artificial reefs?
-- What is the market potential for squid and what can I find out about processing and handling it?
-- Can you produce a mailing list of companies on the west coast that are ship repair yards?
-- Has a patent been issued on a process for better flavor retention in frozen fish?

Where can an individual a search done? Many public libraries, academic libraries at state institutions and some state libraries offer online searching to the public. Even the smallest public library can usually channel a search request to an associated facility.

What does it cost? Sometimes searches are free. This may be true at a small college with limited resources where students with appropriate topics can receive a limited list of references or at a state library where sear-
ches may be offered to citizens of the state to help compensate for the lack of library services in a sparsely populated area. The Maine State Library, for instance, calls their service Talimaine and it is available directly or through a public library. In other cases, there may be a surcharge to help pay the cost of the librarian's time, the terminal and telephone fees, and this is added to the online charge. An example is the Providence Public Library where the surcharge is about $10. There are many variations of the way fees are calculated from a flat rate to a complicated scale of charges.

At the University of Rhode Island we have continued the system first worked out by NASIC (Northeast Academic Science Information Center), a federally funded project which sponsored and supported the introduction of online searching into New England in the mid-1970's. We have calculated a charge per minute of computer connect time for each database that would cover the fee of the most expensive vendor with which we have a contract. This is then the rate regardless of the source of the database. Royalty fees for typing or printing citations are added to the minute charge. We are subsidizing one-third of the connect time for the campus community and charging one and one-half that amount for most others. This nominal charge has resulted in searches that average $24 for our academic users with a range from $2 to several hundred dollars per search.

At the University of Rhode Island Library our search service is called URICA for URI Computer Access and our terminals are situated in a small room with partial walls within sight of the reference desk. All of the reference librarians have had extensive training.
in online retrieval and each is responsible for searches in their area of subject expertise. Appointments are made for searches and at that time the requester sits down with us, we review the topic with them, organize the search strategy, select the databases and do the search. As we have gotten more experience and more searches we neither have the time nor the need to spend on extensive preparation. We are learning that a complex or comprehensive search may best be done in several sessions with the patron reviewing the first results before proceeding further.

Support by the library administration allows us discretion in doing a quick search to answer a reference question, verify interlibrary loans and give demonstrations for classes. Most senior level and graduate classes coming into the library for instruction on library resources are given an online demonstration along with directions for using the corresponding paper index. We feel that students should know about our search service and this in turn will make them aware of information systems available to them at home and on their future jobs.

Now, should we expect that there will be an overall change in the online searching by librarians resulting from the multitude of microcomputers that are appearing around us and the promotion of friendly systems and lower rates during off-peak hours? Will individuals do their literature searching at home, on the lab bench or their desks at work? A recent ad for a "black jack," a computer connection that can be screwed into the telephone handset to replace the mouthpiece, made me imagine someone on the highway stopping at a pay phone to dial up a database with a question. I think that changes will take place, but only gradually. One different aspect may be that we must
serve as consultants to those searching with micros. I recently happened to meet an individual from a nearby company who had frequently come in for a search on microchip technology. He explained that the company had gotten a Dialog contract and a micro, and two people were searching. The trouble was that they had spent a lot of money and still did not know what they were doing. He had suggested that they come to the library for help and advice. With our investment in manuals, paper indexes and experience we can certainly contribute assistance to this group of searchers.

Some individuals who use their computers all the time for a variety of functions will be delighted to find that they can retrieve information on most any topic and they will not care if it is comprehensive or totally pertinent. A few others have never felt satisfied with a librarian between them and the information they want. The most successful amateur searchers, however, will be that small group of faithful library users who come to the library to read journals, peruse the printed indexes and who are familiar with the primary literature of their field. For this group a micro will offer a logical extension of their use of printed material.

Librarians also have micros available to them, and decisions must be made about the best use of them. Do we want some interface software which will simplify or standardize search languages and reduce the connect time for transmission of a complex search? Will this increase the efficiency or will it slow down an experienced searcher and hinder the interactive capabilities? Do we want to download search results on a disc? This service may be requested by those researchers who
maintain files of literature in their area of specialization and wish to receive library output in electronic form.

A few public libraries are making micros available for anyone to use, and are contracting with a vendor to allow patrons to do their own searching at reduced evening rates. This has had some success, but early reports indicate that security of passwords, an adequate charging system, and some way to keep an individual from monopolizing the computer are important factors to consider. Better manuals were another concern so librarians would not have to spend so much time helping and answering questions. BRS also reports that their After Dark equivalent to the Knowledge Index is being used as a low-cost supplement to the traditional online services for demonstrations, staff practice and occasional regular searches.

One trend by vendors may be to target certain user groups. A service called "Colleague" by BRS caters to doctors with friendly software to help search the medical literature and even full text medical books. Other vendors offer businessmen, who can use the micro on their desk, financial data or stock quotations or the latest full text articles in the Harvard Business Review. Even farmers can call up various databases for pertinent commodity and market prices; electronic trading of such items as eggs, lambs, cotton or pigs; USDA reports; and information on crops, pesticides and farm management. A micro on a desk, a dock or the bridge next to the chart table should also be able to dial up the nearest communications network for databases with information on fish market prices, the latest underwater equipment, coastal zone regulations or information on steel deterioration on off-shore platforms.

As full text of journals and books become
generally available and this is combined with the next generation of intelligent computers, librarians may indeed be replaced in their role as intermediaries. In the meantime, we may be appreciated more than ever as database consultants and in-depth searchers. We must, however, combine a real knowledge of literature with all the latest computer capabilities in order to continue to provide competent and efficient information retrieval for our library communities.