

On line Lowdown



The following item was written by State Library of Victoria staff member, John Hull.

The State Library of Victoria has been conducting successful online information searches since February 1984. They are undertaken as part of the standard research offered. If an online search is considered to be the most appropriate way to deal with an enquiry, this method is employed. The research service has always been offered free of charge to the public, and this continues to be Library policy. Thus, there is no charge to a user if an online search has been conducted as part of an enquiry.

Of the many on the market, three systems are currently available at the State Library, providing a huge new information source. Ausinet, an Australian system, offers 30 databases and 500,000 records, while Dialog, based in California and the giant of information retrieval, provides access to 100,000,000 records via about 200 databases. A further one hundred databases are available through I.P. Sharp Associates. The areas best covered are science, technology and business. The social sciences are well served, but the humanities less so. There are some gaps in coverage, although the number is shrinking.

Vendors such as Dialog and Ausinet act as distributors for databases produced by other organisations. Usually each database has a particular subject as its focus, ranging from *Adtrack*, an index of advertisements in U.S. magazines and *Nonferrous Metals Abstracts to Religion Index*, now available after being held up because of problems with 'dirty data'. There is a great variation in size. At one end of the Dialog spectrum are *Medline's* 1,500,000 records on every aspect of biomedicine and *Chemical Abstracts* 6,500,000 records, while at the other, are the 14,000 records of *Child Abuse and Neglect* and the 15,000 of *Coffeeline*. The *Directory of Education Research and Researchers in Australia*, offered by Ausinet, contains 700 records.

... cost of searching can range from 75c to \$6 per minute

Some databases are produced by government-funded or assisted bodies, while others are supplied by purely commercial organisations. This is reflected in the cost of searching, which can range from \$0.75 to \$6.00 a minute.

As database development began only in the 1960s, most of the information held is comparatively recent. However, some files have reached back into the past; American dissertations since 1861, Library of Congress cataloguing since 1897 and geological reports from 1919 are all available. Not available to the State Library, but of interest in this respect, are the holdings of the OCLC system. Its time span ranges from 1000 AD to the present.

The most common record found on a database is a reference to a journal article or book. However, there are other types of records. A directory database like *Electronic Yellow Pages* lists the names, addresses and phone numbers of over 10,000,000 U.S. businesses and services. *Energynet* provides the names and interests of 8,000 researchers working on energy-related topics.

Statistics are another type of information available. Population figures and balance of payments data is available for nearly every country since 1960 on *BI/Data Time Series*. The latest census figures on the racial composition of individual American communities can be identified, using *Donnelly Demographics*, while daily prices of Australian bonds are available through I.P. Sharp's *Commonwealth Bank Bond Index*.

... full text available, Playboy to Scientific American

One of the newest developments is that of full-text databases. Instead of a reference to an article, the entire article is stored by the system and may be printed on-line, a very expensive procedure, or ordered and received by post in about a week. This is a developing area and the range of titles available is rather uneven. Should one be so inclined, it would be possible to retrieve complete articles from *Modern Bride*, *Guns & Ammo* or *Playboy* (remember, text only). There are other titles available, such as *Scientific American* and *Datamation*. Newspaper articles and encyclopaedias are also being included in this development.

Even where the text is not available online, copies of complete references from many databases can be ordered via the terminal. Books can also be ordered by this method now. The catalogue of the publisher John Wiley is available for online searching and ordering.

Given that they come from a wide variety of sources the quality of databases varies greatly. *Medline's* records include dozens of indexing terms and often an abstract so detailed that there may be no need to read the original article. The *Australian Business Index* offers a single indexing term only for each set of five references, making precise searching difficult. Updating frequency also varies. Some are

up to six years behind, while *Newsearch* provides yesterday's news, indexed and ready to be searched, today.

In the short period since online searching started at the State Library of Victoria, there has been a significant impact on research services. Around half of all bibliographies produced by the Reference/Research Section now come from online sources. The amount of time required to produce these has dropped by up to 80%. Queries which were difficult or impossible to do in the past have become straightforward with the advent of database searching. One of the best features of such searching is the ability to link several concepts simultaneously. A request for articles on 'the therapeutic use of medicinal plants which had been subjected to double-blind clinical trials' presented no problem. Searching such a query using printed sources would have been a formidable task.

Most reference librarians have been asked for the full details of a book by a user who can supply no more than a few half-remembered fragments from the title. Quite often it is out of the question to search this manually, whereas an online search could reveal the answer in minutes. One problem, if it can be called that, is that a search often provides too much information. Over 2,000 references to a particular computing system in which one user was interested were identified online.

... Sometimes the system seems to crack under pressure ...

No electronic system seems to be without a few gremlins. It is not uncommon to have problems in accessing a database system, especially an overseas-based one like Dialog. The period of unavailability is usually quite short, but often coincides with those occasions when demonstrations have been arranged to impress non-searchers. Sometimes the system seems to crack under pressure and produces a screen full of nonsense. Maybe this proves that machines are human too.

Darwin 1986

Are you planning to attend the LAA Biennial Conference in Darwin next year?

Are you currently estimating your 1985/86 budget? If so don't forget that the Darwin Conference is being held from 30 June-4 July 1986 and you will need to allow for this in next year's budget rather than the 1986/87 budget.

Jenny Adams
Executive Director