

UNDER CURRENTS

by Katie Blake

Some six years ago I began a column in *InCite*, called Baudy Bits. It was a column of online news, as this will be. The information industry is far more complex now than it was then. Use of online systems has become widespread, and there are many more systems available. Microcomputers have become commonplace, and text retrieval languages abound.

This column will deal with the information industry, including new technologies, companies in specific areas, the politics of the industry, and applications of technology. It will range from microcomputers (hardware and software), through online telephone based services, telecommunications, optical technology and all areas of information storage, retrieval and distribution.

One of the most interesting developments has been that of compact discs. These are usually called CD-ROM, which stands for compact disc, read only memory. What are they? Why would you want one? What impact will they have on information storage and retrieval?

Compact discs (almost always spelt with a 'c', to distinguish it from magnetic media like floppy disk) look the same as the audio compact discs which are gradually replacing the LP for music recording. Instead of being for sound however, they are used to store textual information. Information is burnt on to the disc in a series of pits which are read by a laser beam in a CD player. This is why they are called ROM (read only memory) — once the information is burnt on it cannot be overwritten or erased. Although research is being carried out on 'erasable' compact discs, these are probably a long way off. Instead of being 'read' on a sound player connected to an amplifier and speakers, the compact disc player is attached to a microcomputer, rather like

an extra disk drive, with information displayed on the computer screen.

Compact discs can store an enormous amount of information and retrieve it quickly with no 'taxi-meter' charges for online connect time or telecommunications. For a while it was thought that the new technology might replace traditional online systems. It won't, not entirely.

The general feeling is that compact discs will replace microforms, not online systems. There are two major reasons for this. Although huge amounts of data can be stored on a compact disc, it is nowhere near as much as can be stored on a mainframe (very large) computer which is accessed through the telephone.

For example, Compendex (the online version of the Engineering Index) is available online as one database, going back to the middle 1960's. One compact disc can only hold about 20 percent of this file. Bibliofile, the Library of Congress MARC records, takes up three discs. The prospective user is faced with swapping discs around, or investing in a 'jukebox' style arrangement for multiple discs, but these are expensive and not readily available.

The other major reason is the frequency of updating. Most CD-ROM products have quarterly updates, as the costs of producing and distributing updated discs are quite high. This is fine for information like directories or encyclopaedias, but not for technological and business information which requires currency. Online databases can be updated daily if required.

Development of the CD-ROM market has been fairly slow. Too many new developments have hit the dust (quadrasonic sound, reel to reel tape recorders, 8-track cassettes) and the market is untried. Who wants to rush out and buy expensive equipment when it might be superseded, abandoned or vastly improved in a year or so? Until there are many good products available on CD-ROM people will not buy the required equipment. Until there is a sufficiently large market, producers will be wary of investing in new product lines. Chicken and egg stuff.

SilverPlatter, a US company, has invested heavily in developing a comprehensive range of products to stimulate the market. They have released a range of databases, such as LISA (Library and Information Sciences Abstracts), Psycinfo (Psychological Abstracts)

and ERIC (Educational Resources Information Centre), among others. It is one of the few new companies to build their business around the technology. A couple of the online vendors, such as Dialog and H.W. Wilson, have recently announced new CD product lines. Dialog OnDisc was launched recently with ERIC, and H.W. Wilson has released a range of discs of their own databases.

On compact discs the search software is contained on the disc itself, so there could be enormous variation between different products. Wilson and Dialog see the advantage of combining compact disc with online access in a sort of tandem arrangement, giving continuity of search language between the compact disc back file and current information online.

Publishers are logical entrants to the CD market. Bowker has just released *Books in Print* and *Ulrich's International Periodicals Directory*. This may be the trigger to many potential users. They are cumbersome in print and are used regularly by many libraries and bookshops. Although available online, the cost of connect time and telecommunications discourage frequent 'dipping into'. Once equipment is purchased the way is paved for purchase of more products.

I think the technology has already taken hold, and will expand rapidly in the next few years.

Katie Blake

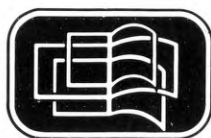
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