Information Utilities in an Information Age

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INFORMATION UTILITIES IN AN INFORMATION AGE

In the late 1970's I had the opportunity to participate in the White House Conference on Libraries. During a session held in Lexington, the general populace came forward and said we want our information packaged. There is too much material for us to wade through and we want some way to access what we want when we want it. I was appalled. I saw this as the first step toward censorship with the librarian discarding any facts that did not fit the scheme of the package. I felt the librarian's role was one of facilitator of finding information while letting the user judge what to assimilate and what to discard.

Today we are packaging information but in a way that just four short years ago I could not imagine. It is not happening in the library world but in the cruel world of business and it is not a package of information as such but a super index to all this material available. It has been facilitated by the need for information and disseminated by the technology of the computer.

It is hard to believe that the computer industry is only a few years older than I am and a bit younger than my better half sitting over there. This industry dates back only about 37 years but according to the National Academy of Sciences "its impact on society could be even greater than that of the original industrial revolution." Hallmarks in this industry begin with the geniuses at University of Pennsylvania developing the electric numerical integrator and calculator - ENIAC for
short. This invention required 18,000 vacuum tubes and 14,000 watts of electricity (enough to power a locomotive). This little gem today truly becomes a little gem as the same capacity would cost approximately $100, fit into a pocket, and run on flashlight batteries. In 1947 Bell Labs developed the transistor and in 1959 Texas Instruments and Fairchild Camera and Instrument Co. simultaneously developed the IC, which is the centerpiece of microelectronics. In 1971 Intel developed the microprocessor, an advanced integrated circuit, and the computer industry began to shrink both in size and cost but not in capacity and market.

At the same time that the computer was growing up the publication boom and the need for information became a pressing need. In the 1960's money was poured into libraries to try to fill this need. The demand for information continually increased and today we now have 15,000 newsletters in the United States to fill the gap between daily newspapers and monthly magazines. Libraries as we know them could not keep up with the pace so private industry came to the rescue -- enter the information utility.

I define the information utility as an on-line information system that comes directly to the home. This utility accesses many data files and fills the need for information as well as the need for recreation. It seems to to be all things to all people. There are a number of information utilities available but today I am going to talk about the two most prominent ones -- the Source and CompuServe.

THE SOURCE

The Source, produced by Reader's Digest, is a "user friendly" information utility that can be accessed with very little training.
Help screens instruct you on features of various data bases and the manual is simple and easy to follow. The Source uses menu search or for the more advanced searcher, command level searching and provides access to approximately 800 different information files. These files include the normal bibliographic files, news items, catalog shopping, and games. There are such features as electronic mail where you can send a document of any length to another subscriber, CHAT which enables you to have interactive communication on-line, POST which is a bulletin board for buying, selling, and exchanging ideas, voicegram where the user can telephone a message from anywhere in the world and the Source will send it. Catalog shopping allows you to purchase items from furniture to books electronically and have it charged to your credit card. The Home Medical Guide, CARE allows you to diagnose an illness through multiple choice selections. A thirst for the latest news is quenched with the UPI News Wire which brings the most up to the minute news in your own home. Other examples of files on the Source include (read from the book). This information package is available to John Q. Public for a mere $100 administrative fee and connect rates beginning at $5.75 (rates will be raised May 1st.)

Many people have asked me what can you do with the Source? Personally I have not done much with it but it has been a good information tool at times. My husband and I are river rats and very interested in the fate of the Kentucky River. When rumors were rampant about the lock situation and the Lexington paper did not seem to do an adequate job in covering this story, we turned to the Source and the UPI news wire which gave us much more comprehensive coverage and up to the minute news on the situation. I have a keen interest in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan since most of my family is there and when the
riots broke out at the maximum security prison in Marquette. I was a bit concerned as I have an uncle who is a guard there. National news only mentioned the riot but the UPI news wire for Michigan gave us a very detailed account. Occasionally David will access the weather for the UP to let me know that I should feel lucky that he brought me to Kentucky.

The Source is truly an information utility. There seems to be something for everyone at an affordable price.

COMPUSERVE

CompuServe is owned, according to my husband, by H&R Block (they are not admitting it) and is very similar to the Source. CompuServe, like the Source, uses menu or command level searching, which makes it relatively easy to search and efficient to utilize. The Information files and services on CompuServe parallel the Source but CompuService has more emphasis on the investor, with stock reports and financial summaries more widespread. CompuServe has some unique features including "Aunt Nettie" which is the electronic answer to Dear Abby or Ann Landers. The troubled user of CompuServe simply drops Aunt Nettie a line electronically, and if it is deserving Aunt Nettie gives her answer the following week via CompuServe. The whole CompuServe world can access the reply by selecting that program. Other features of CompuServe include electronic versions of major newspapers such as the WASHINGTON POST. Through CompuServe you can access the editorials, national news, or what's going on in Washington by simply selecting TWP and reading the menu. The AP news wire and the St. Louis Post and the Middlesex Daily News as well as the World Book Encyclopedia are also available on CompuServe. Other files available on CompuServe are (read
from list). CompuServe is slightly cheaper than the Source with a $19.95 - $39.95 first time charge and a connect rate beginning at $5 an hour.

Our use with CompuServe has been similar to the use with the Source. We have accessed World Book Encyclopedia for information on various topics. Catalog shopping via CompuServe yielded us a door bell ordered from Heath Company in Benton Harbor Michigan on Thursday delivered to our door by UPS the following Tuesday. As more companies join these utilities to make their products available we will certainly see a change in consumer shopping habits.

Features common to both services include the electronic mail, catalog shopping and storage in their computer. This service enables the user to access a large mainframe computer to compose programs or just to store large files. There is a monthly storage charge for this. Each service issues a bimonthly magazine and a monthly newsletter telling you the latest in the service and industry.

Both the Source and CompuServe are total information utilities. These utilities are much different from the types of data bases we are used to in the library community but even these utilities are no longer exclusive to libraries. Data base vendors such as Dialog and BRS are now producing home versions of the generally complex systems with an eye to giving some of these other utilities competition.

KNOWLEDGE INDEX

Knowledge Index is Dialog's home version of data base searching. Unlike other services we have discussed it is a bibliographic utility
which is limited to on-line bibliographic references and continues to use boolean logic. Knowledge Index stays away from the emphasis on individual files but lumps the files available into subject categories. The logic is simplified as is the language and there is help available online by simply typing in HELP. The term used for searching in Knowledge Index is simply FIND and there is only an and/or operator with no adjacency operator. Data bases available on Knowledge Index are limited but include Magazine Index, Agricola, Standard & Poor News and Psych Info. An excellent manual has been produced to go along with this service and Dialog charges a one time fee of $35 to subscribe and a flat rate of $24 a connect hour no matter what data base is used. An added feature of Knowledge Index is document delivery for items index for a fee of $4.50 a document.

BRS AFTER DARK

BRS After Dark is produced by BRS and is based on the same principles as Knowledge Index. Unlike knowledge Index it is menu driven to facilitate use by novice searchers. It includes many of the same data bases as Knowledge Index but has a broader coverage and also includes NTIS, GPO Pref File, and Books In Print. It is now just a bibliographic service but plans are to ultimately expand it into an information utility as The Source and CompuServe. There is a $50 initial fee for BRS After Dark and a $12 monthly minimum. Data bases vary in cost from $6 - $15 an hour.

FUTURE

The swift rise of such utilities as the Source and CompuServe and the expansion of Dialog and BRS to home use make one wonder where this
is leading us. In 1876 Melvil Dewey commented in the first issue of the LIBRARY JOURNAL "The school teaches people to read; the library must supply them with information which will serve to educate." We are now rapidly advancing on a new frontier in which levels of accessibility are changing. Libraries have always had two levels of accessibility -- that which is immediately available (in the collection) to that which is not immediately available (must be obtained by interlibrary loan). This system is steadily breaking down in the age of electronics. Information is being brought to the user's door via the computer. This can be best seen in the area of Agriculture. The farmer no longer has to depend on mailed USDA reports to predict prices because now via a terminal or his microcomputer he can access AGNET from the University of Nebraska or FACTS from Purdue and get the information he needs for the price of telecommunication charges. Instant weather reports are available at a simple command and with a microcomputer he can enter his breeding records to document the quality of his stock of cattle.

In the age of electronics, concepts of libraries will have to change. A library can no longer be judged by the size of its collection or the elegance of its building but judgment will be made on the effectiveness and efficiency with which information can be delivered. The librarian will select what to access by the known demand rather than the anticipated demand which is now the case. Raymond Kassar, Chairman and Chief Executive of Atari says of the information utility:

"Everything the home industry offers will at first glance appear to be redundant. People have yellow pages, stock market reports, newspapers, restaurant guides, telephone shopping, libraries. What we are selling is a new medium -- a method of obtaining information."

The information is being packaged by private sources but the demand for information will continue to grow. Libraries
must realize these services as full partners and consider expenditures for such as part of the normal scheme of things. Librarians must be less identified with the building and collection and more as a body of professionals that can facilitate the access to information. The information utility is a part of the growing electronic resources that are here to stay and librarians must recognize and utilize this new medium. In closing, I would like to leave you with a question posed by Susan Crooks in "Libraries in the Year 2000" —

"...the question is not whether libraries can beat other information providers in utilizing new technology to satisfy information needs. The question is: what users' needs can libraries uniquely meet in the year 2000?"

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