CD-ROM: Blessing or Scourge?

Antoinette Paris Powell

University of Kentucky, toni.greider@uky.edu

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I titled this presentation "CD-ROM: Blessing or Scourge?" because it can be both. CD-ROM has made on-line searching affordable. Libraries can now budget for their searching as the cost of the CD-ROM remains the same no matter how much searching is done. This means that computerized searching can be part of the undergraduate curriculum and once the initial start up costs and subscription price is found, searching can be offered with unlimited use. While this can be seen as a blessing, it also brings its own set of problems. In this presentation I will discuss both the pros and cons of CD-ROM in the library.

CD-ROM and Online Search Services

In October of 1988 we put out AGRICOLA on CD-ROM for the public use. We had had the CD-ROM up in our R&D Laboratory (actually a tiny room that we used for data base searching and developing our products) for over a year prior just learning the ropes and trying to figure out the best way to offer the service. We used it to test difficult data base searches that came through and worked on training protocols for the staff and student workers. Once AGRICOLA was out we found that the majority of the search requests could be filled with the CD-ROM. It was excellent for those people who did not know what they really wanted because they could browse at no charge. We found ourselves still testing our searches on AGRICOLA and giving that bibliography gratis along with what we found on-line. This was an excellent PR tool.
AGRICOLA was a data base we seldom searched on line because it was not very clean but with a CD-ROM, who cared how many false drops they got, just as long as they got some good material as well.

Our patrons were so happy with the CD-ROM searches that we saw a dramatic decrease in our on-line searching. Our statistics dropped to the point that we now do only several a month. Use on the CD-ROM continues to sky rocket and in January of 1990 we had 290 log-ins to the CD-ROM. That averages to 13 a day. We find ourselves doing more quick and dirty searching to satisfy the users needs and we go to AGRICOLA first to try to verify citations.

The problem with this is that many users go away with a false sense of security. They do not want to learn the intricacies of the system and they leave thinking that the computer provided them with everything they needed. They see the computer as an intelligent object and does the thinking for them and do not realize that they will get only what they ask for. Some how the computer will take the subject they enter and find everything on it, regardless of the spelling or vocabulary.

In on line searching we acted as intermediates and made the user think about their subject. We guided them to the best data base and formulate the search strategy. We determined whether one data base was enough or if a second data base should be searched. With CD-ROM we are no longer the intermediaries and user are only scratching the tip of the iceberg in finding the sources they need.

CD-ROM AND BIBLIOGRAPHIC INSTRUCTION

CD-ROM has certainly complicated bibliographic instruction. Students (and many faculty) now believe that the literature began with 1970 or whenever the electronic product began. The mass of information
stored in the printed indexes is simply forgotten because it is too difficult to get to. The problem of wanting to spend the least amount of time looking for the topic remains with the use of CD-ROM. Users do not want to learn to use the CD-ROM effectively. They want to sit down, get their references as fast as they can. The most difficult problem for the person is articulating the topic. They simply cannot break their topic down into components or establish relationships among terms. This has always been with us in using the printed tool but many printed indexes were hierarchical and help the user break down the topic. The electronic tool puts this burden on the user which in turn puts the burden on the librarian offering bibliographic instructions.

CD-ROM has made structuring programs much more difficult. In most instances the CD-ROM workstation is a single user workstation which makes group instruction very difficult. Getting students to dissect the subject is also very difficult. For years we have told them to begin broad and narrow down and now we are telling them to be as specific as possible and then broaden the search. Then there is the question of how much time do you spend with CD-ROM and how much detail do you go into on manipulating the database. The use of boolean logic and controlled vocabulary are essential to good searching but how much of this is necessary. There is also the question of how much do you emphasis the CD-ROM in bibliographic instruction since it covers such a small period of time in the literature.

Staff training is also complicated. With automation we have seen a loss of the depth of staff. Ten years ago any staff member in the Agriculture library could help anyone with basic information needs. They could check out a book, help them search in the card catalog, and
show them how to use indexes. Today this is not the case. We have people the specialize in the circulation system, while all staff can do routine functions anything out of the ordinary has to be handled by the circulation staff. CD-ROM adds another dimension to library services. The staff is now required to learn another set of search protocols and try to help people articulate their subject. This is difficult and time consuming.

This is further complicated by the fact that the back up staff are not called upon often to do this. Without daily use of the product it is very difficult to remember all of the intricacies. This is fine for quick and dirty searching but not acceptable to fill a comprehensive information need.

Collection Management

CD-ROM brings a new light to collection development. In some instances they are more expensive than the printed tool and in others such as AGRICOLA and Bibliography of Agriculture the CD-ROM subscription is actually cheaper. The problem of one disk one uses versus one volume one user is of concern to librarians. Many libraries are not replacing their hard copy with CD-ROM products but further straining budgets with the CD-ROM being an add on subscription instead of a replacement.

CD-ROM brings a new perspective to collection management. Weeding the collection has become more difficult. Publications seldom used because of poor indexing are now being found through the additional access points offered by electronic tools. We can no longer discard because of low use and adequate availability. These publications are now being asked for by undergraduate students as well as graduate students and faculty.
Other Considerations

Automated systems as well as the advent of CD-ROM have turned us into equipment experts. In the days of providing service with print, we simply had to be able to find the physical volume and provide a brief overview of the tool to offer the service. In the age of electronics we have to be able to trouble shoot malfunctioning systems, clear paper jams in printers and generally keep the equipment going. I have become well versed with CD-ROM drivers and extensions, modify config.sys and generally sorting through to see why something does not work. There is always a sigh of relief on my part after I load a new version of the CD-ROM software and the system comes up after the installation. We have to be well versed in error messages and be able to spend time on the phone with the vendor to trouble shoot the system. Like the photocopier - patrons expect us to be able to "fix it" and can be very demanding. CD-ROM may bring affordable electronic searching to the user but at some serious staff costs.

The Future

Where do we go from here? CD-ROM and end user searching are here to stay. Even my technologically advanced husband is enamored with it. Several months ago he bought Microsoft Bookshelf for home use and every night he gives me a new quote from Bartlett's Familiar Quotations. He loved the Bookshelf so much that he purchased the Grolier's Encyclopedia and now browses the encyclopedia routinely.

The future generations of students will come to us computer literate. They will have the necessary computer skill to manage a product. Just in the old days -- most students knew the basics of using an index but needed instruction in the finer points of using the tool,
so will they have had the exposure to computer products but will need instruction on the finer points of using a specific product. Students will no longer fumble through looking for references but will need more intense one on one training to get started.

The days of one disk one user will also disappear. CD-ROM in a local area network will become the norm. Already CD-ROM vendors are negotiating with data base producers for a LAN subscription price. Providing a LAN brings more complicated technology to the library and the need for a LAN manager, a position most of us can only dream of getting.

I see a future of a coexistence of all forms of information. Full text CD-ROM products are here with the Consultants Group in Agricultural Research (CGIAR) putting out a CD-ROM with text in three languages and illustrations. This disk is in the testing phase but CGIAR plans to offer all of their documents on the disk for $100 annually. This is a considerable savings in both subscription prices and maintenance to provide the information this way. The Minnesota Extension Service is doing a test disk of Extension Publications from a number of States to see if it is an option for offering publications from extension services. The printed index and book will still be with us for some things. Libraries will continue to offer on-line searching because of the wide choice of data bases. Large academic institutions will offer high use data bases on their main frames at no charge, end user services will still be offered such as "BRS After Dark" or "Knowledge Index". Home services such as COMPUSERVE will continue to offer a wide variety of products and the library will offer CD-ROM along with some of the others. The names of the products may change but the forms of service
will remain the same.

Librarians have to be ready to deal with all forms of technology. Someone who simply "likes books" will have a hard time finding a place in the library field. We must be prepared to be information managers and offer all forms of information to our clientele. No matter how we feel about it -- "the times they are a changing" and we are going to have to change with them.