

The Indianapolis Experience

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Online reference service in public libraries has shown significant growth in the 1980's. As recently as 1979, Kusack reported that "while online reference services have been available for more than ten years in special libraries and larger academic libraries . . . the movement toward online services appears to have been less than a headlong rush in public libraries."¹ Only 42 percent of the largest U.S. public libraries in his 1978 survey were offering online information services.² In a 1981 American Library Association (A.L.A.) survey of publicly-supported libraries known to offer online services, only 53 public libraries responded as compared to 610 academic libraries.³ But a 1981 survey of 11 of the *largest* public libraries by the Free Library of Philadelphia found all but two offering online searching, with the remaining two planning to do so in 1982.⁴ By 1983, a survey of central public libraries located in 25 U.S. cities with populations of 300,000 to 500,000 found 70 percent of those libraries offering online information services.⁵

Online searching in Indiana libraries has also grown in the 1980's. By September, 1984, there were 131 libraries in the state offering online services, compared with fewer than 30 four years earlier.⁶ Of these 131 libraries, 18 are public libraries.⁷

While public libraries have been slower to adopt online services, many that have gone online have used database searching to assist with traditional reference service, rather than considering it just a literature search service. Of the 17 public libraries offering online services in the 1983 survey, 47 percent said searches were normally free,⁸ an indication that such searching is considered part of regular reference service. In the 1981 A.L.A. study, 58 percent of the public libraries included a free period of online time as opposed to 44 percent of college libraries and 30 percent of the university libraries.⁹

The surveys do not distinguish between reference use of databases and literature searches, but a sampling of recent descriptive reports indicates that public libraries with a strong commitment to reference service are using databases for both ready-reference and in-depth reference. Houston Public Library, which began online searching in 1975, reports that "the majority of searches are performed free of charge to the patron in the course of answering difficult reference questions,"¹⁰ adding that "the library has historically had very little demand for exhaustive literature searches."¹¹ A 1983 report on free online searching in the Westchester (N.Y.) Library System indicated that "approximately 20% of the searches were done to answer reference-type questions that could not be answered through traditional reference sources or because of material constraints"¹² Westport (Conn.) Public Library, which also offers free online searching, found that "98 percent of all DIALOG searches were completed within the 15 minute free allocation of online time."¹³ Furthermore, 81 percent of the searches were of the ready-reference variety, being conducted in three databases (Dun's Market Identifiers, National Newspaper Index, and Newsearch) and requiring an average of 3.19 minutes per search.¹⁴

The development of online searching at Indianapolis-Marion County Public Library (I-MCPL) is similar to the development at other large public libraries. Currently at Central Library 90 percent of the online searches are done to answer reference questions. In 1983 an average of 30 searches, of which only two were paid searches, were done per month. The concept of providing database searching to supplement traditional reference service was incorporated into the first staff guidelines written in late 1980. The guidelines distinguished between free searches (to answer reference questions) and paid searches (to survey the literature). The guidelines specified that patrons would not be charged when databases were used at the discretion of the librarian to answer a reference question.

By the end of 1980, I-MCPL had signed contracts with three of the four major vendors (DIALOG, New York Times, and SDC) and

had access to INDIRS (Indiana Information Retrieval System based at the School of Business, Indiana University). An initial set of guidelines and forms were devised and a 1200 baud *General Electric* terminal was purchased. The budget established for 1980 and 1981 was \$5,000 per year. This amount included training costs, supplies, and repairs for the terminal. From 1982 to 1984, \$10,000 was budgeted for database services. The major part of each year's budget went to pay the database vendors. During 1980 and 1981 coordination of database services was the responsibility of the Administrative Assistant, Central Services Department. In 1982 a Newspaper and Periodical Division was formed. The administrator of this new division was also assigned overall coordination of online searching, resulting in greater attention being given to the management of database services.

Central Library of the I-MCPL system contains three separate adult subject divisions. The Arts Division, the Business, Science and Technology Division, and the Social Science Division are all in separate sections of an enlarged and remodeled 1917 building. Database searching was the first attempt at Central Library to provide a reference service which cut across all division boundaries. The physical and psychological barriers created when librarians were located in different areas of the building, while there was only one centrally-located terminal, at times seemed insurmountable. The easiest course to have taken in 1980 would have been to assign database searching to one subject division and to train only those librarians to handle the task. Because of the initial commitment to provide searching in all the divisions, librarians from all subject divisions needed to be trained. Therefore, all librarians were exposed to the principles of searching and were allowed to advance their skills.

From early 1982 until the present day, the first priority of the coordinator of online searching has been to see that staff were trained and given the opportunity to gain experience searching. In 1980 most of the librarians in the Central Library had no experience with database searching. The initial plan for training was for at least one librarian from each division to be trained on DIALOG, The New York Times Information Bank, and SDC. Successful training programs were never developed for SDC and the Information Bank. Librarians found that SDC contained few databases useful to a public library. New York Times training presented a unique set of problems. I-MCPL wanted the Information Bank; the abstracts of the *New York Times* and other popular periodicals were not available on either DIALOG or SDC. The first problem with using the New York Times Information Bank was that the

system kept changing. Infobank I, Infobank II (with BRS protocols), NTYIS, and finally NEXIS training were all scheduled for Central librarians between 1980 and 1984. That was approximately one new system to learn each year. The second problem was that every time a new system came along a new contract was signed, a new password was assigned, and, in the case of NEXIS, a new terminal and telephone were installed. These changes kept the staff constantly confused.

DIALOG training was more successful. From 1980 until the end of 1983, 20 librarians were given introductory DIALOG training. The training was possible because in 1980 Becki Whitaker, the Information Retrieval Specialist for the Indiana Cooperative Library Services Authority (INCOLSA), developed an introductory DIALOG workshop. This one-day workshop introduced librarians to Boolean logic, to the DIALOG system and its commands, and to the development of search strategies. A one-day seminar was not enough training for a librarian to become a skilled searcher, so follow-up meetings with newly trained staff were held. At these meetings the coordinator for online searching went through the policies and procedures for searching at I-MCPL and then reinforced the information learned at the INCOLSA seminar by use of a checklist. The checklist reviewed the DIALOG commands and also reminded librarians of the features that would aid them in their practice sessions. (See Appendix for a copy of this checklist.)

Because of the relative ease of providing initial DIALOG training, all adult librarians were scheduled to attend. The less enthusiastic staff were sent to be trained along with the more enthusiastic ones. Some librarians were trained and then did little or no searching. Others took an interest in searching, worked on their own, and became efficient and effective searchers. Subject division heads encouraged their staff to become proficient searchers. One administrator insisted that each librarian practice 15 minutes per month for one year, another divided the librarians into teams and had each team work on a search project together. INCOLSA also sponsored advanced training sessions. Over the last four years, I-MCPL librarians have attended sessions on Magazine Index, National Newspaper Index, Compendex, ERIC, Management Contents, the Predicasts databases, and PsycInfo. The availability of beginning and advanced training, a commitment of funds to support this new service, and the willingness of division administrators to support this effort all encouraged Central librarians to develop their searching skills.

During the same period in which I-MCPL staff were being trained and encouraged to do online searching, more databases with high reference value became available. Numeric databases, such as Disclosure II and Disclosure/Spectrum Ownership, offer answers to ref-

erence questions without referral to other documents; directory databases such as Dun's Market Identifiers, the Electronic Yellow Pages, Trademarkscan, the Encyclopedia of Associations, Ulrich's International Periodical Directory, and Marquis Who's Who offer immediate and current answers to other reference questions. In Indiana, INDIRS provides statistical information about the state in tabular form tailored to meet the user's specific requirements. The content and design of certain bibliographic databases have also made them reference databases. The abstracts on the New York Times Information Bank and the full-text capability of NEXIS and UPI News and ASAP on DIALOG often eliminate the need to refer to hard copy of the sources cited. Other databases, such as Magazine Index, National Newspaper Index, Newsearch and the new Wilsonline databases, index such readily available sources that they too can be used for quick reference in a public library setting.

A survey of online searching at I-MCPL between July 1, 1984 and October 15, 1984 showed overwhelming emphasis on reference use of databases. During that period there were only four paid literature searches, while 86 reference questions were answered through online searching. Seventy-five of the reference searches were conducted on DIALOG by 13 searchers in three subject divisions. Eleven searches were done on NEXIS by four searchers in the three divisions.

A breakdown of reference questions searched on DIALOG revealed the heaviest use of online searching by the Business, Science and Technology Division. This division had 34 questions dealing with companies, products or trademarks, eight other types of business-related questions, and four medical or scientific questions. The Social Sciences Division answered 13 questions, including five on education, two of a biographical nature, and the rest on a variety of topics such as religion, grants, and associations. The Arts Division used DIALOG to answer five arts or literature questions and four sports questions. There were also seven bibliographic verification questions coming from the three divisions.

DIALOG searches were conducted in 39 different files; but of these, eight files predominated. Six of these files could be categorized as either directory or reference databases. Dun's Market Identifiers (20 searches), Trademarkscan, (8) and the Electronic Yellow Pages (6) were the most heavily used business files. National Newspaper Index and Magazine Index each were used for ten searches, while DIALINDEX was used nine times for preliminary searching.

Reference questions answered through DIALOG searches include the following:

- How companies have celebrated their fiftieth anniversaries.
- A list of public school districts with Montessori programs.
- The history of the shopping cart.
- A list of the ten states with the highest elementary school test scores.
- Information on Pollen's syndrome.
- Changes in IRA rules.
- An association for persons involved in color analysis.

NEXIS was used almost entirely by the Arts and Social Sciences Divisions. Both divisions did five searches on NEXIS, while the Business, Science and Technology Division did only one. This is to be expected since many of the nonbibliographic databases on DIALOG are geared to business questions, while the full-text capability of searching newspapers, magazines, and wire services on NEXIS is better suited to the kinds of questions asked of the Arts and Social Sciences Divisions. The following is a sampling of some of those questions:

- Information on an upcoming exhibition of English furniture in Washington, D.C.
- A revised schedule of the Jackson Victory Tour.
- The percentage of President Reagan's income donated to charity.
- Information on a cribbage contest organized by a Nebraska man.
- The date of the International Year of Youth.
- Information on the psychological term "airtight compartment."¹¹

In most cases, the decision to search online was determined by the currency of the question, the inadequacy of traditional indexing, or the ability of the database to provide immediately the discrete information required. Although the number of reference questions answered through online searching is still a small percentage of the total number of reference questions answered, our survey showed that at I-MCPL online searching is an accepted part of regular reference work, to be used when it is the most appropriate tool.

So far I-MCPL has done a modest amount to publicize database searching. A pamphlet entitled "Computerized Reference Service" was printed in 1984 and distributed to all branches of I-MCPL. To acquaint branch administrators with this new service, an adult services workshop was held in October 1982. Since that time other branch librarians have attended the "Introduction to Online Search-

ing Workshop" at INCOLSA. A variety of activities have been planned to publicize database searching: press releases to the media, posters for branches, radio spots, and demonstrations are all being considered.

Online searching has proved to be an important reference tool in the public library. I-MCPL has demonstrated its commitment to this new service by allocating budget money and staff time to it. We are confident that our publicity campaign will bring the news of this valuable service to more potential users.

FOOTNOTES

1. James M. Kusack, "Online Reference Service in Public Libraries," RQ 18 (Summer 1979): 331.
2. Ibid.
3. Mary Jo Lynch, *Financing Online Search Services in Publicly Supported Libraries* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1981), p. 20.
4. James B. Woy, "Surveys of Online Information Service in Large Public Libraries," *Drexel Library Quarterly* 19 (Fall 1983): 85.
5. Ibid., p. 80.
6. Indiana Cooperative Library Services Authority Information Retrieval Program, *Indiana Online: A Directory of Online Search Services in Indiana* (Indianapolis: Indiana Cooperative Library Services Authority, 1984), Preface.
7. Ibid., pp. 24-26.
8. Woy, p. 81.
9. Lynch, p. 26.
10. Gene Rollins, "Some Economics of Online Searching: Experience at Houston Public Library," *Public Library Quarterly* 4 (Summer 1983): 14.
11. Ibid., p. 15.

12. George Fox Donati and Martha Moss Kriesel, "Free Online Searching in a Public Library System: An Unscientific Study," *Online 7* (March 1983): 15.
13. Katherine A. Golomb and Sydelle S. Reisman, "Using DIALOG for Ready Reference," *Library Journal* 109 (April 15, 1984): 786.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 787.

APPENDIX

Checklist for Beginning Database Searcher

DIALOG used for all examples:

Do you know how to:

- 1) How to set up equipment (1200 Baud Terminal):
 - a) How to turn it on.
 - b) What is correct speed and half/full duplex.
 - c) How to set modem to dial telephone numbers.
- 2) Mechanics of Terminal:
 - a) Carriage return at end of line.
 - b) How to correct misspellings.
 - c) How to erase a line before hitting a carriage return.
 - d) How to get out of search after it starts to print abstracts.
- 3) How to logon using *Telenet* and *Tymnet*. Where are code sheets?
- 4) How to get from one database file to another (on DIALOG)?
- 5) How does time and cost show up on *DIALOG*?
- 6) How to *Logoff*?
- 7) What is *Logoff hold*? How is it different from *Logoff*?
- 8) Do you know how to fill out the log sheets?

- 9) On *DIALOG*, different symbols, terms have meaning.
- a) What is the difference between *S* and *SS*?
 - b) What does *C* mean?
 - c) What does *E* mean?
 - d) How to truncate.
 - e) What format do you use to print online?
 - f) What format do you use to print offline?
- 10) Do you know that *DIALOG*
- a) Has one page summary for each database (blue pages).
 - b) Has Pocket Search Guide.
 - c) Has chapters which describe in detail the structure of each database.
 - d) Has 800 telephone numbers to call if you are having problems.
 - e) Has free ½ hour of time every month on different databases.
 - f) Has monthly newsletter called *Chronolog*.
 - g) Has Dialindex (File 411). Can be used to see how often a specific word has appeared in individual databases.
 - h) *DIALOG* (Ontap files). Can practice searches for \$15 an hour online time.
- 11) Please check before going online:
- a) Blue pages (*DIALOG*)
 - b) Chapters (*DIALOG*)
 - c) Any database manuals or thesauri
 - d) How much does the database cost per hour? Does it have online print charges?
- 12) Other Hints:
- a) Expand company and personal names.
 - b) Use 800 telephone numbers to call database producer or vendor.
 - c) Talk your problem over with co-workers.
 - d) Don't forget printed sources. They can help you understand how database is put together.
 - e) Use *Dialindex* (411) to focus on appropriate databases.