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INTERACTION OF ONLINE USERS

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The past decade or so has seen a rapid development of online information retrieval systems. This equally applies to the manufacture of a vast range of databases, host-computers, terminal equipment and the design of search programmes. In regard to the development of online systems, the cliché of an information explosion is perfectly valid. An inevitable consequence is that today - searchers are buried under loads of paperwork giving all possible information on spinners, command languages, equipment etc. I could imagine that many are tempted to forget all about this documentation avalanche though useful it may be - and have a word with a colleague who might be able to tell him 'the latest' in a few minutes. The user or operator of the information systems I would like to refer to as an agent acting to the customer -the end-user.

When talking shop, users will also find out that they have certain interests in common and would like that more effort be directed towards the solution of the following problems - to mention just a few.

- convince governments of the need of support on a national scale;

 convince postal authorities that telecommunication facilities should be improved on some points and certain tariffs be readjusted;

- urge spinners to modify their systems and install new databases of common

interest;

approach database manufacturers to modify the structure and extend the coverage of a particular database;

contact European Community authorities with the aim to try and change certain parts of their EURONET plans.

Against the complexity of the information market and the many questions it gives rise to, it is not so surprising that in the past two years, several national, regional or disciplinary user groups were formed in 11 European countries and some 80 in the US. Also suppliers of online facilities (the Government, postal authorities and private industry) are showing considerable interest in the organisation of users.

Spinners and database producers are forming user groups, EURONET has its user forum and also CIDST is considering the formation of a group for user relations. Recently, the International Telecommunications User Group has been recognized by the international PTT organisation CCITT as a partner for a future dialogue on matters of mutual interest. Using my nationality as an excuse, I would like to illustrate certain developments by briefly sketching the history of our Netherlands Association of Users of Online Systems. The whole thing started when, only four years ago, three members of the Dutch Online Mafia met at a Chemical Abstracts Symposium. One of them casually said that he had compared some tiny detail in a search in the ESA/IRS system with its brother in ORBIT from the SDC system. The other two performed a similar exercise and they agreed on having a meeting to exchange their experiences. At that meeting, it was deciced that other online users would also be invited to discuss their findings.

I will spare you all the details of the long way we have had to go since

then: we now have a recognized, independent organisation with over 150 members, about 50 of which are from institutes. To my knowledge, 90% of the total membership are Dutch online users. Both NOBIN (the Netherlands Organization for Information Policy) and the Dutch PTT are associate members. Our Association publishes a bulletin (mostly monthly) highlighting news of special interest. Unfortunately, copies are only available to members; moreover, it's in Dutch! We, of course, did survey ourselves and we are planning another one. Each year, two general meetings are held. The last consisted of simultaneous sessions held by all our working groups. Members could just walk in and ask their questions.

The working groups held many other meetings and among the points discussed

- education and training;

- cost;
 evaluation of systems;
 evaluation of databases;
- comparison of search strategies;
- business information.

A new working group on data transmission will be formed in due course.

Now what has been accomplished so far. Our attitude towards the PTT has been one of cautious co-operation. Whatever we think of the role of the European PTT's, fact is that a large part of online access is now via their nodes. After the Dutch PTT had installed the online node to the American systems in Amsterdam in 1977, we put them under considerable pressure in regard to tariffs. The Netherlands still has one of the lowest tariffs for access to the USA and it is our impression that our talks with the authorities concerned have had some influence here. The PTT also consulted us when they extended their node with a 1200-baud facility and we co-operated with them at a large general fair on online systems. Recently, they asked our advice on the planned EURONET node. As far as the information industry is concerned, we succeeded in providing an access for several spinners enabling them to organise seminars so as to get user reactions. We are now considering the formation of user groups of specific systems or databases.

On a national level, we have taken part in discussions about national information policies, focal centres, tariff structures and document delivery systems. Some of our activities have been subsidized by various ministries, such as the demonstration of online systems on 11 terminals to an audience of about 1000 people at our National Library Conference last month.

The hard core of the On-line User Group is its working groups. The group on 'education and training' has now organized two general one-week online courses. These courses dealt with general online principles and not with any specific system. A spin-off of this activity is that we are now negotiating with various organizations to study the feasibility of setting up a permanent online training centre. The Government have already promised financial aid.

The working group on 'cost' collected material enabling us to choose between the 300 and 1200 baud and wrote a report on the advisability of running SDI profiles in-house, from an intermediary or online. The groups concerned with the evaluation of systems and databases have gathered a wealth of material, which is being reported in our bulletin.

Considering our activities, we feel that our members benefit considerably from such an exchange of information and ideas. A favourable aspect here is that both NOBIN and Dutch PTT are much more co-operative than similar organizations in other countries seem to be. A second major factor is that Holland

is a small country: distances are short, people attending our meetings generally know each other well and it is comparatively easy to get your expertise collated. Moreover, Holland was one of the first online-using countries in Europe so that we managed to build up a lot of expertise. But Holland is, of course, no exception here. There are several other groups in other countries doing a similar job. However, there is still quite a number of problems to be solved. In my opinion, a major difficulty is that technical progress is so very fast that it takes national and our own organisations longer and longer to absorb it and make use of it. Two examples may illustrate this situation. In Holland, VIEWDATA might be available in a couple of months from a technical point of view but it will take 4 to 5 years to create the organisational mechanism for it. In our own organizations, much has still to be done to ensure an optimum use of online systems by libraries and information services. Part of each online conference is devoted to a seemingly endless discussion on the theme 'the end-user behind the terminal' which, in my opinion, is slightly ridiculous because, in practice, the reverse is true. We are approaching the stage where each end-user will require two intermediaries - one to know him and his subject and the other to be conversant with the database and the software.

In two other problem areas we are still at the beginning. Quite a few organizations are now thinking of setting up internal databases, such as report series and library catalogues, online on their own computer facilities. We, in Unilever, have already partly done so and during this operation we discovered that we had probably followed a path of discovery already well trodden by others.

The second area is that, in my view, VIEWDATA and Teletext systems will affect our profession dramatically.

In both areas, user interaction and co-operation are very important indeed. Close contacts between users are, therefore, an essential element in the online world. However, numerous user problems are in fact of an international character and an exchange of experience at such a level is therefore very useful.

In this respect, EUSIDIC, the European Association of Information Services, has been active for over 10 years. This was the reason why representatives of various national users groups, meeting in London in December 1977, decided to ask EUSIDIC to act as their international umbrella. The EUSIDIC Council responded very favourably and nominated a working group for members of national user groups.

It will take some more time before we can expect any real results from this group, the more so because it is an international bunch of 'poor' people, who can meet only occasionally. Nevertheless, during its first year of existence we exchanged very useful information and agreed on mutual modes of communication. An agreement on a few general issues, especially with regard to EURONET, is taking shape. At the moment, we are considering to put forward certain suggestions to do some spadework in this field, which might be sponsored by EUSIDIC.

Effective communication channels between users, both nationally and internationally, will be essential to make an optimal use of the exciting possibilities created by the computer revolution. Acceptance by the end-users of library and information services will be determinative of the profitability of host-computers and of the size of the budgets of libraries and information departments. It is not uncommon in our profession to define possible needs of our end-users on the basis of the wisdom we pretend to possess as communication experts. We seem to consider libraries and information services as holy, ideal facilities and think that end-users do not use these services as

frequently as we think they should do. It may be time to step down from our ivory tower and spend more effort on pinpointing real needs of end-users, such as:

- efficient document delivery systems;
- critical evaluation of our sales product;
- better coverage of specific literature areas such as hard data and regional information.

The first step of this process will have to be an even closer co-operation between the groups of information processing people.

DISCUSSION

Mr. T.J. Tanzer: Mr. v.d. Wetheringh, I would like to ask you how many meetings per annum there are of the Netherlands On-line User Group?

Wetheringh: There are only two general meetings, but there are many working groups, some who meet as often as once a month, others less frequently.

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