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Test Driving CD-ROMS - BIP PLUS

Tom Gilson

College of Charleston, gilsont@cofc.edu

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TestDriving CD-ROMS — BIP PLUS

Column Editor: **Tom Gilson** (College of Charleston)

Ken Kister inaugurates this review column with an analysis of the BIP PLUS family on CD-ROM. Ken is a freelance writer based in Tampa, Florida, who specializes in evaluating reference materials. His latest book is Kister's Best Encyclopedias (Oryx, 1994). ATG also interviewed Ken in June, 1995 (v.7 #3), pages 44-48. — TG

Books in Print PLUS.

New Providence, NJ:

R.R. Bowker/Reed Reference Publishing,
August 1995. Monthly. MS-DOS.
\$1,095.00 (1-year subscription);
\$3,121.00 (3-year subscription).

Reviewed by **Ken Kister**

(3118 San Juan St.; Tampa, FL 33629)

How **Books in Print (BIP)** has grown and thrived since its debut in a single volume in 1948, nearly half a century ago!

That earliest volume — actually an index to *Publishers' Trade List Annual* — furnished author and title access to roughly 85,000 books available from U.S. publishers, and little else. By 1960, when I first encountered it as a library science student at Simmons, BIP had expanded to several author-title volumes, added a separate subject volume, and spun off a work wholly devoted to paperbacks. Over the decades BIP kept accreting, until today the hardcover edition comprises ten fat author-title volumes that list some 1.5 million books from more than 40,000 publishers. The companion *Subject Guide to Books in Print*, which first appeared in one volume in 1957 and quickly became an essential part of the service, has inflated to five volumes. Two publications designed to update BIP, an annual, came along in due course, namely the bi-monthly *Forthcoming Books* (1966-), a list of books to be published in the near future, and *Books in Print Supplement* (1972-), a multivolume addendum that appears around mid-year. In addition, the current BIP family includes numerous spin-off products (or "cousins," as Bill Katz has aptly called them) intended to serve specialized markets. Among these are *Paperbound Books in Print* (1955-), *Children's Books in Print* (1969-), *Medical and Health Care Books and Serials in Print* (1972-), *Scientific and Technical Books and Serials in Print* (1972), and *Books Out of Print* (1983-).

If you're thinking BIP has become a bibliographic colossus, you're right. But wait, there's more to the story.

In the 1970s, the R.R. Bowker Company, creator and publisher of BIP (and now a subsidiary of Reed Reference Publishing, a division of Reed Elsevier), wisely automated the service's burgeoning files, converting millions of records to machine-readable form. BIP's large and continuously accruing bibliographic database proved to be a natural for computer technology. Computerization allows for much faster and more efficient compilation and updating of records, and it affords users greatly enhanced searching capability and the option of electronic ordering from vendors, a boon for librarians, booksellers, and trees. Most users of BIP in electronic form are also delighted that they no longer need to fool with the set's cumbersome hardcover volumes or ruin their eyes on its puny print.

As might be expected, BIP's entire automated database is now available both online and on CD-ROM. Online the service was first offered by BRS in 1981 and Dialog in 1982. Today, other providers include Ovid, OCLC, CARL, Ameritech's VISTA, and DRA's Open Dranet. And Marin Mixon, a Bowker/Reed rep, reports that IAC's Search/Bank, Silver Platter, and LEXIS/NEXIS (now owned by Reed Elsevier) will soon add BIP to their online offerings. For the record, BIP online normally includes all data found in the hardcover author-title set, *Subject Guide to Books in Print*, *Forthcoming Books*, *Books in Print Supplement*, *Children's Books in Print*, *Subject Guide to Children's Books*, *Books Out of Print*, *Paperbound Books in Print*, and the various subject volumes.

Which brings us to BIP on CD-ROM, the focus of this review. Called *Books in Print PLUS* (hereafter cited as **BIP PLUS**), the CD-ROM edition was introduced in 1986 and since that time has achieved remarkable success in the marketplace. In fact, BIP PLUS has become the product of choice among librarians, booksellers, publishers, and other professionals who rely on BIP records for accurate, up-to-date information about books and the publishing industry in North America and beyond. Generally speaking, BIP PLUS is more economical, more convenient, and more utilitarian than

its hardcover and online counterparts.

One reason for the popularity of BIP PLUS is the availability of customized versions developed to meet specific consumer needs. The basic BIP PLUS, which is updated monthly and currently costs \$1,095 for a one-year subscription, includes all of the BIP family (author-title volumes, *Subject Guide to Books in Print*, *Forthcoming Books*, etc.) on a single disk, except for the subject spin-offs, which are marketed separately, e.g., the hardcover *Scientific and Technical Books and Serials in Print* is part of the Bowker/Reed CD-ROM package called *SciTech Reference PLUS*. An enhanced version of BIP PLUS offers the same data but adds full-text reviews from a dozen major publications, such as *Booklist*, *Choice*, *Kirkus*, *Library Journal*, *Publishers Weekly*, and *School Library Journal*. Appropriately titled *Books in Print with Books Reviews PLUS*, this version contains about a quarter of a million reviews and — no surprise — has become a major selection tool for librarians. The annual subscription rate is \$1,595.

There are also two versions of BIP PLUS tailored to Ingram customers, one without reviews (\$1,300) and one with (\$1,800). Updated weekly, *Ingram-BIP PLUS* interfaces directly with the wholesaler, offering users very current inventory and product information as well as electronic ordering and confirmation. Likewise, two Canadian editions are available (\$1,495 without reviews; \$1,995 with). Still another version, *Bowker/Whitaker Global Books in Print PLUS* (\$1,995), incorporates approximately 800,000 titles from J. Whitaker and Sons' British database. Altogether, the Bowker/Whitaker CD-ROM provides bibliographic information for approximately 2.5 million English-language books in print around the world.

All versions of BIP PLUS currently run

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on MS-DOS but, according to the publisher, Windows is coming soon and may well be ready by the time this review appears. As proof, a demonstration of the Windows application is included on the DOS disk dated August 1995 supplied for this review. Only two versions, the basic **BIP PLUS** and **BIP with Book Reviews PLUS**, are currently available for Macintosh.

Another reason why **BIP PLUS** has gained so many loyal adherents over the past decade is its fast and robust search system. The system permits users to search for and instantly retrieve data about publications listed in **BIP** from practically every conceivable angle, including author, title, subject, keyword, audience, grade level, language, Library of Congress catalog number, ISBN, price, and publication year. By way of example, I checked to see how many titles in **BIP PLUS** today had been published in 1910. To get the answer (38) I simply typed `py=1910` in the search mode and hit the Enter key ("py" being an abbreviation for "publication year"). To call up all books published after 1910, the command would be `py>1910`. The system also has Boolean searching and truncation features.

BIP PLUS is not difficult to use — once you get the hang of it. While logically constructed, the interface is quite different from that of other CD-ROM reference sources. Cheryl LaGuardia makes the point in her review in *Library Journal* (December 1993, p. 188) that **BIP PLUS**'s search procedures "will take some getting used to for nonexperts, as will the overall screen design: information and prompts appear in places you don't expect them." David Loertscher in *American Reference Books Annual* (1993, p. 13) concurs, putting it this way: "**Books in Print Plus** requires some training to use because the front-end search program is not particularly user-friendly. Once the system is learned, however, searching is much easier than using the microscopic print in the paper editions."

During the course of preparing this review, I experienced several interface problems with **BIP PLUS** that, while not egregious, caused a certain amount of frustration and hence should be discussed. The first involves searching for titles with "and" and "or" in them, such as *War and Peace*. If the user types `ti = war and peace` on the search screen ("ti" an abbreviation for "title"), the system responds not with books entitled *War and Peace* but a Boolean search: 851 hits for "war," 291 for "peace," and 0 for "cs" (combine set). An inexperienced

or ill-trained searcher will most likely conclude, incorrectly, that no book called *War and Peace*, including Tolstoy's famous novel, is currently in print. Only through instruction or reading the printed manual that accompanies **BIP PLUS** — a 180-page looseleaf document — will the searcher discover that quotation marks must be placed around titles containing the connectors "and" and "or" in order to retrieve them as titles. Otherwise, according to the manual, the program will treat the title, as it did in the case of *War and Peace*, as "a Boolean argument and break it in two."

But this is not the end of the "and" problem. **BIP PLUS** customarily records "and" as an ampersand ("&"), meaning that in the database Tolstoy's novel is *War & Peace*, not *War and Peace*. This seemingly small difference is significant because, again quoting the manual, "In order to retrieve a citation, the title must be entered exactly as it appears in the official record." So, to find Tolstoy's book in **BIP PLUS**, the user must know to enter `ti = "war & peace"` — a user-unfriendly command.

The other problem I have with **BIP PLUS**'s interface concerns retrieving directory information about publishers. Happily, the database includes such information, but getting to it is a chore, requiring six steps.

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To find a publisher's address or telephone number in **BIP PLUS**, you first go to the search screen and type pu = ("pu" for "publisher") followed by the name of the publisher, e.g., pu = Oryx Press. Second, hit Enter, which reveals 386 hits, meaning that Oryx has that many titles in **BIP** at this time. Third, hit the F10 key to display brief, one-line citations of the 386 titles. Fourth, select (or highlight) any title by pointing the cursor at it and hitting Enter. Fifth, hit F10 again, which displays the full bibliographic citation for the title selected and, for the first time, the F2 prompt, which appears at the bottom of the screen. Sixth, and finally, hit F2, the command to display directory information (mailing address, telephone, FAX, telex, etc.) about the publisher of the book selected. **BIP PLUS** would be improved if the user could go directly to publisher information from the initial search screen. NB: I have run into librarians and bookstore people using **BIP PLUS** who are either unaware that it contains directory information about publishers or don't know how to find it.

It is important to keep these niggling complaints about **BIP PLUS**'s interface in perspective. The purpose here is not to denigrate but to suggest ways in which **BIP PLUS** might become an even better reference source. Suffice it to say that **BIP PLUS** is a superior product. It exemplifies how CD-ROM technology can deliver enormous quantities of essential information in a convenient, comprehensive, practical, and cost effective manner. Clearly a winner, **BIP PLUS** is recommended to everyone — librarians, booksellers, publishers, vendors, writers, researchers, the literate public — who seeks current and accurate information about books published in English in the U.S. and, in some versions, abroad.

(For technical assistance or hardware requirements, call toll-free 800-323-3288.)

their collections, what areas they will not focus on for the near future, and what they like and don't like about collections that are available from various sources.

VM: Are there areas where your company may part ways with the desires of librarians?

SS: Not really. However, when it becomes obvious that a requested information product will not be economically feasible to produce, we cannot afford to publish it.

VM: What changes have you seen over the last few years in specific libraries, or in the library market as a whole? Can you identify some of the forces driving these developments?

SS: Access and technology seem to be two of the biggest issues impacting our company's change. Librarians recognize the value of the information we provide and our "value-added" features, such as the high level of integrity of our indexing. Because of this, we select the appropriate type of technology for delivering our products in a manner that will fit a library's budget. This is why many of our products are still produced in microfiche form, as opposed to expensive digital conversions which may be too costly for many library budgets. The bottom line for us is providing the information libraries need. We are dedicated to our customers; not just individual librarians, but users, and the library as a whole. This philosophy has been central to our relationship with libraries.

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