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Mark Nelson, Founder and President, Ovid Technologies

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Interview with Mark Nelson

President and Founder — Ovid Technologies, Inc.

by Katina Strauch (Editor, *Against the Grain*)

This is a man that you can talk computers to and understand! Soft spoken and low key, he has created a company that a lot of people are paying a lot of attention to ... — KS

ATG: Let's start at the beginning. Tell us how Ovid got started and developed into a company.

MN: I was an English lit major at Columbia. I had my BA and was getting my MA and I needed a job. I found a job on the job board that advertised flexible hours. The job was for a person to do manual information retrieval from BRS, Dialog, and NLM databases for a small consulting firm. So I learned how to do searching and would also pull articles and copy them. About that same time, PCs were coming along and with my searching experience I thought I could write an easy program. So, I wrote a program and started the company in 1988.

We bootstrapped the company in the beginning. My sister was the first person to join the company other than myself. We were successful because people liked the search software. End users could search the databases themselves the way the librarian would do it and wouldn't lose valuable information because they didn't know how to structure searches. We have been successful because we always try to stay in the forefront in terms of the technology. We've done a lot of things first. We put the entire MEDLINE database on CD-ROM. We also pioneered/invented mapping as a way of helping the end user build on the strength of indexing in a database.

ATG: You didn't come from the computer side, then?

MN: Definitely not. I thought the computer revolution had passed me by. I thought I was coming in too late and had too much to learn. But it turned out to be fairly easy for me because I knew about searching and the objectives of searching. One of the best compliments we get about Ovid is when people say that it is obviously designed by experts who know about searching.

ATG: What technologies are you using?

MN: In 1990 we started checking out networks and next generation software. That's really when Ovid was born. It took three years to build a flexible foundation for both Unix & Dos platforms for the future using Web and Internet. It was scalable for a single CD-ROM as well as for statewide systems. We also

started building a broader base of databases — ABI Inform and PsychInfo, broader than the STM databases that we had started with. In 1993, we had 100 employees and are still growing. In 1994 we went public and joined NASDAQ.

The Ovid Web interface was introduced in 1996 to great reviews. A lot of people expect awful functionality relating to the Web (compared to CD-ROM), but we had a strong search engine on the back end which helped us overcome that.

ATG: You've recently released a number of fulltext journal collections. Why/how did this come about?

MN: We began with fulltext in 1994 when we acquired the remnants of the BRS search service including Colleague. That gave us a foot in the door with regard to online and a base of fulltext medical journals. We have expanded that base and now have 30 fulltext journals and graphics (BRS didn't have graph-

"Web and fulltext are a big growth area for us."

ics). Another 70 journals are coming soon. Web and fulltext are a big growth area for us. Now we employ 180 people and have offices in New York, Utah, London, Amsterdam, Australia, France and Germany.

ATG: Can you talk more about your fulltext journal collection? You said you were interested in broadening the base from exclusively STM?

MN: Yes. We hope to get a broader collection of academic journals. The technology

is just getting in place with the Web and the networking infrastructure. Pricing and licensing issues have to be worked out. Publishers are worried about how the Web and networking will change their revenue streams and are trying to adapt to the new electronic world. But users who see fulltext love it and want more of it. They want fulltext on their desktop. This has significant implications for libraries. It points up the ever-expanding role of libraries as information will be able to reach more people than ever before. This is astounding potential. Librarians need to be involved on the intellectual side and less on the back side (shelving, circulation, etc.).

ATG: So, are you marketing to end users as well as libraries?

MN: Our success to date has been due to the library community embracing our technology. We are very grateful and respectful of that relationship. We market exclusively to libraries. We are servicing librarians and librarians are servicing their customers, the end users. We respect the position of librarians in choosing the right system for their end users.

ATG: Can you talk about the technical aspects of interfaces for the end users. Should librarians become more techies than intellectual content people?

MN: Over the short term, for better or worse, libraries and librarians have had to focus on the hardware infrastructure themselves. But I don't think that is where they (and we) add real value and, over time, I think the focus won't be on the technological infrastructure. To a certain extent the Web simplifies some of that once it is set up. That's when the librarian slant — finding the right information — comes in. And it is much more important in the world of the Net than in the paper world because the volume of information has greatly increased.

I like to think of a university library with 12 floors of stacks of books. Even printed information is useless without people or indexes to help you use it. Electronic information is no different. We need people, indexes, guide software to help us use it otherwise it is useless. Today people are paying a lot more attention to search engines than they did a year ago. They have preferences — Lycos, AltaVista, Yahoo. And they are starting to appreciate the role of the librarian as navigator in this new world. They are starting to appreciate what searching is all about. So, over time, librarians will have to focus less on the hardware infrastructure and

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more on the information technology. There is a lot of work that has to be done in that area.

ATG: *How about the contrast between Web versus CD-ROM search engines? Libraries generally prefer information over the Web which can be used by many users as opposed to CD-ROM which is more labor intensive to set up and is not available to as many users. Yet the search engines on the Web are inferior to many CD-ROM search engines.*

MN: Initially we were reluctant about the searching capabilities on the Web which are generally inferior to CD-ROM. People thought it was a step backward. At Ovid we've been pleasantly surprised by our Web product and so have our customers. Our technology is very different from AltaVista, Lycos and Yahoo. It's the next generation of search engine, if you will. Technically speaking, we have a Web front end talking to a Unix server on the back end. The rewritten code maintains "state." The Web in native form doesn't run "state." Once you perform a search, you are disconnected and lose your search statements. As every experienced searcher and librarian knows, building on search statements is critical to maintain and that's what we've delivered.

ATG: *Other vendors are using PDF to deliver fulltext. SGML is also an option. What are your thoughts about these strategies?*

MN: With fulltext, we mean the document as well as graphics. Several services offer page images or variations on that. The big publishers — Elsevier, Springer Verlag, Academic — have just recently articulated their fulltext strategy. Those three publishers make up the bulk of academic and scientific publishing. Generally the major journals are coming along in electronic form slowly. Licensing is one journal at a time and is a hard fought battle. We'd like to deliver 3,000 fulltext journals over the next three years and now we've just licensed more than 100! The process is just beginning.

It's interesting to look at how publishers are choosing to deliver content electronically and how it has changed/evolved over the past few years. It started with electronic pictures of the printed product. That's okay, but it is really just a photocopy. You can't search it, can't link to a reference, there is no navigation like in real fulltext. The PDF format was the next step. But this format is proprietary (Adobe) and is print page oriented which I believe is its biggest drawback. That format is pushing very hard and has had some success, but it is pitted against the open HTML (a

subset of SGML) standard of SGML and HTML (a subset of HTML). SGML makes no assumptions about the output and is more suited to viewing on the screen. We believe that people want to read more text on the screen and that scrolling is better than the page format. One of the big drawbacks of PDF as far as I am concerned is that it has its roots in the printed page. When you print in PDF you get the printed page; in SGML you get additional print options. In the long term, one or the other (PDF or SGML) will win out. It doesn't matter which one wins. I personally think that SGML provides us with an easier hook in the literature and a link to references when you load a fulltext journal. But this is an important question for the ARL and STM community especially.

ATG: *Moving right along, numerous models exist for the dissemination of fulltext. The most frequently discussed is a distributed model. You've talked about aggregation. Why is that your model?*

MN: The distributed model is one where the content resides at different sites so that when the user wants fulltext, s/he goes to the

"Users who see fulltext love it and want more of it."

site and pulls it down. In the aggregated model, we bring it together in one place with centralized pricing and licensing. People don't want just one publisher's data. They want content from a dozen different publishers. It's a lot of aggravation to be registered with dozens of different publishers. People want fulltext in one place and in the distributed model you can't do this. Ovid's strategy is to provide aggregated content, preindexed and preloaded. The technology and search engines require the aggregated model in order to be fulltext searchable.

At Ovid we think there are a lot of reasons for bringing the content together. The aggregated model is part of our value added. Libraries don't want to deal with hundreds of publisher licenses. Ideally speaking, publishers could get together and develop a standard, but that is several years off (if at all), plus you have many, many publishers without the technological resources. So, we think that aggregating the content makes sense.

ATG: *How has the market reacted to your products?*

MN: We have more than 100 libraries now are using our fulltext products and they have been very well received since we started marketing them six months ago. If we get the chance to show what we can do, we usually win. We like to be in head to head situations. And we keep hearing — "we want more content as quickly as possible."

ATG: *So — what are Ovid's future plans for the delivery of primary information?*

MN: We want to continue licensing as much content as possible. There is a demand for it, and we hope that as more and more people use the content there will be more reason for publishers to deliver their content electronically. If, for example, you are the number 1 psychiatric journal and the number 2 journal is out there on desktops (or vice versa), then you are less available than your competitor. Journals compete on brand name and image. This is a very important aspect that can't be underplayed. Being online needs to become a sign of approval. People who use our products need to tell publishers that they want to see more content available electronically. It is more powerful as a statement when publishers hear this directly from librarians.

We have a group of people who talk to publishers. It's an educational process right now. We have to explain to publishers who we are, show them our model, try to address their concerns. Unfortunately, publishers think that if one site subscribes, the rest will cancel. It's a question of education, understanding the pricing models. It's a new technology, a new delivery medium. It's a long process.

ATG: *What's your sense of the future of the information industry?*

MN: What is exciting about today is that we finally have all these things coming together — the technology in terms of the bandwidth, the software in terms of the Web and the Internet, and the search engine software to search bibliographic files in fulltext. And we can make this service available campus or institution wide, not just in the library. The Web is an enabling technology. Before this point, journals were bound and gagged, sitting on library shelves. Now the journal is free. Here is a way to present the library without walls — to take the library's intellectual content and make it available on a wider basis. The ease of use goes up as the ease of access increases. And usage will also increase. In the past, if people had questions they might not have pursued the answer because it was a physical trip to the library. Now they can have the library on their desktop. I believe it's a brave new world — for libraries and librarians and for information technology. And the excitement is there. People see the potential. Look at what's happened on Wall Street with Netscape. There's no more time lag. There's real time information and it will be a given, say, five years from now. There's no going back. It's revolutionary.

Well, y'all. This has been an invigorating interview. Why not contact Mark at Ovid Technologies — 333 7th Ave., New York, NY 10001. 212-563-3006 and tell him so! — KS