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A Balmy Time for CD-ROM

by **Cheryl LaGuardia** (Coordinator of the Electronic Learning Facility, Harvard College Library, Cambridge, MA 02138), ph.: 617-496-4226; fax: 617-496-9802 <claguard@fas.harvard.edu>

*Not mine own fears, nor the prophetic soul
Of the wide world dreaming on things to come,
Can yet the lease of my true love control,
Supposed as forfeit to a confined doom
The mortal moon hath her eclipse endured,
And the sad augurs mock their own presage;
Incertainties now crown themselves assured,
And peace proclaims olives of endless age.
Now with the drops of this most balmy time
My love looks fresh....*

William Shakespeare, Sonnet 107

Reading Sonnet 107, I have to shake my head in wonder at Shakespeare's overwhelming prescience and perspicacity: how did the man anticipate and appreciate the invention of CD-ROMs by nearly 400 years? Because it's obvious he's talking about this medium, whose demise has been predicted almost since it first became available. I tried out early CD-ROMs in 1985, and it was later that year I first heard industry pundits utter "sad augurs" of its doom, characterizing the format as an interim technology. And yet CD-ROMs are still among us, a mortal moon doggedly enduring its eclipse (Shakespeare even nailed the disc imagery, for heaven's sake!).

Librarians and publishers alike are struggling through this age rampant with fears and "incertainties" about the right format to use. As we work increasingly with the World Wide Web, it seems that

perhaps CD-ROMs' applicability is waning—isn't it always better, faster, easier, and possibly even cheaper to put something on the Web rather than CD-ROM? Well, no, frankly, it isn't.

The Mythic Proportions of the Web

If the Web could deliver all reference materials better, faster, easier, and cheaper than any other mode of publication, both publishers' and librarians' lives would be simplified: we'd simply convert everything into Web formats as soon as possible and be done with it. Although I have been an avowed CD-ROM enthusiast, I, like most other librarians, have only one vested interest concerning reference products: to encourage the development of the best possible research tools in the most appropriate format available. If the Web answers every need well, then it should be the format of choice.

When Web-based products were first introduced, some of them offered numerous advantages over both printed and CD-ROM resources, most notably in terms of timeliness and immediacy. I'll never forget a demonstration by an *Encyclopedia Britannica Online* rep showing **P.L. Travers'** full obituary the day she died. For current news sources it is hard to beat Web-based products.

But current news sources are only one small slice of the juicy pie that constitutes a good reference collection, whether physical or virtual. Dictionaries and encyclopedias, handbooks and guides, bibliographies, indexes and abstracts, government documents and data—all of these, plus other publications, make up effective reference collec-

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JSTOR promise that libraries dropping subscriptions will have access to what they have already purchased. But promises like that are few. Other suggested solutions are to charge maintenance fees for limited access or provide the "paid for information" on CD-ROM. But clearly, this is an issue that has no easy solution.

There is also the issue of content. A revealing article entitled "What does Electronic Full-Text Really Mean? A Comparison of Database Vendors and What They Deliver," was just published in *Reference Services Review*, volume 27, no. 2 1999. In it, the authors note that "none of the four databases in this study gave cover-to-cover full-text for all the journals in the sample test." They found that letters to the editor, short columns, book reviews, etc., were omitted. This is something libraries that hope to cancel paper subscriptions need to be aware of.

The issue of archiving for preservation may be even more difficult. The very integrity of electronic format is in question. Many are skeptical of its staying power. **Sir Charles Chadwyck-Healey** does "not think that electronic storage is a satisfactory archival medium at the present time as it has not been properly tested." (see p. 36) He points to short

term solutions like keeping "multiple copies of all our CD-ROMs, refresh tapes and properly maintain Web sites in more than one location." But long term, with the constant change in technology, no one knows. Will you be able to find a CD-ROM player in 100 years? Will the Web exist in 2050 or will it have been replaced by something else? Regardless of the answers to questions like these, librarians and publishers struggle with this issue. Sir Charles feels that, "at the end of the day the publisher must remain responsible for the maintenance of his own data." (see p. 36) But libraries have a bigger responsibility than that. We have tried in our imperfect way to act as the record keepers for the written word. As uncertain as the future looks, it will be one of our greatest challenges to maintain that commitment.

Wrap up

The world of information is in constant flux. Naturally, publishers are scanning the horizon in search of markets and profits, but they should not be making their decisions unchallenged or in a vacuum. A creative tension exists between publisher and librarian that if used productively, offers both fair profit margins and quality products at affordable prices. For our part, librarians need to question, cajole, and sometimes fight for the best possible product at the best possible price, whether in print or online. Librarians cannot

be content to sit back and merely observe. We also have to adhere to our tradition of public service, providing our patrons with timely information in the most accessible and useful formats. And, of course we will have to continue our tradition of collecting and preserving for future generations. Remember if we don't, who will?

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for the next ten years or so (or at least for paper). In our situation CD-ROMs running on a single station are fairly routine; however, networked CD-ROM databases are problems for us. We rely on the computing center to operate that network and the reliability has been poor. We are moving more and more CD-ROM based databases to Web versions. I think we will continue to be pressured to provide greater remote access to our reference resources, which means more Web-based databases and, concurrently, more reference and instruction services provided online. That riptide we're riding just keeps rolling. I hope that when we get free from it, we'll still be able to say that we are in the business of providing access to information and knowledge and preserving it for future generations."

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tions. Some of these can, and have been, well translated onto the Web. Others are still best served in print, while others continue to be implemented most effectively on CD-ROM.

So the question becomes, when is it "better, faster, easier and cheaper" to put up something on the Web? Or to produce it on CD-ROM? Or to distribute the information in print? Strict guidelines cannot be established to answer every publishing contingency (as soon as we set 'em up, a product will appear to knock 'em down), but I can think of key issues that influence how I want to use reference tools, and, more importantly, how my patrons want to use them. So here's my take on what fits where in the present research environment.

To Web ...

How often in libraries these days can you coax "oohs and ahhs" out of a sophisticated group of 20-year olds who recently staggered out of their 11th viewing of *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace*? Yet it's wonderful to see just such a reaction from a class full of students when I'm demonstrating a full-text Web-based product that, as I note, they can access "from Belgium at 3 AM on a Sunday." Nope, you don't have to go to the shelf—YOU DON'T EVEN HAVE TO COME INTO THE LIBRARY. Beatific smiles all around, copious scribbling of URLs, happy, happy, happy users.

Subject and general indexes and abstracts, as well as many bibliographies (with accompanying full-text where possible), are natural Web converts. Many such resources were nightmares to use in print (naming no names since everyone reading this can think of at least three titles in as many seconds), and, while much better served on CD-ROM, became best served when made Web-accessible. So too, as mentioned above, are many news sources. Subject-specialized resources in business and the sciences, where immediate updates are crucial, are also ideal Web candidates. Where timeliness is key, the Web answers the call.

... or Not To Web

It can be argued, mostly from a user's perspective, that libraries should make as much as possible remotely accessible. I agree with this, to a point—that point being, keeping a rational definition of what "as much as possible" means. Users these days are savvy about the technological possibilities offered by the Web and Web-based research products: many of them know that it is "possible" to mount a product on the Web.

Whether it is economically feasible, or user-friendly, or realistic from a speed and data storage view, or even effective as a means of information and research delivery is not so clear, even to many of us contracting for these products for our clienteles. The eco-

nomics issues surrounding Web-based resources that limit their acquisition may be artificially screening out some of the other issues that should be considered when asking the question, "To Web or not to Web?"

Gray Areas

In many cases, it seems that the only impediments to putting every known reference product (and developing every new such product) solely on the Web are cost and storage: it is not yet cost-efficient to load and store all the old back files of certain products for Web access. It seems but a matter of time and reduced conversion and storage costs before these impediments disappear. And when they do, will there be wholesale Webconversion?

I hope not. I don't want every printed and CD-ROM reference tool to disappear, for several reasons. First, because I really prefer to use some reference sources in print or CD-ROM. Ready-reference tools such as dictionaries, handbooks, directories—quick lookup items—are mostly easier to grab off a shelf and scan than to log onto a Web site or load a CD-ROM to get at that morsel of information. I'm not saying they should not be available electronically for remote use, I'm saying (selfishly) that print is my preferred format for such titles to carry out my professional work as a librarian most efficiently and effectively. So, too, do I like encyclopedias in a CD-ROM format: they're affordable and updated sufficiently to be accurate (with Web-linked updates for many), they offer sophisticated yet easy access to information, and I like the fast local access.

For data handling, CD-ROM is still an effective format. The Web is not yet fast enough to handle huge amounts of data as quickly as it can be delivered off a well-designed CD-ROM product. And the interfaces that are presently available on the Web for many data products leave much to be desired.

How It Delivers

Interfaces are an aspect of reference resources that continue to fascinate me for a number of reasons, and a full discussion of the issues concerning them is at least another full article. In the context of this discussion, let me say that I am amazed at librarians' willingness to accept (gratefully!) Web-based search systems that they would have sneered at (and more importantly, rejected—(no budget dollars spent there)) in a CD-ROM format.

This is presumably due to "Web-desperation," a recently-defined condition among librarians so beleaguered by outside forces (administrative mandates and user demands) they

"Competition is the librarian's best friend, and that depends on us librarians demanding better product."

will resort to inane search screens on Web pages rather than demand better quality searching by waiting for a good product to be delivered, (and keeping their budgets in their pockets until they get "the goods"). Libraries, and their users, deserve better overall Web interfaces than are presently being made available (and when you learn the nitty-gritty of how some pages' search engines work, it's like

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taking an insider's tour of a meat-packing plant: you become the research equivalent of a vegetarian and are inclined to use only print thereafter).

We have been over this particular road so often you'd think we'd have learned the basic lay of the land by now: if it's not a good product delivered in a sensible, effective manner, don't buy it (or subscribe to it, another variation on electronic themes). As recently as the days of CD-ROM we saw different vendors making available different versions of standard files, and we picked and chose those that suited our users' needs best. Competition is the librarian's best friend, and that depends on us librarians demanding a better product.

One last word about interfaces: we all read reviews of printed books, costing \$50-100, saying this volume is poorly indexed or that title has no table of contents, and we don't buy those books. Shouldn't we be applying similar criteria when it comes to looking at online files costing hundreds or thousands of dollars?

The On-Going Case for CD-ROM

There are a bevy of reasons why I think CD-ROM will continue to play a large part in reference collections for some time to come (at least 10 to 20 years, which is several lifetimes in an electronic context). One of the most compelling reasons has emerged over the past couple of years, as so many large, standard resources have transferred over to the Web. Small companies (one- or two-person, in some cases) are bringing out highly specialized products that would never have even been produced in the early years of electronic access. These titles fill a void in the reference marketplace, and they are creating a niche market that is a boon to serious and specialized researchers. The big library publishers may not in the past have focused on such highly specialized, narrowly focused topics because they do not have mass appeal, but there is yet money to be made in the "less-evident" areas of research. And if you look over the publishing lists of some of the big publishers, you will see an increasing shift into subject-specific topics.

Is it feasible to bring these files out on the Web? If you are a company that already has a vast Web presence, and can add these files to your menu of offerings, it certainly is. But it is also advisable to keep offering them in CD-ROM format, because many libraries would like to channel use of more specialized, long-term research files to CD-ROM workstations (think about it: would you want a researcher tying up a Web-access station for six hours in order to use a highly-specialized, narrowly-focused title? Or would you rather have that person working away at a CD-ROM workstation?). And if you are a company that specializes in producing targeted, niche-type

products, you may be best served still by producing your basic products on CD-ROM (and possibly offering Web-access through a Web aggregator).

To Own or To Lease: CD-ROMs vs. Web Subscriptions

The ownership/subscription debate is still being waged in many libraries over electronic products, and is of especial significance for many reference products: depending upon your budget, it may be more rational and cost-effective to buy a CD-ROM encyclopedia than to subscribe to an online version (especially if your budget won't allow you to upgrade every title every year). In years of budget shortfalls, the purchased CD-ROM encyclopedia keeps on "giving," while the electronic file just goes away. CD-ROMs overall have hard, predictable, containable costs compared to some Web-based files (where you sign on for one price and six months later that price changes or the vendor pulls a major information component out of the file without notice).

Keeping Up With the Equipment

Equipment issues influence the development of reference collections very strongly. Many librarians are interested in going to Web-based versions of some files because their CD-ROM drives and towers are full. To do so they must often acquire much faster, more powerful computers than they presently

have. Again, in yet another tight library budget era, few libraries can do complete makeovers of their installed hardware base, so the present computers—many of which have been purchased for CD-ROM use—may determine what gets used in which format.

There are both good and bad technological access and maintenance trade-offs between Web-based and CD-ROM products: Web products can be easier to access once a browser-based station is set up, but CD-ROM products give libraries more local control over accessing the data. I don't know about those of you reading this, but the Web files of certain producers have been fairly unreliable and challenging to access over recent months. This will eventually become less of a problem—one hopes—as Web use stabilizes. Til then, however, I keep CD-ROM backups handy for highly used resources.

This Most Balmy Time

So I don't believe CD-ROMs are passé: they are yet a highly-efficient, cost-effective means of reference information delivery. To paraphrase *Sonnet 107* once more: in this most balmy time of working with multiple electronic reference formats, as "the wide world dream[s] on things to come," for me and many of my colleagues, CD-ROM continues to look fresh.

That Shakespeare: what a smart—and far-seeing—guy.

Here's Looking At — Distance Learning

by Eamon T. Fennessy (The Copyright Group, P.O. Box 5496, Beverly Farms, MA 01915 phone & fax (978) 927 9936 <EFENNESSY@worldnet.att.net>

My definition for this term is: "That system for providing in teractive instruction outside the traditional teacher/student classroom setting." Others express this differently. At a recent publishers' meeting, **Bonnie Lieberman**, Vice President at **John Wiley & Sons**, used this definition: "Any situation in which the teacher and student are separated."

Almost immediately one would ask: Where did this concept come from? Is it an effective educational tool? How long has this system been around? You will be surprised at the answers.

Where did distance learning start?

Some say the roots lie in mail-order correspondence courses. The students work at their own pace, at the location they select and, using their preferred technology: satellite transmissions, television, computers, and

other electronic platforms. As technology has changed, so have the means for delivering instruction. I personally like to think Distance Learning got its biggest boost more than fifty years ago in Australia's "School of the Air."

I can recall documentaries, perhaps from National Geographic, showing elementary school children in the Outback, online with the instructor and other students, via short-wave radio. The mere fact of children keeping in touch with their teachers who were thousands of miles away made an indelible mark in my memory. No classroom, no hall passes, no school buses, no school bells—just instruction—interactive instruction! On the other hand, there was no chance to run in the schoolyard at recess or the opportunity to socialize each day with your classmates in and around the school building.

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