Titanic Online Meeting

A report on the 8th International Online Information Meeting, Novotel, London 4-6 December 1984.

For many years the International Online Meetings had been held in the titanic hotel (the Cunard) which dominates the skyline in Hammersmith and was clearly intended to be reached by taxi rather than by underground from the adjacent station. At first it appeared that the 1984 meeting had transferred elsewhere to a hotel which sounded like a telegraphic address—the Novotel. But the Novotel is the old Cunard minus the ship models and with some marked improvements, especially in the catering. The cloakroom facilities remain inadequate, however.

The meeting consists of a very extensive exhibition and a well organized conference which starts well with delegates being handed a copy of the proceedings. The conference began with a disappointing keynote address from Martha Williams and then split into parallel sessions. The opening session was disappointing in that it was alleged online activity is beginning to reach a plateau. This assertion was based solely on connect time and failed to take into account the switch to faster terminals and improvements in the man-machine interface, both in terms of improvements in human expertise and machine performance. Other criteria, such as royalty payments to data base providers, might have painted a different picture; and one that would have supported the signs of a highly buoyant industry reflected elsewhere at the meeting.

Three major trends were detectable. Firstly, at last the online industry appears to be taking an interest in Artificial Intelligence in an endeavour to make their wares more widely available. Secondly, the industry is becoming acutely aware of the need to be able to market their products to the end user. This is being tackled in three ways: by improvements to the host systems by the introduction of simplified subsidiary systems (which are even capable of assessing which host or data base to search) and by incorporating intelligence within the user’s own terminal. This last may seem remote from large systems, but one major data base provider (ISI) is marketing its own SCI-MATE which affords unified searching on DIALOG, BRS, MEDLINE and SDC. Thirdly, there are signs that bibliographical retrieval no longer holds the centre of the stage, but is being supplanted by real information and data bases. Traditional publishers, such as Wiley and Bowker, are taking a lively interest in marketing their publications in this new form. Obviously, such activity may eventually have a considerable influence upon the information professions.

The scale of online publishing may be gauged from the fact that NEXIS, marketed in the UK by Butterworth (Telepublishing) now contains the full text of over 130 publications relating to news and current affairs, including the New York Times, the Economist and Financial World. Access to NEXIS, and LEXIS—the specialized legal data base, has been inhibited by the requirement to acquire a dedicated terminal, but this has been relaxed to admit the IBM personal computer, and further relaxation is expected this year. Publications which may be familiar to indexers which are now available online include Ulrich’s Periodicals Directory, Who Owns Whom, the Kompas Directory, the Thomas Register of American Manufacturers and Everyman’s Encyclopaedia. The American host organizations, such as DIALOG, are actively exploiting their services at reduced, off-peak rates, and in simplified search formats, to the man in the street, or more correctly the modern man or woman with his or her own terminal.

The Americans are able to occupy a dominant position in this industry because they have a large, homogeneous, domestic market and, in consequence, are able to exploit the rest of the world almost as a by-product. The Europeans suffer from a surfeit of languages and national pride, although attempts are being made to diminish these disadvantages by establishing a network of online systems within Europe.

The exhibition, which originally occupied a supporting role, now dominates the proceedings with its 80 exhibitors, especially as the 90 project reviews are closely associated with it. These operate in tandem with the parallel sessions of the main conference. The exhibition has now expanded to fill what appeared to be the cargo hold (in Cunard terms) and has expanded up on to the promenade deck. In short, the exhibition is beginning to run out of space and really demands a more suitable home—such as the Wembley Conference Centre.

One major problem remains for the casual visitor; namely, the difficulty of being able to see systems being demonstrated. In part this reflects the relatively slow nature of online searching, in part a shortage of hardware and exhibitors, but it perhaps may be indicative that exhibitions are an unsuitable medium, except to introduce the uninitiated. Existing online users might be better served by the data base providers and online hosts making greater use of free sampling to potential customers.

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The Indexer Vol. 14 No. 3 April 1985