THE AH! FACTOR

six. To hone the description more particularly would indicate a more important reference than any of them is; we are not according subheadings on the principle of subtraction from a total string of minor references, but on intrinsic virtue only. Recurrent characters need to be listed and retrievable; but if they never elicit an 'Ah!' to bestow a subheading, then a run of twelve page-references truly conveys a series of 'Mm' entries. They lie within that stratum of mentions that should not be excluded from an index, but are not important enough to waste space-consuming words on. We must acknowledge that this grade exists, and that thereby hangs many a string. We not only have a system for subjective analysis of weight of entry, but display it according to the same code.

Similarly, if three separate characters are merely present at a wedding, rating 'Mm' only, each receives only a page number for the occasion. If two of them have only two further page numbers each, making satisfactory complete entries of name and three page references, but one character has another eight 'Mm' references—then he must have a string of nine, not a falsely inflated 'at MC's wedding' to reduce the number at the expense of truth to significance, making it appear comparatively that he did more at the wedding than the two fellow-

CD-ROMs (Compact Disks—Read Only Memory) and their future are much featured in the current trade press. The NFAIS Newsletter for November 1990 offers three articles on the subject: 'When is the price right? CD-ROM enters new territory'; 'CD-ROM and the next wave of technology'; 'CD-ROM—the information breakthrough'. The second, by Martin Brooks of Bowker Electronic Publishing, gives a clear basic description of the software:

'Five years ago it was impossible to imagine placing a single 4.75" shiny disk in a computer and having access to over 550 megabytes of data... and that these data would be accessible using a relatively easy-to-use interface that did not require knowledge of cryptic commands and syntax.'

More and more databases are now being placed on CD-ROM; and established printed publications may be reissued in this alternative, enhanced form. Over 1,400 commercial titles have been released in CD-ROM versions, delivering large amounts of data conveniently at relatively low cost. CD-ROM developers and publishers offer unique schemes for indexing, sorting and providing access to data, claims Brooks.

'The amount of space available in the CD-ROM medium has enabled publishers to create products with almost unlimited indexing capabilities, allowing users to access data in ways never before imaginable or, at the very least, never before practical.' Details are given of the indexing of the CD version of Bowker's Books in Print: 'access by author, ISBN, keyword (any word of the title, author or subject type), Library of Congress catalog number, publisher, subject type, Ingram [a trade book distributor] title code, title, 4-4 author/title, series title, title key, audience, grade, illustration, language, price, and publication year. A Boolean search combining elements like “find all computer books that are illustrated for grades 6 and up that were published after 1988” can customize retrieval further. The CD-ROM software displays results in about 20 seconds.'

Priscilla Oakeshott gives us the statistics. In February 1990 there were over 800 CD-ROMs on the market (each with a capacity of 10,000 pages), mainly conversions of existing databases or large full-text reference works. The emphasis is on business, medicine and science, though there are disks in all the 'online' subject areas: LISA, CAB, Sociological Abstracts, etc. Most are starting with the backfiles only and planning to offer regular updates. Although most of the CD-ROMs so far announced are new formats of existing online files, some are developing...
more integrated services, such as linking bibliographic references to a database of complete articles. 'The CD-ROM, like the magnetic tape, provides the user with a complete database for a one-off, and therefore high and up-front, cost, with unlimited access.'

Silver Platter is the first company set up specifically to publish on CD-ROM. Recently released by Software Toolworks of Sussex is the CD-ROM Toolworks Reference Library, which combines several dictionary sources on one disk, including Webster's New World Thesaurus and its dictionaries of the English language, of quotations and of twentieth-century history, and over 100,000 US business and government address and telephone numbers, and a spelling checker. The package costs £99.99 + VAT.

The Lord of the disks

One current application is ADONIS, created by a consortium of international publishers in the scientific, technical and medical fields. Articles from more than 200 journals in the medical and biological fields were optically scanned and the images of the pages stored weekly on CD-ROM optical disks and supplied to document supply centres. The jukebox at the British Library (well, what else could it be called?) holds 270 disks, with a choice between current-awareness indexing services.

The indexing system supporting ADONIS can provide 'research profiles' according to individual interests, and is at three levels. Level 1 is 'a mere physical location indicator, uninformative as to the content of the articles'; level 2 adds 'details of the bibliographic citation'. Level 3 adds subject indexing, created by Excerpta Medica. The level 2 index uses about 14 mbyte of hard disk storage per year and contains a unique and unambiguous article identifier. The Excerpta Medica subject index also carries the ADONIS identifier, so providing a link to the articles stored on the CD-ROMs. It can be on a separate disk from the bibliographic index, stored and accessed on a different computer, or interrogated through the telephone network. The index can be browsed, and used to generate current-awareness bulletins.

ADONIS is a thoroughly international production. It is based in Amsterdam, where articles are checked and indexed. In Berlin they are scanned; in South Wales the disks are mastered and duplicated; they are distributed to subscribers and users; and finally back to base with the royalties.

Silver newspapers

Newspapers are becoming available on CD-ROMs. All the text of the 1990 issues of The Times and Sunday Times, complete with indexes and appropriate software to find specific articles, is to be supplied on a single compact disk, THOR, playable on a CD player linked to a personal computer. One or more subject words will locate information, and photographs and graphics can be provided. THOR will be available from January 1991, and is to be followed by quarterly updates containing all issues of both Times titles. The first disk, plus the first five quarterlies, will together cost £975, needing also a Toshiba XM-2200 CD-ROM drive, software and interface card. Material for the years 1985 to 1989 will also be made available in 1991.

Bowker-Saur is to offer a similar but separate system for the Independent and Independent on Sunday, going back to issues from November 1988, charging £598 for the 1989 and 1990 disks, and £499 for 1991 quarterly updates. The Northern Echo is to launch its own system in December 1990, and The Guardian plans publication on CD-ROM in association with Chadwyck-Healey.

Varying views for the future

Writing on CD-ROM publishing in Learned Publishing, D. P. Murphy suggests 'From the publisher's point of view, CD-ROM does bring certain advantages over online.' And moreover, 'For the database which is produced directly from the print equivalent, the enormous advantages of the power of retrieval software over the conventional print index are obvious... The retrieval facilities are also obviously greatly superior to microfiche...'

But the Editorial of Information Media & Technology for November 1990 considers CD-ROM with modified enthusiasm, describing it as 'a specialist medium selling in comparatively small quantities and limited to those with access to IBM compatible or Mac personal computers', suffering from 'a proliferation of retrieval systems and user interfaces' because of the lack of standards for the exchange of information on CD-ROM. Standardization, though, Bernard Williams suggests, would inhibit the introduction of new functions by software developers and make pricing difficult.

Nevertheless, Martin Brooks assures us that CD-ROM capabilities and applications are being extended, and multi-media CD-ROM are on their way: 'more dynamic', he promises. 'People will be able to access more material on a single disk than most of them were able to access in a lifetime, just a few years ago.'

References


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