Manual of Online Search Strategies: A Review

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Manual of Online Search Strategies; a Review.


This rather weighty tome was prepared, according to the authors, to assist those information retrieval specialists who have mastered the mechanics of online searching but who need to broaden their exposure to databases in particular subject areas. The contributors are recognized authorities in searching for specific kinds of information online. The fact that many are English lends an international air to many of the individual chapters and provides a closer view of online services with which an American reader may not be familiar. With few exceptions, the chapters generally follow the formula of describing the key database(s) for the subject area, a list of other databases which may prove relevant for certain kinds of searches, and examples of strategies and output. What follows is a chapter-by-chapter summary:

Chapter 1, “Developing Search Strategies,” by the editors (pp. 1-43). This section includes a brief but satisfactory overview of the importance of the “pre-search interview,” the process by which the intermediary assists in determining the client's information need and identifying techniques for satisfying it. The editors suggest the use of printed database directories as an aid to database selection, as well as the exploitation of “database index” features such as DIALOG’s “DialIndex.” Searching via controlled vocabulary and retrieval by free-text techniques, and methods for broadening and narrowing retrieval during the search process, are also discussed.

Chapter 2, “Citation Indexing,” by David Bawden (pp. 44-83). This chapter focuses on the use of the SciSearch and Social SciSearch databases (corresponding to the printed Science and Social Science Citations Indexes, published by ISI) as a means of gathering literature citations when controlled vocabulary and free-text techniques are not appropriate. The author's list of valid and invalid scholarly citation provides an interesting way to look at the “publish-or-perish” dilemma with regard to authors' decisions to cite the “right” authority.

Chapter 3, “Patents,” by Edlyn Simmons (pp. 84-156). This is probably the best “patents database” literature this reviewer has ever read. It provides an excellent discussion of the types of patents and patent applications, and gives some background on the legal issues and patent information not usually included in patents files. In addition to highlighting principal sources, it also identifies other databases which contain meaningful patent information.

Chapter 4, “Chemistry,” by Parina Hassanaly and Henri Dou (pp. 157-236). The Chemical Abstracts Search database is most thoroughly explored, with a good discussion of the use of CA Registry Numbers and other techniques for retrieval. Index Chemicus, the Chemical Reaction Documentation Service, and DARC are discussed fairly well. The authors' opinion that only three multidisciplinary databases — PASCAL, NTIS, and SciSearch — are useful is open to debate. Toxicology is ignored in this chapter, as it is addressed in others.

Chapter 5, “Biological Sciences,” by Bonnie Snow (pp. 237-278). Some eighty databases are identified which provide substantial coverage of biomedical literature, with Biosis Previews recognized as the starting point for any good search in biology. This section also includes an overview of the use of DIALOG’s “Map” command for search strategy development.

Chapter 6, “Health Sciences,” by Ann J. Van Camp and Catherine Seeley (pp. 279-322). The five major medicine databases — Medline, EMBase (Excerpta Medica), Biosis Previews, SciSearch, and CatLine — often provide considerable overlap resulting in duplicate citations. The authors provide an extensive list of many other online resources providing health-related information, and illustrate several sample searches.

Chapter 7, “Agriculture,” by Tim Cullen and John Parkinson (pp. 323-354). The discussions of Agricola and CAB (Commonwealth Agricultural Bureaux) Abstracts as major sources are
somewhat skimpy — very little discussion concerning their respective subfiles and sources is encountered. The research-in-progress files of the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (AGRIS, Agriculture Research Information System) and the European Community (AGREP, Agriculture Research Projects) are described. American readers may enjoy the overview of agriculture-related information available on British telecom’s PRESTEL service. The authors list a number of other useful databases and briefly discuss some approaches to information retrieval on forestry and veterinary science.

Chapter 8, “Energy and Environment,” by John R. Luedtke (pp. 355-393). This chapter concentrates mainly on the Department of Energy’s “Energy Data Base” (EDB), although it does mention a number of other files of interest. The DOE/RECON information service is listed as a host for EDB and other databases; but in 1987 DOE/RECON ceased operations and has been replaced by DOE-ITIS, which features only a few of the databases. In a list of search aids, the author notes “DOD/RECON,” the name of the Defense Department’s system is actually DROLS — Defense RDT&E (Research, Development, Testing, and Evaluation) On-Line System. Despite these relatively minor errors, the chapter is very insightful.

Chapter 9, “Engineering,” by Donald T. Hawkins (pp. 394-416). The author provides a good review of the coverage of the COMPENDEX database (corresponding to Engineering Index). The Aerospace Database and the Global Mobility File of the Society of Automotive Engineer are less thoroughly described. A list of general and specialized databases is provided, but does not include the names of online services which provide them. Considering the enormous variety of engineering literature databases, Chapter 9 left this reviewer hungry for more breadth and detail.

Chapter 10, “Computer Science and Information Technology,” by David Raft (pp. 417-468). In this section the author makes the assertion that literature on information and computer technologies can be found in many databases because of the continuing (and growing) interest in such a wide variety of disciplines — education, chemistry, business, etc. He describes a number of relevant databases on the ESA and DIALOG services, and illustrates the application of certain advanced online features, including ESA’s “Zoom” and DIALOG’s “Report” functions. He also provides a fairly detailed summary of principal search features of appropriate newsletters available full-text through NewsNet — this discussion alone is solid enough to be worth a read.

Chapter 11, “Social and Behavioral Sciences,” Claire Drinkwater (pp. 469-506). Although the author supplies a fairly lengthy listing of more than 50 social sciences databases from 17 online services, the author seems to concentrate on those available primarily through DIALOG and BRS. While the Comprehensive Dissertations database is acknowledged as one multidisciplinary source, NTIS is not mentioned at all. While the search examples shown are competent enough, the author — who is associated with the University of London Institute of Education Library — might have taken the opportunity to give greater coverage to the European sources in key areas, such as local government administration. In all fairness, however, it may have been much more appropriate for the editors to have allowed separate chapters for important specific disciplines (education, political science and public administration, psychology and mental health, sociology and social work, history, and so on).

Chapter 12, “Law: British and European Legal Systems,” by Rosemary Gray (pp. 507-536). Law represented one of the first areas of full-text information storage and retrieval. This author provides views of several services and databases devoted to European law (coverage in Lexis as well as Eurolex, Ceqel, and POLIS), and observes some of the differences between the practice styles of American attorneys and their British counterparts.

Chapter 13, “Law: North American Legal Systems,” Gary D. Gott and Gary R. Hartman (pp. 537-558). Westlaw and Lexis are each discussed to some length; the Canadian QL service, however, is mentioned only in passing. In this chapter as well as the one preceding it, the reader could argue that both sections should have included some discussion of bibliographic files (Legal Resources Index, Index to Legal Periodicals, etc.) as well as “non-legal” databases of use for legal information research, such as news databases (commentary on impacts of legal decisions), scientific and technical databases (for identifying “experts”), and so on.

Chapter 14, “Business and Economics: United Kingdom,” by Helen Butcher (pp. 559-598). This section covers two types of information: directory-style data on business enterprises (notably from the Key British Enterprises and Jordan-Watch databases), and literature on management.

and business activities (Management & Marketing Abstracts; Textline; the World Reporter; etc.). Economics as a social science is addressed in an earlier chapter, but there is an interesting discussion of numeric data sources. Little discussion is made of U. S. databases in business management, although these are likely to provide some coverage of British industrial activities.

Chapter 15, "Business and Economics: United States," by Mike Koenig (pp. 599-622). Although there is a brief review of textual databases, the focus appears to be on company and demographic data. The management and marketing literature sources are addressed mostly in passing.

Chapter 16, "Humanities," by Candy Schwartz (pp. 623-678). Bibliographic databases in the humanities (and, to a lesser extent, in the social sciences) have been generally slow in arriving online. The market for these databases is fairly small (largely academic) and not especially elastic in funding (accepting the hypothesis that most searching is affordable either through institutional support, such as company research efforts, or through outright government grants, which in the U. S. are more likely to be available in the “hard” sciences). Given the situation, the author does a credible job in discussing a variety of bibliographic databases in key subjects (art, music, history, etc.) and the databases of the Library of Congress and the British Library for multidisciplinary sources. She also lists the “art catalogs” which are now online (such as ARTQuest) and summarizes their coverage and contents.

Chapter 17, "Systems and Databases for Office and Home Use," by Richard V. Janke (pp. 679-715). This chapter covers two kinds of services which might be of interest: electronic mail (via Canada’s ENVOY 100), and user-friendly interfaces (BRS’s After Dark and Colleague, Info Globe’s ISEARCH, DIALOG’s Knowledge Index, and WilsonLine by its microcomputer-based interface, WilSearch). While the examples are interesting enough, this chapter is not particularly satisfying for several reasons. First, the author is a widely regarded search authority, and could have written in depth on many of the other subject-specific areas contained in the volume; his views on intermediary services in Canada (QL and CAN/OLE, for example) would have been of great interest.

Having Richard Janke write on end-user services is like demanding that your blood pressure be taken by Dr. Christiana Barnard. Secondly, there are many other electronic mail and bulletin board systems in operation; an overview of their similarities and differences might prove much more insightful than a demonstration of just one. Thirdly, the user-friendly systems discussed are merely interfaces to sophisticated intermediary systems; no discussion covers other services such as GEnie, Compuserve, The Source, and Dow Jones News/Retrieval Service. Finally, the chapter seems somewhat out of place — this reader had been rolling along (at the lawful maximum speed), letting the experts share their knowledge in earlier chapters; and then suddenly the brakes were put on, with menus appearing like “Reduced Speed Ahead” signs on a freeway.

Chapter 18, "Databases for Quick Reference," by D. J. Grogan (pp. 716-740). Although competently written, this chapter (like the one that precedes), seems somewhat out of place. Many of the points raised could have been raised quite satisfactorily earlier in the volume, in order to illustrate the differences between the "down-and-dirty" reference search and the more detailed, comprehensive literature search.

Chapter 19, "Electronic Journals," by Harry Collier (pp. 741-764). The author presents a history of the British Library’s "BLEND" project for electronically editing and publishing refereed papers. A detailed explanation of "The Electronic Magazine" — a full text news service on ESA, published by the author's employer, Learned Information, Ltd. — is included.

Appendix 1 lists all the databases discussed in the book, and indicates the online services through which they are available. Appendix 2 is a bibliography of database directories and other published literature (this is in addition to the backnotes and references provided in each chapter). Two indexes — one by name of database and online service, and the other by general subject area — complete the volume.

An overall evaluation of this type of compilation is difficult. While a few chapters are truly well-written, others are not quite as impressive (although none are outright "bad"). The fact that each section was prepared by a separate individual (American, British, Canadian, or French) almost guarantees a certain diversity in expression ("host" versus "online system," for example) and tone.

The fact remains, however, that whatever its other shortcomings, the volume should be a val-
Attention Donors to the Los Angeles Central Library

Nearly 2 years ago a notice appeared in SLA newsletters announcing a serious fire at the Los Angeles Central Library and soliciting donations of periodicals all across the country. We have had a wonderful response and still receive donation lists from time to time.

I would like to thank all of you who have taken the time to send in your lists and for your patience in this long process. Many of you are probably wondering when you will be able to unload those boxes that you have set aside for so long.

To explain why the Central Library has not been in a position to accept your books, I would like to bring you up to date on its status. Even though it has been 2 years since the fire, we are still without our public library. First, the library suffered a second fire in September of 1986 that was centered in the Art and Music department, which destroyed valuable sheet music. The second fire, like the first, was declared an act of arson but no suspects were ever found.

Another major setback occurred when the selected temporary site, an old department store building, was judged seismically unsound. Given the unacceptable expense of the needed structural changes, the library Board then had to locate and approve a second temporary site. If this site is also approved by the City Council, we can expect the temporary library to open by the end of the year.

The ad hoc committee will be getting in touch with you over the next 2 months to give you instructions regarding where to send your donations. If you sent in a list but have not yet heard if it has been accepted or if you have not heard from us by mid-August, please call or send us a note. More specifically, if you have sent a list to Eleanor Eckstein at Pannell Kerr Forster, please contact Mary-Ann Mernes (see attached list). Eleanor left Pannell Kerr and I am afraid that some of your lists might have been lost as no arrangements were made to forward them to another committee member.

Again, in behalf of the ad hoc committee, I thank you all for your donations and your patience. I know this has been an extremely long process, and many of you are anxious to send your donations. We greatly appreciate your efforts to help the Los Angeles Central Library and hope to contact you all very shortly.

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