
Public-Access Provocations: An Informal Column

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Progress in public access doesn't come smoothly or uniformly. If
you can actually take two steps forward (through a change for the
better) and only one step back (because something gets misplaced
along the way), you're doing pretty well.

Two steps forward: My local branch library now has a decent
CD-ROM periodical index on a neat little PC workstation (with,
presumably, a hidden Pioneer minichanger CD-ROM drive), replacing
the clunkier Magazine Index on roll fiche, which replaced . . .
well, no up-to-date periodical index at all.

One step back: For simple searches, Magazine Index was
significantly faster, and somewhat easier to use. That's a half-
step. The other half-step: the menus for the CD-ROM system make
it all too easy to escape to the C:/ prompt, particularly if you
just want to return to the opening screen. There's no C:/ prompt
(with its opening for deviltry) on a roll fiche reader. (Yes, I
know an experienced PC hand could trap that escape to the C:/
prompt. This is a small branch library. Where do they find
experienced PC hands?)

Two steps forward: Library users at colleges and some public
libraries will soon be able to go beyond their local online
catalogs to see what else is available in hundreds of libraries,
all in a single search, all at a controlled price, while using
their own library-wide or campus-wide network and using an
increasingly familiar search syntax.

One step back: The user interface for such extended access
will be character-based and probably rely on VT100 emulation, so
that it can be used in the real world across a wild variety of
local equipment.

Two steps forward: Computers are getting powerful enough to
provide fast searching for enormously large databases.

One step back: We still don't know how to balance precision
and recall, and to provide good access while retaining user
control.

What we need to watch out for is the "crazy dance" of the
John Sebastian song, "one step forward, two steps back."

One step forward: Providing enough ready-reference tools on
CD-ROM (etc.) so that experienced library users can do some of
their own reference work (albeit probably more slowly and less
effectively than if reference librarians were helping).

Two steps back: Taking away front-line reference librarians
and assuming that "disintermediation" is inherently a good thing.

One example is enough. There are others, but you get the
point. Just a plea to recognize that almost every big

improvement in public access comes at some price, and to see that the price doesn't outweigh the improvement.

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