

EASYNET - AN INTERVIEW WITH RICHARD KOLLIN

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Abstract. A member of *Infomediary's* Advisory Board of Editors interviews Richard Kollin, the president of a firm offering EasyNet, an intelligent front-end and gateway system.

Intelligent front-end and gateway systems have been in use for some years to facilitate online searching in the plethora of databases available under various online services with differing sign-on protocols, search commands and information-retrieval languages.

The EasyNet service, developed by Telebase System under sponsorship of the National Federation of Abstracting and Indexing Services, offers menu-driven access to over 800 databases available under Dialog, BRS, SDC, Questel, VuText, Newsnet, etc. This computerized information intermediary/infomediary (to borrow the name of our journal) service permits even absolutely naive users to get bibliographic, factographic and/or full text information meeting their needs without pre-registration or any prior knowledge of online searching. All one needs is a valid credit card. EasyNet "interviews" the searcher to find out the specific information requirements, then automatically selects the most appropriate database and translates the search question into the language required by the given online service.

Peter Jacsó, a member of our Editorial Advisory Board and a regular speaker at both the National Online Meeting in New York and the International Online Meeting in London, recently had a chance to have a discussion with Richard Kollin, President of Telebase Systems, Inc. Excerpts of their talk thought to be of particular interest for our readers have been reproduced for *Infomediary*.

Infomediary: Your EasyNet system has been the talk of the town both at the International and National Online Information Meetings in London and in New York. Your booth proved to be a roadblock because of the many attendees at your demonstrations. What makes EasyNet so attractive?

Richard Kollin: The jungle of conflicting telephone numbers, choices of networks, log-on protocols, multi-level complex passwords, etc., has indeed taken its toll

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among many. First and foremost EasyNet is seen as a breakthrough and a unifying force. Additionally, the effective standardization of the searching protocols has had an exciting impact on people.

Infomediary: EasyNet is practically a computer clone of the human information intermediary. Does this imply that there will be no need for humans to mediate end-user information requests in the future?

Kollin: It probably obviates the need for lower-level intermediary activity. Such kinds of searching as simple "anding" and "oring" with a smidgen of nesting will probably be comprehensive and used by most reasonably well-educated people. It is also probable that someone interested in cats and dogs will eventually reach a level where they would enter "cat or dog". However, in using complex Boolean logic and in fine-tuning proximity indicators, the information intermediary cannot be replaced. Also, the intermediary role as an information consultant will be heightened, whereas the infomediary's exclusivity as the only source of electronic data will disappear.

Infomediary: Your multi-level menu system interviews the end-user for the topic being searched and proceeds ahead step by step as in a quiz game. This is very friendly for the absolutely naive user, but one who has used EasyNet for a couple of times might prefer to bypass some of the menus, but cannot do so. Do you contemplate a new version where an option for this bypassing would be possible?

Kollin: EasyNet II was designed to provide direct access if the user knows the name of the database. In that sense, it "jumps ahead". Our basic research is developing additional mechanisms for more rapid access but, if we must err, it will always be on the side of too much help as opposed to too little.

Infomediary: EasyNet I was criticized for not allowing the searcher to choose the database. In EasyNet II this facility was implemented, but the end user is still not permitted to select the vendor if a database is available via more than one vendor. It is understood that EasyNet automatically selects the least expensive alternative in this case, but price is not always the criterion. I may want to access a particular vendor for a given database for other reasons, e.g., certain data elements in the same database are searchable on one system but not on the other. The end user may know this and still, being unfamiliar or uncomfortable with the command language of the given system, do a native language search.

Kollin: Throughout EasyNet I there are 71 different menus in which we allow the user to choose the database to be searched. To be perfectly frank, most of our users do not know what a vendor is. (In fact, they barely know what a database is.) The criteria for choosing a vendor are much more based upon the vendor's method of loading the files and how the files have been accumulated, rather than the costs of a particular vendor. The convenience to the user is weighted heavier than the price of the file. Our feedback from our end users does not seem to indicate major concern with the choice of vendor.

Infomediary: Your innovative charging scheme of having the user pay only for positive search results may have a loophole in it that can be abused. There is at least one area where no result is a good result: patent/trademark searches. Wicked search

ers may use your system for hours without paying a dime (apart from telecommunication charges), but EasyNet still has to pay the connect time fee for the vendor. How can you handle this situation?

Kollin: We will deal with this loophole by changing our software very quickly to close it off. Probably by the time your readers see these words, trademark and patent searching will be charged to the user whether or not positive results are obtained.

Infomediary: EasyNet is available under various aliases, such as AccuSearch, Searchlink, IQuest, Einstein, ALANET, but “a rose is a rose by any other name”. Why are these pseudonymed versions necessary? Will this not imply that we will have similar but not identical gateway systems, as we now have BRS and Data-Star, or Dialog and ESA?

Kollin: The primary marketing strategy for EasyNet has been to find the marketing partners who are well represented in specialized niches. The choice to rename EasyNet in each of these niches is one made mutually between us and the marketing partners, and any differences from niche to niche are only in menu structuring. If your search is “cats or dogs” it does not matter which service you are using, you will always type in “cats or dogs”.

Infomediary: After the US market, EasyNet went international. There are EasyNet versions in Finland, Italy and France. Customization by translating EasyNet menus into Finnish, Italian, French has its appeal, but some of the important features of EasyNet might vanish, like the 24-hour toll-free online help, the instant, credit card-based sign-on. It is really worth it, considering the fact that the overwhelming majority of databases are still in the English language? To whom do you recommend this nationalization?

Kollin: It hasn't really been up to us so far to decide how appropriate it is to connect EasyNet to other countries. Those countries are willing to modify their own ends of the system in order to receive a service that has no tool equivalent in Europe to this date. Non-English SOS therefore will be established in Europe if desired (Italian in Italy, etc.)

Infomediary: How many staff members do you have to handle the workload of customization of search services, databases, around-the-clock online assistance and the like? Do you use online usage statistics in deciding which services and databases to customize for EasyNet?

Kollin: We currently employ perhaps twenty people to fulfill these functions. We try to use usage statistics as much as possible in determining directions of development. The only counterbalance preventing us from a total commitment to this ideal is the ever-present issue of practicality, specifically money.

Infomediary: What new features and services do you plan for the near future?

Kollin: I enjoy developing new ideas to facilitate the evolution of this business. EasyNet is still a young product and it can still be improved in a number of interesting ways. Multi-vendor searching, multi-vendor SDI, command language access, are but a few.

Infomediary: Several years ago you suddenly became fed up with the information business and walked out of the industry to return a few years later with a block-buster

product. Do you regret your return or are you living “happily ever after”?

Kollin: My walking out had to do with my information products being used to support the Vietnam war effort. If it's up to me, there will always be new products, new ideas, etc. I certainly don't regret being back. Peace seems to stimulate invention.