



A Final Joy Write: Panorama of Past Pans

IT has been a great pleasure to write this column for 15 years in *ONLINE*, *Database*, and *EContent*. However, I am, once again, taking on the rotating chair's position of the University of Hawaii's LIS program. As this will consume a great deal of my time, I need to give up this column's "joy write."

I would like to thank Nancy Garman and Paula Hane, who helped me a lot as my editors in the early years. Marydee Ojala has endured me and the angry rebuttals she got from producers of panned databases for the longest amount of time. I refer to her as Marydear because she handled my ESL (English as a Second Language) "condition," clarified my Hunglish (Hungarian-English), alerted me to my potential gaffes, and corrected my factual errors anonymously instead of adding an editorial note. [*Sometimes factual errors happen simply because a database or website changes between when a column is written and when we go to press.* —Ed.] It gave me much peace of mind to know she has the skill, as well as the will, to corroborate and correct my searches.

I am very grateful to Tom Hogan, president and CEO of Information Today, Inc. (ITI), the publisher of *ONLINE*, for giving me so many opportunities to publish in ITI journals. In addition, he encouraged me to speak and give workshops at many of ITI's conferences, regularly and intensively. Once, when I did seven of these in 2 days, Reva Basch referred to them—somewhat ironically—as the "Jacsó Track." Tom has been the most rational, honest, straightforward, always available, and genetically kind person with whom I've done business. He has stood by me—and behind me—when advertisers, exhibitors, and golf partners complained about my pans. He remained the gentlemen's gentleman even when we had the opposite opinion in some matters.

PANORAMIC VIEW

Periodically, I have looked back at my previous pans to report if the criticized databases improved, remained the same, or deteriorated further. I use this opportunity to take a **panoramic** view of my past pans to give a final summary.

Writing the picks was easy, as there are so many worthy databases to praise. But there are many similar channels to learn about the best. Writing the pans was much



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harder because I had to explain and illustrate convincingly in a tight space what was erroneous, very wrong, and possibly even immoral with a database; show the reality versus the hype; and tell readers what their mothers never told them about Database A, B, or C. There were a variety of reasons I chose to pan a database. My website has the full text of the details, with illustrations about the deficiencies of these sorry databases and services (<http://www2.hawaii.edu/~jacso/online-picks&pans.htm>).

THE GRATIFYING PANS

The most obviously gratifying pans were those that contributed to the demise of a database that had no place under the sun and certainly not in your bookmarks, let alone in your budget plans. I particularly disliked it when libraries were ripped off and librarians were fooled. This was the case for short-lived Prestige Factor database. It was a copy of the data extracted from the Journal Citation Reports with a slightly modified algorithm and was sold to libraries at a fraction of the original price by people in Canada. They allegedly had doctoral degrees—and spoke with a much thicker, more Eastern European accent than mine. However, they offered no explanation to my questions when I contacted them, pretending to be a potential and naive customer. From the trial copy they supplied to me, I could test the product and reveal in my review the reality behind this fraudulent product. The company was told to cease and desist—and probably tried its luck with selling the Brooklyn Bridge, or possibly Montreal's Victoria Jubilee Bridge.

In a sense it was even more irritating for me when I saw people in our own circles, in the conference rooms and exhibit halls, who kept fooling librarians with inferior products. The people in the managerial and advisory positions of the Mental Health Abstracts (MHA) and the Information Science Abstracts (ISA) database at IFI/Plenum were my prime example for this in the 1990s. I panned those inferior and recklessly compiled databases, touted by others as best in the genre, as often as I could.

The contract with IFI/Plenum to produce the ISA database was terminated, and Information Today, Inc. took on the task of cleaning up the file. In the end, 5,000 of the salvageable records from ISA (renamed ISTA to disassociate it from the bad reputation) were loaded on EBSCOhost. In July 2003, EBSCO acquired ISTA and has now incorporated ISTA in its superb open access LISTA database. LISTA was a great idea for helping librarians find information via an open access database that keeps growing. In early July 2009, it added the one-millionth record to the database. The full text of more than half of the records are available. The bibliographic data with abstracts are available for free to anyone from anywhere. LISTA is a splendid database for practicing librarians, LIS students, and LIS teaching faculty—more valuable than all the free lunches offered by EBSCO at conferences combined—and a big reward for the time I spent panning the ISA database and exchanging opinions on the pages of *Database*.

As for MHA, Dialog, the only online platform for this junk database, ensured the readers of *Database* after my second MHA pan that “it has no plans to remove MHA from the system.” Common sense prevailed, and Dialog did remove it, which meant the end of this inferior, ever-shrinking database. I have a CD-ROM version of it that shows the brutally primitive indexing, the ill-chosen journals, and the plummeting number of records year by year.

I panned the SportDiscus database (which existed as File 48 on Dialog in 2004) for its duplicate and triplicate records, as well as for its thesaurus' idiosyncrasies. I distrusted the producer's claims about the quality control that the database went through—in theory. I still have screen shots of its delirious thesaurus, which I could use as a negative example in my class. I could not reproduce the search results reported in its brochure that purportedly documented the quantitative superiority of SportDiscus over MEDLINE. On the contrary, my test showed its utmost inferiority both in the quantity and quality of the records. This database was removed from the Dialog platform, but it is still mounted on EBSCOhost and Ovid. [ONLINE will run an article on research sports in a 2010 issue. —Ed.]

NO PANAGYRICS

Certainly, there were pans of databases I wanted to praise, but the reality proved it to be an impossibility. The e-psyche database, after its promising debut, quickly turned into a disaster due to unrealistic promises and unwarranted braggadocio by two leading personalities in the information industry. They kept cutting corners by adding cited references more and more selectively, until they reached the point of nonsense, including only the first 10 references in the documents that qualified for their changing criteria. After seeing its strategy and shrinking, it was one of the jeers in my 2003 Cheers and Jeers column in *Information Today*. I wrote the following in my pan for ONLINE: “It came in as a lion and apparently goes out as a lamb to the slaughter house. It was mercy killed before the developers would have stooped further down.”

The Haworth Press was a disaster already in the print world—it took subscriptions but delivered journals very, very late at best and combined issue numbers to print fewer than four physical issues for a quarterly publication at worst—while I envisioned the president laughing all the way to the bank. I repeatedly panned the cheapness of the company that used an innovative mode to borrow money without paying interest. It worsened the situation for me that there were quite a number of library and information science journals among many others in social sciences and humanities, so librarians were hit twice.

The digital age made it a bigger disaster because its pathetic digital library, or should I call it merely a digital shelf, looked as if it were done by a kid from the neighborhood on an afternoon when he was grounded and got ice cream for compensation. The software was ultra primitive, and staff members had no idea about the problems. They replied with

the same scripted message to all error reports. Finally, the company was acquired by Taylor & Francis, and subscribers were spared some of the troubles with their digital access.

SOFTWARE PANDEMONIUM

I also repeatedly panned Microsoft's Windows Live Academic when I saw that "it remains nonacademic with its elementary software." It should have been renamed to Windows Live Elementary. I hope I contributed to its withdrawal.

Sometimes the data content was good, but the implementation by a host was absurdly reckless, incompetent, and/or primitive. Kluwer Academic was my pan for its inability to make a good adaptation of the very expensive and powerful software for its worthy journal archive. It was put out of its misery when Springer acquired its assets.

I did not have much success with my panning of the Wiley InterScience collection for its mediocre software, especially its citation tracking module that still shows signs of Alzheimer's disease by not recognizing cited references from its own collection, even when the name of the citing and the cited journal are the same. I also criticized it for the launching of the half-baked ASIS&T Digital Library with less than half of the *Bulletin's* issues of ASIS&T, four of the volumes of the many *Proceedings* of ASIS&T, and four of the then 41 volumes of the *Annual Review of Information Science & Technology*. My hope that this poor software may be phased out by the much better one used for the Blackwell collection that Wiley has acquired, remained only a hope. I'm afraid those pans were in vain.

PAINFUL PANS

Finally, I was mildly successful with panning Google Scholar for some of its software modules. Its unorthodox interpretation of Boolean logic yielded these results:

aussies	11,700 hits
kiwis	20,100 hits
aussies OR kiwis	10,100 hits

A similar anomaly exists with its time range operators, which exhibits cognitive dissonance by getting more results for more-limited time spans:

1975 2009	183,000 hits
1980 2009	192,000 hits
1990 2009	210,000 hits
2002 2009	232,000 hits

I was particularly displeased with the brain-damaged parsing module that very often fancies page numbers, phone numbers, and fax numbers as publication years and article sections (such as Introduction and Conclusions) as author names, with a different first initial (such as I Introduction and V Conclusions) depending on the chapter identifier of the section.

The success was that the developers removed from millions of records the most "productive" authors, which you could also find from menu options, such as F. Password from the

Forgot Password menu option. These became ghost authors, and the real authors became lost. However, the Boolean and range operations still malfunction, and there are new ghost authors (although in smaller volumes, created from the street address of the affiliation organization, for example).

PANDEMICS OF PAYMENT

I can't judge the success of my pans of those databases that charge high fees for information that is freely available through other channels. I hope fewer people are paying the very high service fees and royalties charged by The British Library even for open access documents, and I hope that fewer libraries paid \$500 for the miserable Bowker's very incomplete, very primitive Complete Video Directory when the breathtakingly smart and information-rich Internet Movie Database (IMDb) offers everything you can dream of in terms of video.

Nor do I know how many users canceled their subscription to the *Official Airline Guide*, which, after two pans, still has that 1960-ish look and feel and a steep fee, when practically the same schedule information is available through the free version (www.professionaltravelguide.com). Another alternative is the much greater and far better presented information on my favorite fare-comparison sites, such as ITA Software's Fare Shopping Engine (<http://matrix.itasoftware.com>), for airlines that you would be willing to fly on.

PLANNED PICKS

I regret that I could not do my last picks, which would have included the Ulrich's Serials Analysis System (SAS). It offers a well-designed software and very up-to-date content for facilitating the extremely boring and tedious job of comparing the journal coverage of many of the most important databases with spiffy comparison reports, summaries, and rich details in a few seconds. It has certainly benefited from being part of ProQuest's Serials Solutions product family, which must know about the latest changes to tens of thousands of journals and the databases included in its federated search engines.

My other planned pick would have been the free TripAdvisor service that has been my longtime, omniscient travel agent for all destinations, hotels, airports, airlines, and almost any bus and mule transportation services. It has the most smartly designed interface, note foldering, mashing, linking, and ranking features, but I must stop praising it because I must go.

I am using the last 30 days of my sabbatical for a trip with my wife to South America, and I can't be late for that. Thanks for the time you may have spent riding along with me to read this column. It's been a joy write for me and, I hope, a joy read for you.

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