



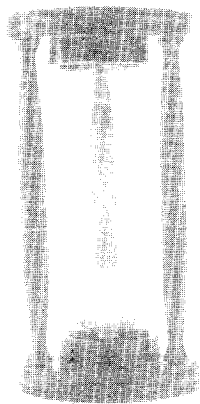
# Old Wine in

Online Bottom Line:

# New Bottles?

## The Currency of Databases

by Péter Jacsó



**Online databases that you pay for often lag behind the printed and/or CD-ROM versions.**

*Editor's Note: It is more than a little ironic that this article, written by the author in June 1996, is not appearing in print until March 1997. Although changing editorial schedules delayed its publication, the quality of the research and the ideas expressed are still sound. The original article was updated in December 1996. —Susanne Bjørner*

Usually the first idea you associate with online databases is that they are more current than their printed or CD-ROM counterparts. We journalists and educators certainly have contributed to this notion. The idea is reinforced by many Internet databases that indeed are updated daily—sometimes even two or three times a day.

The online version of *PC Magazine* is available at no charge ten days before the print version hits the stand. The same applies to *PC World*, as well as a number of other titles. It is almost titillating to have a sneak preview of these popular magazines online. True, they don't have everything that the print or (in the case of

*PC Magazine*) the quarterly updated CD-ROM version will have, but they offer many extras that the print and CD-ROM versions would not have—currency, most of all.

It is, however, equally true, though lesser known, that online databases that you pay for often lag behind the printed and/or CD-ROM versions. I also find much too often that professional databases fall significantly behind the promised schedule and pace of updating, even when you are charged for the privilege of online access to presumably current information. I was disappointed when I wanted to use the New York Public Library Desk Reference database through America Online and found that it was the same stale version that was published in print format



**FIGURE 1**  
**CARL's Update Message Showing Promised and Actual Currency Dates**

CARL LISTSERV MESSAGE - DATABASE SHOPPING LIST  
 June 1996

	Listserv message	
CINAHL	Monthly	3/13/96
Facts on File	Weekly	4/10/96
Health Index	Monthly	4/10/96
Legal Resources Index	Monthly	3/13/96
Library Literature	Monthly	2/29/96
Nat'l Newspaper Index	Monthly	3/13/96

several years ago. Wouldn't you assume that, as the NYPL staff prepared a third edition, the new and/or modified information would be entered into the online version? I certainly would. I should have known better, of course, based on what I see happening in the more expensive professional online services arena.

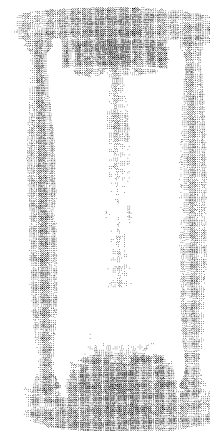
**STALE DATABASES ONLINE**

My grandfather could tell if a wine was stale as soon as the waiter started to pour it into the glass. Others may not be able to tell even after they have sniffed, swirled, and swallowed it. The same may happen with some database users. Luckily, as with sampling wine, there are clear signs and simple tests—though not as tasty—that can help determine the currency of databases.

Quite often a quick look at the database banner (DIALOG) or the introductory screen of the online service that lists the coverage of all databases (Ovid) will tell the story. Don't rush to conclude that all is well, however, since sometimes the banner is incorrect. It is always smart to check the last update or publication date field entries in the database, if possible. For example, during a test on June 15, 1996 the banner of the Arizona Republic newspaper database indicated that it was last updated on May 25. Once I was within the database, however, I could see that the last substantial publication (PD) field values were from 960613—much more recent than the banner had led me to believe.

Even simpler is the case with CARL's databases—or so it seems. You can look up the Database Update Information for yourself...just don't

believe it. When I checked last summer, the heading informed me that the page itself had been last updated on November 6, 1995. The entries for the individual databases, however, clearly indicated that the page must have been updated after April 12, 1996, but not even that list was close to the real and much better update currency. This sloppiness gives a worse impression about CARL's updating than it deserves. CARL sent out a message for LISTSERV members in mid-June about the status of its database updates; it was better than the one suggested by the Database Update Information Screen, but ideal it was not...As the promised update frequency and the actual last update date are juxtaposed (Figure 1), significant delays with many of CARL's databases are quite obvious.



**Warnings should be essential for all databases that are behind schedule.**

DIALOG has its own serious delays (Figure 2). I was less than pleased, in mid-June of 1996, to see on DIALOG that Gale's Biography Master Index was last updated in 1994. It is promised to be updated every year,

**FIGURE 2**  
**Selected DIALOG Database Banners with Update Dates and Messages**

```
?b 492,287,234,192,169,179,203,498,724,639,470,11,154,93,450
16jun96 05:08:01 User00xxxx Session B1124.6

SYSTEM:OS - DIALOG OneSearch
  File 492:Arizona Repub/Phoenix Gaz 1986-1996/May 25
  File 287:BIOGRAPHY MASTER INDEX 1980-1994
  File 234:Marquis Who's Who 1990-1994/Oct
  File 192:Industry Trends & Anal. 1977-1995/Aug
  File 169:Insurance Periodicals 1984-1995/Oct W2
  File 179:Architecture DB 1995/Sep
  File 203:AGRIS 1974-1996/Mar
  File 498:Detroit Free Press 1987-1996/Jun 05
  File 724:(Minneapolis)Star Tribune 1989-1996/Feb 04
*File 724: ***This file will not be updated until further notice.***
  File 639:The Houston Post 1988-1995/Apr 18
*File 639: *** Houston Post will no longer be updated. ***
  File 470:Books In Print 1996/May
  File 11:PsycINFO(R) 1967-1996/May
  File 154:MEDLINE(R) 1985-1996/Aug W1
*File 154: Type HELP NEWS 154 for 1996 reload information.
***MEDLINE updates delayed. See HELP DELAY 154.
  File 93:US Political Science Documents 1975-1994/Dec
  File 450:Publ., Distr.& Wholesalers 1994/Dec
```

and the database description claims that it includes references to biographies up to the present day. Not on DIALOG! The print and CD-ROM versions are several editions ahead of the online version.

The same is true about the Marquis Who's Who database that, in 1996, had been last updated in October 1994. Again, the Bluesheet promises that it is updated annually, and the print and CD-ROM versions are much more current. (*The online database was updated and greatly enhanced in the summer of 1996, but Gale's BMI still had only the 1994 update in December 1996.*)

I would not recommend that anyone look up current reports from the Industry Trends and Analysis database, since in June of 1996 it had not been updated for 10 months. In our industry, trends change at least twice in that period. The database was not meant to be updated bimonthly for nothing.

What can you say about the Insurance Periodicals database on DIALOG? In June 1996 its latest update dated back to the second week of October 1995, while it claimed to be updated weekly. Databases scheduled to be updated monthly were not always better. The British Architecture database had been last updated in September 1995.

Daily newspapers fared pretty well on this latest test—only the *Detroit Free Press* had a 9 day backlog (and it's been on strike). Those daily newspaper databases with March and April update dates in the banner correctly advised the user that the database would not be updated until further notice, or would no longer be updated (*Minneapolis Star Tribune*, and the *Houston Post*). Similar warnings should be essential for all databases that are behind schedule by, say, two update cycles.

#### DIFFERENT HOST: DIFFERENT UPDATE PATTERN

When a database is hosted by multiple online services, its update frequency pattern often varies significantly from host to host. If you look at the Books in Print database, you will find that the then latest update dates were noticeably different on four of the online systems (Figure 3). Since

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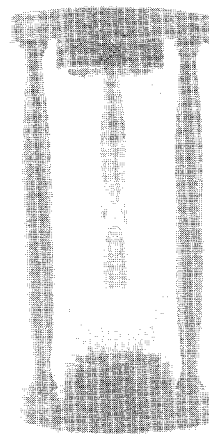
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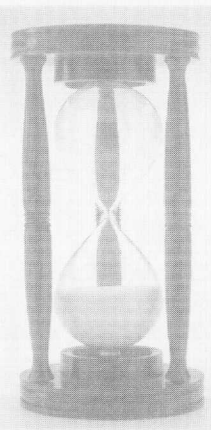
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**When a database is hosted by multiple online services, its update frequency pattern often varies significantly from host to host.**

**FIGURE 3**  
Number of 1996 Books in Print Records on Four Hosts in Mid-1996

Host	Last update	1996 as pub. yr.
OCLC EPIC	96 June 12	115,288
DIALOG	96 May	95,840
Ovid	9603	59,515
CARL	960308	(could not search)



**FIGURE 4**  
**Currency Sampling of H.W. Wilson Databases on Various Hosts**  
**June 16, 1996**

	Last ud	1996 as pb. yr.
Social Science Index		
H.W. Wilson	not stated	7844
OCLC	05/22	1876
Ovid	April	3867
Index to Legal Periodicals		
H.W. Wilson	not stated	3969
OCLC	06/14	3266
Ovid	April	1850
Art Index		
H.W. Wilson	not stated	6459
OCLC	05/23	1285
Ovid	April	2248

the update identification is not necessarily consistent, it is smart to verify by another method that the differences are indeed significant. In this case I checked the number of records with a PY field value of 1996, and they reconfirmed the first impression. Of course, the queries were adjusted to the syntax of the host.

Versions of a database on different hosts are rarely in sync. Out of two dozen databases that I checked, only ERIC had identical records for 1996 on OCLC, DIALOG, and Ovid. PAIS, Microcomputer Abstracts, and GeoBase had identical records on OCLC and DIALOG. Just because a database is behind schedule on one online service, it does not mean that the database is behind on other hosts. PsycLIT on Ovid, for example (with an update labeled as 1996 July), was much better in terms of currency than on DIALOG (where the last update was labeled May 1996). On the test date, the former had 992 hits for the publication year 1996, while the latter had merely 9.

The database banner itself may confuse the user. Many of the Wilson databases on Ovid are more current than on OCLC, even though the former had April as the last update, and the latter specified the last update date for Social Science Index and Art Index as 05/22 and 05/23, respectively. The date in Ovid refers to the most current information in the database, while in OCLC the date is that of the update on the OCLC computer. OCLC, however, was more current, with updates made in June for Index to Legal Periodicals, but it could not beat Wilson.

Not surprisingly, if one of the hosts of the online database is also the file

producer, that host is practically always more current than any of the other hosts. This is the case with the files of H.W. Wilson, as shown in Figure 4.

Why else might updates be delayed?

#### PRODUCER PROBLEMS

In some cases, tapes don't come from the file producer. All hosts were delayed in April 1996 when NLM could not continue with data entry, while waiting for the decision of a judge in a pending lawsuit. In mid-June, DIALOG still carried the warning "updating is postponed" for the NLM databases, even though the updating of all the related files had resumed. Again, such warnings—when valid—would be appropriate on every host for every database that is not being updated as promised. When this happens, however, it is exceptional.

There is no such warning for many grossly delayed databases—even ones that seem to be clinically dead. Rigor mortis clearly set in for the United States Political Science Documents database, for example, that in June 1996 had last been updated in December 1994 (and was still promised to be updated quarterly). It awaited only the undertaker, who finally came late last summer (after it was selected as one of Péter's Pans in *DATABASE* [1]) and added a note to the DIALOG banner, indicating that the database had ceased publication. (*Obviously, publicity helps to set the record straight.*)

I would say the same about the Publishers, Distributors, and Wholesalers database that was also last updated in December 1994 on DIALOG (with a promised monthly update frequency)—if I did not know

that it had been updated on CARL at the end of April 1996. The problem here, clearly, is with the host—not the content provider.

#### TIMELY CONCLUSIONS

It's easy to see from these examples that all hosts have currency problems at one time or another. To verify conclusions you reach about a database's timeliness or lack of it, you should check the update patterns of databases often over a period of time. A single sampling that takes place right after the massive updating of a series of databases on service X, for example, would favor that service and not necessarily be accurate over the long term. My examples, however, reflect a typical pattern for several months in mid-1996, when I repeatedly tested the currency of updates on various hosts and for various databases. Retesting in early 1997 shows that some of the players have changed, but general problems remain the same.

Updating variations remind you of the fact that the "same" databases are different on various hosts—not only in terms of search capabilities and prices, but also in terms of currency. If currency is the hot currency of online databases, perhaps you should ask for a discount when stale fare is served.

#### REFERENCE

- [1] Jacsó, Péter. "Databases: Péter's Picks and Pans." *DATABASE* 19, No. 3 (June/July 1996): pp 98-101.

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