

## To Rant or to Rave? That is the Question

by  
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*Editor's note: Péter Jacsó's columns "CD-ROM Commentaries" and "Multimedia Medley" appear monthly in Information Today. This article marks the debut of his third column for Information Today, Inc., which will appear bimonthly in Computers in Libraries.*

**A new trend among CD-ROM publishers is non-exclusive licensing of reference sources to competing publishers.**

Welcome to my new column, a place where I'll have yet another opportunity to rant about what's bad and rave about what's good in CD-ROM technologies and applications. There has been plenty to rave about over the years: Consider CD-ROM applications such as Readers Guide Abstracts or the many other general-interest abstracting and indexing databases, which have spared us sweat and tears in looking up the source of an article we barely remembered. Or UMI's Magazine Express, which enabled us, for example, to get a high-quality photocopy of a *Money* magazine article that was torn out of the paper-bound issue soon after it landed on the shelves. Or the CD-ROM phone directories, which made it easy to locate an old army buddy no matter where he lived (assuming that his name wasn't John Smith, of course).

### *On the Plus Side*

I remain impressed with many such earlier breakthrough products, as they keep expanding their content and/or improving their ease of use. I will report about these old favorites whenever there is some new trend, such as the spread of non-exclusive licensing of respected

reference sources to competing CD-ROM publishers.

This is just what has happened with the majority of the Wilson databases, now available in a splendid OVID version and a very good WinSPIRS version. Others are following suit, sometimes with an interesting twist. UMI, which used to focus on CD-ROM databases that it alone had licensed, is now launching a version of Microcomputer Abstracts that will compete with SilverPlatter's version, offering it together with the Business Software Directory and its own microcomputer-related articles. The twist is that, at the same time, UMI also licensed some of its family jewels—ABI/INFORM and Dissertation Abstracts—to SilverPlatter and OVID. (OVID, by the way, is the new company name of the former CD-Plus Technologies.) Smart move, and we users benefit from it, given the higher quality and lower prices that competition breeds.

Smart Move is also the name of a new CD-ROM that helps you choose where within a metropolitan area you may wish to move. This database has a wonderfully simple and flexible interface that allows you to set *your* priorities in ranking the suburbs by weighting the importance of such factors as crime rates, housing costs, school quality, public services, etc. rather than just retrieving prearranged listings and data frozen into CD-ROM.

Frozen? Of course data is burnt, not frozen, onto the polycarbonate surface of the CD-ROM platter. I must still be under the influence of the 1995 edition of Microsoft's Encarta multimedia

encyclopedia, which includes (among many other audio clips) the stirring rendition of "Fire and Ice" by Robert Frost himself: "Some say the world will end in fire./ some say in ice./ . . . But if it had to perish twice./ I think I know enough of hate/ to say that for destruction ice/ is also great/ and would suffice." This CD-ROM encyclopedia with the revised and simplified interface is a must-have product.

### *On the Minus Side*

CD-ROM technology and applications have also given me cause to rant, though that will require some explanation. After all, while I'm a CD-ROM addict, I certainly don't rise, applaud, and cheer everything in the manner that Rush Limbaugh fans do for his every utterance regardless of what he says or does. There are many irritating things in the CD-ROM industry that trigger rage . . . or, if that's too strong a word for you, indignation.

One of the latest commercial fads is the CD-ROM megapack. I didn't like the idea to start with, but the most recent incarnations are appalling. They come with such labels as the World's Largest Bundle (34 CDs for \$99.99), or the Impossible Bundle (10 CDs for \$33.99). Most of the CD-ROMs in these megapacks are ones that didn't sell well on their own. It seems to me that publishers are dumping them into superpacks because, the discs not being biodegradable, they can't dispose of them any other way.

Many of the packs include long superseded versions of CDs. They give CD-ROM a bad name, and certainly don't fulfill the potential of the technology. If you want games, buy high-quality ones like *Myst* or *SimCity* at mail-order prices, not the cheap copycats bundled with unimaginative clip art and font collections.

If you need a CD-ROM world almanac, buy Exegy from ABC Clio, with its well-researched country data, excellent illustrations, and quality interface and search software. Steer clear of the many awful versions of the CIA/KGB Handbook that made it to

these 10-packs, with their ill-structured, barely searchable data and their low-quality maps. (Maybe Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Jesse Helms consulted one of them before introducing Pakistani Premier Benazir Bhutto as the "distinguished prime minister of India.") These discs appeared when publishers rushed to get the public domain CIA datafile, but lacked the resources or know-how to create decent database products from it. Of course, Exegy is much more expensive, but the adage is true here: you get what you pay for.

Equally annoying is the sales pitch for yet another 3.5-inch CD-ROM drive, this time from Spectre. Its picture looks cute, and the publicity blurb may anesthetize you to the point that you buy one. But when you wake up, you'll discover that you can count the number of CD-ROM applications available for this cutie on your toes—never mind your fingers. It is a dead-end street.

### *And Back to the Plus Side*

Not all hardware that looks unusual is useless and weird. Mountain Network Solutions has a new CD-ROM jukebox (*Mountain CD7*) that can accommodate seven discs simultaneously. Thus far, we have seen only six-tray and 18-tray jukeboxes with different transfer rates, and some people may wonder why they should bother with another variation. Though the Mountain CD7 has a slow access time (380 ms) and a paltry buffer (64KB)—making it inappropriate for network use, despite the company name—don't dismiss it. For many of us, the extra tray can be a much welcome convenience.

For example, I now use a four-drive ensemble (not a jukebox) that is ideal not only for multi-disc monster databases like MEDLINE, but also to keep four of my most commonly used separate databases on the front burners. Occasionally, I prefer to use a six-tray jukebox (even though it is much slower for the cross-database searching so nicely implemented by SilverPlatter). But I would be even happier with a seven-tray configuration, as I often need to swap a

new disc for one in the tray sooner than I want to.

There is one application that begs for a seven-disc jukebox: the CDMARC database from the Library of Congress. As someone who spent much of his life automating library catalogs, acquisitions, and serials control systems, I love this database. But along with many other users, I was frustrated when it ballooned to seven discs two years ago. Following an index search in multi-disc databases such as BiblioFile or LaserQuest, you can see which discs the desired records are on and you can tell the system to queue requests for the same discs. The Library of Congress' CDMARC lacks queuing possibilities (one of its few weaknesses), and record location is not always predictable. As a result, you sometimes feel you're practicing for a disc jockey job as you swap discs to display eight or 10 records. In the sweatshops of retrospective conversion, or reference services, every minute counts, and swapping discs is a pain in the neck. Mountain CD7 fills a niche, and I roll out the red carpet for it.

Ironically, by June the Library of Congress may introduce a compressed version of CDMARC that can again be accommodated on six discs. Of course, it may be a case of a quick fix "miracle diet," with the database ballooning up again as records are added at a lightning pace. On the other hand, the Library of Congress has been pursuing another method to deal with this problem, now followed by an important player in the library automation field. More about this in the next installment of CD-ROM Currents. ▲

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