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Current Comments®

What Does *Current Contents Online* Mean to You?

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In 1981, we announced the first of several new online data bases including *ISI/BIOMED®*.[1] Since then, we have added several other data bases to the ISI® Search Network: *ISI/CompuMath®*, *ISI/ GeoSciTech™* , and *Index to Scientific & Technical Proceedings & Books (ISI/ISTP&B®)*. The data bases were stored on a host computer in Washington, DC. By the time you read this essay, those files will be closed. We are now continuing with a long-range development effort to "renovate" and reopen our files, perhaps on our own computer in Philadelphia.

Over the years, ISI files have been available via several "third party vendors," such as DIALOG and DIMDI. However, the development of software directly relevant to our needs is crucial. This is especially true for readers of *Current Contents®* (*CC®*). The new *ISI/NET* system will, in fact, provide simultaneous access to all editions of *CC*, including *CC/Arts & Humanities*.

During the transition from the ISI Search Network to *ISI/NET*, we intend to test our system extensively. In another essay, I will provide a detailed analysis of this three-year experiment. ISI Search Network passholders have received a letter describing in more detail the new changes. If you use any of the data bases mentioned here, and did not receive this letter, you should direct questions to Barbara Schreiber-Coia, ISI's online commitments administrator, at 800-523-1850, ext. 1288. Overseas clients should contact the nearest ISI office.

The decision to make *CC* available online, or in some electronic form, was always a long-term goal. Even with considerable experience with online searching, we do not want to mount any new files until we have fully tested our premises and our software. In planning for *CC Online*, we know that only a fraction of our readers have their own microcomputers. But that number is increasing rapidly. A significant number of *CC* readers have acquired *Sci-Mate™*,[2-4] and many of them have asked, "Why don't you put *CC* online?" This was confirmed in a recent telephone poll. This study confirms a high degree of interest and also a wide diversity in perceptions of costs and features.

This brings me to the main point of this essay. In designing this new service, we wish to be guided by comments from as many readers as possible. As a *CC* reader, you are invited to participate in our planning. We'd like you to tell us your vision or version of *CC Online*. Tell us the features you'd expect the service to include.

Our reliance on user feedback in designing ISI services is not new. By now, many of you are familiar with our "Piece of Your Mind" (POYM) questionnaires.[5] Through these periodic surveys, we keep our finger on the pulse of user needs. Over the years, most POYM responses expressed satisfaction with *CC* as it is. There are always those, however,

who suggest ways *CC* could be made "better." Most of their suggestions involve journal coverage, and reflect the eternal dilemma in information systems: should it be all-inclusive, or highly selective? Should it be a mass product or personalized?

There are always readers who want *more* journals and features added to *CC*. Many of them have forgotten the time when *CC* contained nothing but contents pages. There was no subject index or author address directory. The journals we covered then numbered but a few hundred. Today, a typical *CC* edition covers about 800 to 1,200 journals, and lists from 100,000 to 200,000 articles per year.

On the other hand, there are those who want *fewer* journals. They would reduce the number of journals covered in *CC*, but not their favorite journals. These "economizers" are rarely in agreement about which journals should go. Acceding to their wishes would offend others. To paraphrase Abraham Lincoln: You can't please all of the people all of the time. However, in designing *CC Online*, we are going to try.

Of course, there's been a "customized *CC*" of sorts available for the past 20 years. Our weekly *Automatic Subject Citation Alert* (*ASCA*®)[6] can tell you about a select group of articles or journals. *ASCA* users themselves provide us with highly individualized interest profiles. These profiles can consist of keywords, author names, cited references, institutions, journals, countries of origin, or any combination of these. Each week, you receive a printout of all the latest articles which match your profile. As effective as *ASCA* is, many feel that it cannot replace the aesthetic *satisfaction* of browsing contents pages. So a large percentage of *ASCA* users also scan *CC*. When *CC* goes online, many readers will want to combine the best features of both systems.

CC Online can have many different meanings. For some readers, this is interpreted literally to mean exactly what it implies. Such readers visualize using their personal microcomputer or other intelligent terminals for direct access to the ISI central computer. They want to browse or search intermittently. They would turn from page to page, checking carefully their favorite journals. They would scan the contents pages and check off interesting article titles. Then they would execute a command to generate a reprint request, interlibrary loan, or a purchase order.

Those of you who have already adopted the *Sci-Mate*[2-4] software system, or its equivalent on minicomputers and mainframes, could take the literal interpretation of the *CC Online* idea a step further. You would download or offload the bibliographic information retrieved *online* into your personal microcomputer files. This would not only make it easier to retrieve the references in the future, it would also permit you to do all the housekeeping (file management, annotations, etc.) *offline*.

The literal *CC Online* idea is possible, but not necessarily inexpensive. The fact is that any national online system involves a "connect charge" of 50 cents to a dollar per minute. Even if you can browse a contents page in 60 seconds, you can run up quite a bill going through dozens of contents pages each week. The fact that *CC Online* is not necessarily cheaper than the printed version will surprise many readers. Many of you believe that electronic journals will somehow be cheaper than their printed counterparts.

Electronic versions of journals or *CC* may be cheaper in the long run, especially if you take into account all costs. It depends upon your particular situation. The initial cost of selecting and obtaining an individual electronic record may seem high. But the long-term benefits

may be higher. Once your personal file is stored electronically, you can access it free of charge. On the other hand, if you never download records, you must pay connect time whenever you access a document.

There are other electronic alternatives. Instead of accessing *CC Online* over networks such as Tymnet, Telenet, or Euronet one could obtain *CC* each week on floppy disks. Each floppy disk could contain a category of *CC* journals (biochemistry, mathematics, neuroscience, etc.). This is a variation on the theme of *CC* magnetic tapes, which have been available for 20 years.[7] Some of the world's leading information centers use them to provide selective dissemination of information services to their clients. These include centers in such countries as Canada, Hungary, Israel, and Sweden.[8]

The advent of minicomputers added a new dimension to the use of ISI tapes. Several pharmaceutical and chemical firms use them, as do such institutions as the Imperial Cancer Research Fund in London. There, the contents of the tapes are stored online for a short period. Readers can access them on the basis of predetermined profiles. This eliminates the cost of long-distance telephone networks. Access is provided free to anyone on the local area network. Browsing online becomes cost effective. It is not the aesthetic equivalent, however, of browsing the printed version of *CC*. So it is not unusual to use this system selectively. This is combined with browsing the printed version of *CC*.

Indeed, preliminary market research confirms that most readers intend to continue reading and browsing the printed *CC*. For such readers, *CC Online* means the ability to search retrospectively. Sometimes, you may want to retrieve a paper noted earlier in *CC*. You recall the particular journal in which it appeared, as well as a keyword, but you may not remember the exact title or author. It was in such situations that readers often used the *Quarterly Index to Current Contents®/Life Sciences* (*QUICC™/LS*).[9] However, this print service has been discontinued. *CC Online* could provide all the access points we provided in *QUICC/LS*, and a lot more.

Some readers might want to use *CC Online* in another way. They would continue to scan *CC* each week, marking off particular items of interest. They would then want to go online to ISI to record the author's address and/or the entire bibliographic record. This could be done by simply using the *Original Article Text Service* (*OATS®*) number which appears in the oval in the left-hand corner of each *CC* page. This number uniquely identifies each issue of each journal covered in *CC*.

In combination with the journal page and, for error-checking redundancy, the first author's initials, a unique code is created. This code is sufficient to capture complete bibliographic information including, if desired, the list of references cited in that article. Preparing the list of article codes *offline* on your *SciMate* controlled microcomputer can minimize the time spent *online*. Using 1,200 baud lines, it will take about one minute to download from ten to 20 records. The telecommunications cost would be small compared to the nominal "hit" charge for downloading a record.

How would one pay for such a service? The online industry has dozens of charging systems, most of them complex. We hope to provide *CC Online* for use by the individual scientist subscriber or small lab. For larger groups or institutions, group rates will be worked out. Clearly, we want to provide you with bibliographic records that are timely and accurate. If we tried to charge you more than what it would cost you to do it yourself, you would create your own biblio-

graphic records. Depending upon your own local circumstances, this may be the best solution. However, using ISI's verified records should be more convenient and economical in the long run.

ISI has no particular commitment to a particular technology. Printed journals have a long-term future. So do their electronic counterparts. Scientists and librarians have an insatiable appetite for information. Each new medium offers new opportunities. According to the circumstances, titles, citations, abstracts, and even full texts are useful and necessary. Selective critical reviews and/or mini-reviews will also be necessary and increasingly useful as the volume of literature continues to grow. But each has a price.

As long as the worldwide population of research scientists and scholars continues to grow, the volume of useful information in electronic and print media will increase. Aesthetic and intellectual, as well as economic, factors will determine how rapidly *CC* or other journals or indexes will make the transition to electronic form. As we develop *CC Online*, we also see videodiscs on the horizon. The popularity of these new technologies will be conditioned by the quality and resolution of television screens.

Adaptations to these new media will not take place overnight. It required a generation for *CC* to reach the stage where it is now taken for granted. Certainly it will take at least half that time for the scientific community worldwide to adapt to the new computer and information age. Those of us who are enamored of each new information technology "breakthrough" want things to happen overnight. A few do seem to happen that quickly. But most require endurance, patience, and persistence.

CC could never please all of the people all of the time. Perhaps neither will *CC Online*. But if you will continue to give us a piece of your mind, we will continue to listen. And we will continue to satisfy most of you most of the time. In a world where specialization is the hallmark of scholarly endeavor, this may be overly optimistic. But we must try.

Please let us know how you envision *CC Online*. You can be sure that I'll be reporting the results of these developmental efforts as soon as we have something really new to report.

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