

Growth of databases gives libraries new byte

By KEITH BRADSHER
Staff Writer

A rapidly growing number of computer databases give UNC students and faculty a new, fast way to locate research materials.

A dozen UNC libraries and departments now offer the direct searching of computer-stored files of periodical literature. Reference librarians can call

up in minutes nearly exhaustive lists of recently published articles on most subjects of research interest, Judith Wood, an assistant professor of library science, said Tuesday.

"There is a new database in just about anything you can think of," she told 22 graduate students and faculty members in a seminar sponsored by the Institute for Research in Social Science.

Since 1981, the number of databases has quadrupled from 800 to 2,800, she said. The number available online (accessible over a computer link without a human intermediary) has risen from half to nearly all.

In the past year, the number of undergraduates requesting computer searches has also risen dramatically, Diane Strauss, head of the Davis Library business administration and social science reference desk, said.

Top University librarians are debating how campus libraries should subsidize these searches, which are not free for students, said Joe Hewitt, associate University librarian for technical services.

In addition to saving time, searching a computer database offers three advantages over paging through printed indexes. First, more recent information is often available.

Second, databases can be searched for more specific words or phrases than

can indexes, which can only offer a relatively limited number of categories. Third, a computer printout usually includes an abstract of the article, giving the researcher a better idea of how much effort should be spent tracking down the material.

To run a search, the researcher, with the help of a research librarian, first identifies a set of key words or phrases unique to the topic under investigation, Wood said. The librarian types the words into a desktop microcomputer and sends them over an ordinary long-distance phone line to the computer of a commercial database service, which checks through its memory for articles using those words. Abstracts of articles, or for a few of the newer databases, statistics and even entire articles, begin to flow within seconds to the librarian's computer, where they can be skimmed on the screen or printed out.

A search usually lasts 10 to 20 minutes and costs the researcher 50

cents to \$3 per minute.

"It can be cost effective," Wood said. "It can also be very expensive if you don't know what you're doing."

Careful selection of search words is critical in keeping the price down, Strauss said. Before asking a commercial database for information on some effect of stress, for example, a researcher should decide whether to exclude the animal studies available, she said. Some subjects may be so obscure that virtually nothing has been written.

"We're always really careful to say it's not free, and we discourage people if it's marginal," she said.

Another problem of databases is that they rarely include sources published before the database was established, Wood said.

"If you want something written in 1757, you're probably out of luck," she said.

The database most frequently used

at UNC last year was ERIC, an education database tapped more than 300 times last year, Wood said. Physical education, business administration and social science databases followed in frequency of use.

The business administration and social science desk at Davis Library performs about 70 percent of all computer searches at UNC, Wood said. Other campus libraries offering computer searches are the Brauer (Math/Physics) Library in Phillips Hall, the Couth (Botany) Library in Coker Hall, the Geology Library in Mitchell Hall, the Chemistry Library in Venable Hall, the Chapin (City and Regional Planning) Library in New East, the Zoology Library in Wilson Hall, the Health Sciences Library, the Carolina Population Center Library, the Law Library, the Social Sciences Data Library and the Humanities Reference desk in Davis Library.

Small companies vie for share of video market

By ROBERT KEEFE
Staff Writer

It's a familiar scene — the little guy being pushed out of business by the big guy. But this time the outcome of this struggle might effect the way consumers choose their entertainment.

Independent video tape rental services are slowly but surely being pushed out of business by the chain and franchised retailers.

Yet many people prefer the convenience of having the smaller stores around, as well as being able to pick up a videos at the grocery store while shopping for TV dinners.

"We always get our movies from the grocery store," said Laura Azar, a freshman from St. Petersburg, Fla. "Being just a few minutes from our house, it makes it very convenient, and I think that they are a little cheaper too."

Many grocery and department stores are now renting out video tapes and machines as a result of the recent craze for home movies. But according to some full-time video stores, grocers and other small-time stores will never have the selection that the chain and franchise operators have to offer.

"I think that eventually (grocery stores and other outlets) will either have to go full force in the video business, or will have to back off," said Jean Watson, manager of North American Videos in Carrboro.

"For instance," she said, "there is a Food Lion store next to us that rents tapes and machines, but they really can't compete with us because of their small selection."

"I've talked with some of the people that work there, and they've said that they don't really enjoy it because they don't have that much business," said Watson. "They don't think it's very profitable."

Watson's North American Video is just one in a chain of eight in the Triangle area. A ninth store is scheduled to open in October or November.

But some grocers are successful in the business. Dot Watson, with The Farm Fresh store in Raleigh, said business in her video department was booming.

"I think that we actually do a better business than the straight video stores because we're also a grocery store, and we have a lot more to offer than just the movies," Watson said.

"We also do not have a membership fee, with something like that, people know that they won't get their money back, but they know they will with a security deposit."

Dot Watson said that her store usually rents videos at a price of 95 cents a day, plus a \$50 security deposit that is refunded upon return of the tape.

The price at Jean Watson's North American Videos is usually \$2.99 per

film per day, with a \$1 charge for each additional night for members, while nonmembers must pay \$10 per film, and can keep it for up to 3 days. The store is now offering a lifetime membership for \$50.

Still, the chain stores usually have a much wider selection than the grocers. According to Dot Watson, Farm Fresh carries about six hundred features.

"We're a medium sized store, and we carry around 1,600 VHS and about 1,500 BETA titles," said Jean Watson. "In addition, we carry 400 adult titles in both formats."

"We also have about 200 releases floating around from store to store, and we keep anywhere from 15 to 100 tapes in stock that we offer for sale."

High overhead might be the leading factor in the decline of 'mom and pop' video stores. According to Jean Watson, the average cost of the latest releases run around \$79.95, while the less popular ones can be bought for about \$59.95-\$69.95 each. Older films sometimes can be picked up for as low as \$15-\$20, but aren't really in demand.

"I think there are a lot of advantages to being in a chain," Jean Watson said. "There's a lot more capital base by which we can expand and offer a bigger selection to our customers."

Source of computer financing in question

By KEITH BRADSHER
Staff Writer

University librarians at UNC and across the country are trying to decide how to finance student access to commercial computer databases.

At issue is whether libraries should pay all the costs of computer searches, which unlike books only benefit a single student, Joe Hewitt, associate University librarian for technical services, said.

Up to now, most libraries, including the UNC system, have paid for terminals, trained staff and database subscription fees, while charging the researcher for the search fee and the phone call to the database, he said. With these charges adding up to \$30 to \$150 an hour, the increasingly valuable service is more readily available to better-funded students, professors and departments.

The existing arrangement, Hewitt said, "would tend to discriminate in favor of the people with grants, departmental money."

"We are at about the same stage as most libraries

in dealing with this problem," he added.

The cost of online services is unlikely to drop in the next few years, said Judith Wood, assistant professor of library sciences.

Members of non-humanities departments are taking a greater interest in library funding decisions, calling for more spending on computer services, Hewitt said. The difficulty for top library officials lies in whether funds for the purchase of materials, traditionally allocated for the purchase of books that can be used year after year, should now also go for data and computer printouts that one student keeps.

"You're using funds for something not permanent," he said. But he added, "We think we've got to do it anyway."

This year, the materials budget was automatically raised by \$10,000 as an adjustment for higher student enrollment. Largely at the request of the chemistry department, the entire sum will be spent supporting the instruction of students in the use of online services, Hewitt said.

The move was made necessary in part by a policy change by the chemistry department's favorite online database, Chemical Abstract Services. CAS charged an annual subscription fee of more than \$15,000 last year, and allowed unlimited searches free of further charge. Use was higher than expected, however, and CAS has returned to billing separately for each search.

Online services costs are unlikely to drop. Today's databases came into being when publishers made available the computer files from which they printed books and magazines. That has now become a profitable business, Wood said.

Moreover, most of the costs of databases stem not from buying increasingly cheap hardware, but from paying computer programmers to develop software, she said. Library administrators are also having to look for personnel skilled in choosing search words. Roughly 80 percent of ads offering positions for librarians now ask for applicants with experience in online systems, she said.

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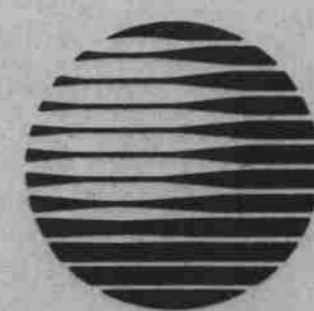
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