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Public-Access Provocations: An Informal Column

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Progress in public access doesn't come smoothly or uniformly. If you can actually take two steps forward (through a change for the better) and only one step back (because something gets misplaced along the way), you're doing pretty well.

Two steps forward: My local branch library now has a decent CD-ROM periodical index on a neat little PC workstation (with, presumably, a hidden Pioneer minichanger CD-ROM drive), replacing the clunkier Magazine Index on roll fiche, which replaced . . . well, no up-to-date periodical index at all.

One step back: For simple searches, Magazine Index was significantly faster, and somewhat easier to use. That's a half-step. The other half-step: the menus for the CD-ROM system make it all too easy to escape to the C:/ prompt, particularly if you just want to return to the opening screen. There's no C:/ prompt (with its opening for deviltry) on a roll fiche reader. (Yes, I know an experienced PC hand could trap that escape to the C:/ prompt. This is a small branch library. Where do they find experienced PC hands?)

Two steps forward: Library users at colleges and some public libraries will soon be able to go beyond their local online catalogs to see what else is available in hundreds of libraries, all in a single search, all at a controlled price, while using their own library-wide or campus-wide network and using an increasingly familiar search syntax.

One step back: The user interface for such extended access will be character-based and probably rely on VT100 emulation, so that it can be used in the real world across a wild variety of local equipment.

Two steps forward: Computers are getting powerful enough to provide fast searching for enormously large databases.

One step back: We still don't know how to balance precision and recall, and to provide good access while retaining user control.

What we need to watch out for is the "crazy dance" of the John Sebastian song, "one step forward, two steps back."

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One step forward: Providing enough ready-reference tools on CD-ROM (etc.) so that experienced library users can do some of their own reference work (albeit probably more slowly and less effectively than if reference librarians were helping).

Two steps back: Taking away front-line reference librarians and assuming that "disintermediation" is inherently a good thing.

One example is enough. There are others, but you get the point. Just a plea to recognize that almost every big

improvement in public access comes at some price, and to see that the price doesn't outweigh the improvement.

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