3-1-1991

Wilson Branches Out

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UNTIL NOW, if you wanted to get online access to the H.W. Wilson family of databases you had to use WILSONLINE, Wilson's own system. Rather than learn yet another command system, many libraries limited their access to Wilson indexes to the tried-and-true print versions and for online searching turned to the competition's databases on widely used systems such as DIALOG or BRS.

Starting in 1986, Wilson also offered other ways to access electronic versions of its indexes. Many libraries have purchased selected Wilson indexes on CD-ROM to emphasize end user searching. More recently, large library systems have begun to lease tapes of the most popular Wilson databases for mounting on their local online catalogs. Still, if a library wanted pay-as-you-go access to Wilson databases, it had no choice but to search WILSONLINE. (Only Index to Legal Periodicals has been available on other online systems, e.g., WESTLAW and LEXIS.)

Wilson on BRS

Times do change; beginning in March or April, all of the Wilson databases will become available on the BRS online system (and by subscription via the inhouse BRS/OnSite program). After seven years of exclusivity on WILSONLINE, the Wilson databases are branching out and BRS is only the first extension. According to Becky Clarke, formerly coordinator of market development and now director, Database Licensing Service at Wilson, Wilson is also talking to several U.S. and European online systems.

BRS implementation of the Wilson files is planned in stages throughout 1991. Stage 1, starting now, will bring up Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature, Applied Science & Tech

nology Index, Biological & Agricultural Index, Social Sciences Index, General Science Index, Readers' Guide Abstracts, Humanities Index, Library Literature, Index to Legal Periodicals, and Art Index. Stage 2 will add Business Periodicals Index and Education Index; Stage 3 includes Book Review Digest, Biography Index, Bibliographic Index, Essay and General Literature Index, and Cumulative Book Index. All files will be up by the end of 1991, according to the current schedule.

Clarke says two factors determined these stages: 1) the existing record structure of each database and the ease with which it could be mounted on BRS; and 2) what files are already on BRS and how the various Wilson files fit in. BRS people involved in the project say that the design stage is easier with the Wilson databases than some others mounted on BRS because "their structure is the same across almost all of the indexes" and "we're doing this in a cooperative way, with Wilson doing the reformatting." The databases in Stage 3 have a more difficult structure and will be more complex to convert.

BRS structure

Wilson databases on BRS will look very much like Wilson databases on WILSONLINE, but with some structural differences to accommodate the differences in the two software packages. Starting dates of the records in each database (1982–1984 for most) will be the same. Content will be the same, of course, with just bibliographic information and controlled vocabulary subject headings in the majority of files.

One of the big strengths of the Wilson databases is their consistency, both internally within a database and externally across databases. In the periodical index databases, for example, authority files are used across files to assign personal and corporate authors; abbreviations are consistent for such things as countries, states, and dates; and consistent terms or codes are assigned for article contents and language.

The record structure for many of the major indexes is consistent, as well, and BRS hopes to maintain this structural consistency. According to Pat Stevens at BRS, "we are attempting to do one generic design for all the databases so there would never be any conflict in meanings of paragraphs [fields] from one database to another. Obviously, some databases will have paragraphs that are not in some other databases, but paragraphs that are in common will be the same."

Differences between WILSONLINE and BRS do mean some structural changes. Readers' Guide, for example, has 21 fields on WILSONLINE, but 24 in the draft version on BRS. Searching without field qualification on WILSONLINE's version defaults to six subject-related fields (corporate subject, descriptor string, personal name subject, subject heading, uniform title subject, and cross-reference subject link). BRS, on the other hand, automatically searches the entire record. If you want to restrict a Readers' Guide search to subject-related fields on BRS, qualifying to the subject superlabel field will restrict a search to descriptors, personal subjects, and corporate subjects. The WILSONLINE "basic index" field includes words from titles, title enhancements, subject descriptors, and corporate name subjects.

BRS enhancements

The BRS load will enhance the Wilson records in some ways. In Readers' Guide, for example, BRS will allow both word and phrase searching ("double posting") on some fields that are only phrase searchable on WILSONLINE. Authors, publication type, country of publication, and others can be searched either by the exact full phrase or by individual words linked with proximity operators. (For example, white-herbert-s$.au. or white adj. herbert adj. w.au. in BRS, but only white, herbert s. (au) in WILSONLINE.)

In addition, BRS searchers have more natural language options in certain fields. WILSONLINE searchers

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must search article contents and record (publication) types by a shorthand code that is spelled out in BRS. [Short-story.ac. in BRS instead of shsto (ct) on WILSONLINE and Book-review.pt. instead of brv (rt).]

WILSONLINE advantages

WILSONLINE does offer some advantages over BRS. WILSONLINE databases are updated twice a week, while BRS versions will be updated only monthly. The Wilson Authority files will not be going up immediately on BRS because, according to Wilson's Clarke, "We are taking it one step at a time." WILSONLINE allows multifile searching and automatic invocation of subject cross references. Clarke summarizes that the WILSONLINE software "was specifically designed to work with our records, so it will still be the most powerful for our databases."

Pricing for the BRS version had yet to be determined at press time, but Wilson anticipates that all BRS databases will be priced higher than the WILSONLINE equivalents. WILSONLINE is a relatively inexpensive online system, with prices for most of its databases ranging from $45 to $65 per hour, and various discounts for subscribers to the print versions. CD-ROM subscribers get access to the corresponding online database for only the cost of telecommunications. The advantages of having access to many other databases and the increased efficiency from searching on a system that more librarians are familiar with are expected to offset the disadvantage of higher prices for BRS users.

Wilson staff make it clear they are not worried that having their databases on other systems will hurt the WILSONLINE. This is "absolutely not the end of WILSONLINE. It probably will have some effect in terms of some migration, but we don't expect to see a lot. In some ways it may increase WILSONLINE usage as people get used to searching Wilson databases online. It will be cheaper to come into WILSONLINE, there are no monthly charges, and if you are used to our software you might as well search WILSONLINE."

David MacDonald of Maxwell Online marketing says academic libraries will be the largest share of the audience for Wilson databases on BRS, followed by public libraries and medical libraries. He says he is not worried that Wilson databases on BRS will be competition for the existing databases, but notes instead the advantage of having many databases. Adding the Wilson databases provide "synergy; the sum of the parts is better than what's there now. People will welcome the choice. It is not just shifting the market share, but will result in a net increase of revenue," said MacDonald.

WILSONTAPE

From Wilson's point of view, the real impetus for branching out with BRS is the tape service. Discussions with BRS started with the idea of making Wilson database tapes available via the BRS/OnSite service and later extended to the online time-sharing service as well. All Wilson databases will eventually be available via OnSite, with users paying a yearly fee for each database they select.

Becky Clarke believes that "On-Site may be far more important [than the online service] in the future." Wilson's three-year-old tape licensing service, WILSONTAPE, is a growing success. Currently, approximately 50 sites are loading one or more Wilson databases locally. These are mostly academic libraries, loading the databases as part of their OPACs. Large public libraries are another potential market, but Wilson is "still working on pricing for public libraries."

Wilson's agreement with BRS/OnSite is just another in a growing group of tape distribution options for the popular Wilson products. The OnSite agreement is "just like their agreement with all other companies" including NOTIS, Innovative Interfaces, Inlex, Dynix, Data Research, VTLS, and CARL.

Academic libraries pay a tape-licensing fee to Wilson based on student population and periodical subscriptions, in addition to any software licensing fees to the software company. "What software they use has nothing to do with pricing" for the Wilson tapes, which are priced differently for each library based on Wilson's unique "service basis method of charge." Just like prices for the print versions, tape prices are based on how much potential use a library will get from the index. A library with a large student population that subscribes to most of the periodicals indexed in a database will pay more per year than a smaller college with fewer subscriptions.

Negotiation

The Wilson-BRS agreement was over a year in the making. According to both parties, this is not unusually long since bargaining, design, and negotiation go back and forth. Kay Poole of BRS says, "it takes longer than people realize. We propose something, they have to think what it means to their company in terms of their print product, we both have to assess the impact in terms of our companies, then legal counsel has to agree. We then get a sample of their data, do design specifications, and it can go through that iteration a couple of times." Wilson brought the bargaining power of its established customer base and well-designed databases; BRS offers the promise of established online users and strength in the academic library market.

Wider distribution/future directions

For a company that for so long kept tight watch over its data, it is surprising to see such wide distribution with software they have little control over. Clarke admits that "Wilson has mixed feelings about their files up on others' systems. It is good for us, though, as we go out to sites that have our databases loaded to see the innovative display and innovative ways of searching the data. It is interesting to see our data with their search engine and their interface."

Wider distribution of Wilson databases will not be the only innovation coming. Wilson is looking at further enhancements, especially to the rapidly growing WILSONTAPE and WILSONDISC services. New software with enhanced search features for the CD-ROM WILSONDISC will be out in June. Several possibilities for full-text tie-ins are in the works. Full texts of journal articles take up tremendous amounts of disc space, so it doesn't make sense for every site to mount full text. Instead, Wilson is exploring various tie-in services for full-text delivery on demand. Joint projects are in the works.

Wilson expects all three of its electronic distribution services to coexist and flourish and has demonstrated that it is not afraid to pursue new directions and new products. But don't forget its most successful products of all—print indexes. Wilson indexes on paper are likely to remain mainstays of libraries for quite a while, coexisting with discs, tapes, and online.