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GUIs Gain Prominence: Baton and Profound

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GUIs Gain Prominence

IN A WORLD of Windows, the World Wide Web (WWW), and flashy CD-ROM games, text-based interfaces look decidedly dull and old-fashioned. The familiar research online information services are beginning to get the message and are developing graphical user interfaces (GUIs) for their old text-based information systems.

Most of the big systems have introduced Windows front-end options in the last year or two. LEXIS/NEXIS users can choose either a DOS or Windows front end; Knight-Ridder's DIALOG and DataStar now have a whole series of GUI software products (for example, KR ProBase and KR ScienceBase); and STN has its highly rated SciFinder software for end users. Most of these combine good looks (more attractive, Windows-based interfaces) with substance (documentation as part of the software, help with search strategies, etc.).

Some of the most innovative GUIs are coming not from the big vendors, however, but from small online services. In "Retooling Online Services" (*LJ*, September 1, 1995, p. 124,126), I reviewed DataTimes' EyeQ, one of the first to combine a new GUI with radically redesigned search capabilities based on a natural-language/relevance-ranking search engine. At the same time DataTimes also lowered the price. Two other small systems that have taken the GUI plunge are NewsNet, with its Baton system, and M.A.I.D. (Marketing Analysis and Information Database) with Profound.

NewsNet = GUI and relevance

The NewsNet service originated by providing online full-text newsletters, those pesky things that many people need but are a pain to maintain in paper.

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Now, its 800 sources include newsletters on a variety of subjects, e.g., *Platt's Oilgram News*, *Pharmaceutical Business News*, *FCC Daily Digest*, *Business Information Alert*, and *Defense Daily*. NewsNet also offers more than 20 worldwide wire services (such as Reuters, AP, PR Newswire, Xinhua); some news magazines and papers (e.g., *BYTE*, *BusinessWeek*, *Information Today*); and other business sources and special online services from companies such as Dun & Bradstreet, TRW, and Standard & Poor's.

Since its founding in 1982, NewsNet has provided a standard command-based interface much like its larger competitors DIALOG and LEXIS/NEXIS but with less powerful features. Last year NewsNet President Andrew Elston decided to go graphical and make major enhancements to the system.

Baton

NewsNet's new look, called Baton, combines a GUI designed specifically for its service, with the relevance search engine from Personal Library Software (PLS). The PLS search engine should be familiar to online searchers—it is also used by EyeQ, America Online for some databases, Grolier CD-ROM encyclopedia, and a host of others. Scratch the surface of many relevance-ranking online or CD-ROM systems and you are likely to find Matt Koll's PLS (see "A New Generation of Online Search Software," *LJ*, October 1, 1993, p. 67–68).

Baton is Windows-based, using icons and toolbars. The main screen offers 16 icons. Clicking on the first icon (for "text search") leads to a screen that guides users through the search process.

The search screen is useful for experienced as well as novice users because they don't have to remember all of the database-specific search commands and codes. A "Database Codes" window will supply the code letters needed to select each database. Other boxes provide point-and-click choices for restricting searches by fields or by date ranges.

Searches may be run on a Boolean logic search engine or Baton's new relevance-ranking search engine (called "con-

cept" in Baton). Having both is a good idea; research shows that each method will retrieve unique relevant documents.

If users select concept (relevance ranking), they then enter a search statement in natural language. They may choose to have the system add terms that are conceptually related (through statistical analysis of term co-occurrence in the database) or that are alphabetically close. The "concept" search will then search for all of the terms listed, statistically weigh each document (using an algorithm that counts how many times each term occurs and how many of the terms occur), and rank the resulting documents in order of likely relevance.

If one article is especially relevant, the searcher can ask for other documents "like" that one. The words in the selected document will be used in a new search as the query retrieves other documents in the database that contain the same words.

The search results screen for a concept search shows Baton's PLS origins. A bar chart graphically illustrates how relevant a document is likely to be compared with other documents. Searchers can choose to view the headlines, KWIC, or full text of all hits or any number of hits (the default number is 40). Documents are straight ASCII text.

Users can view Boolean search results in reverse chronological order, or they can be reordered in relevance-ranked order. For current awareness purposes, the standard reverse chronological order is preferred, but relevance ranking is good when you want only a few highly relevant documents.

Other icons

On the main menu screen other icons allow for NewsNet's special services, such as the current awareness feature, NewsFlash. The NewsFlash search screen leads a user through the process of setting up a NewsFlash profile. Profiles are then automatically run daily to the scanning headlines of current news or to the special report sources from Investext, Dun & Bradstreet, Standard & Poor's, TRW, etc.

Each search icon takes the user to

ONLINE DATABASES

a search screen that is customized for that database or feature. All search building is done offline—only after the search is input into the dialog box does the system log on to the NewsNet computers and run the search. Modifications can be made interactively while online for many of the search functions.

A novice may find the array of 16 choices on the main menu screen a bit overwhelming. Baton has no special user manual, but it does offer on-screen context-sensitive help. Users will most likely use just a few of the icons regularly and ignore the rest.

Unlike EyeQ, Baton does not force users of the command system to switch to icons. Users who prefer to use the old commands for NewsNet searching can still do so with the choice of the "native mode." NewsNet's Boolean search features have been upgraded to include those expected by experienced searchers, including nesting, more powerful truncation, better proximity operations, and string searching.

This new software is just one part of NewsNet's changes in 1995. A switch to UNIX-based client/server architecture and new computers at News-Net makes for faster response time and more reliability.

For more information about News-Net and Baton, contact NewsNet, 945 Haverford Rd., Bryn Mawr, PA 19010; 800-952-0122 (new accounts); 610-527-8030.

M.A.I.D.'s Profound

M.A.I.D. is a British company that, since its entry into the U.S. market in 1986, has found a small but loyal group of users here. Business libraries that need marketing information are most likely to find M.A.I.D. useful.

M.A.I.D. decided to increase its U.S. presence in 1995, expanding its market to individual end users. To do so, the company redesigned its software, opened a new U.S. division, lowered prices, and renamed the newly designed service Profound. Profound includes full texts of news sources, preformatted market research reports, stock and broker reports, company reports, and country reports. The reports and articles come from a variety of major business information providers, including AP, Reuters, Information Access Company, UMI, FIND/SVP, Standard & Poor's, Frost & Sullivan, Dun & Bradstreet, Moody's, etc.

There are actually two Profound products: Corporate Profound, aimed at the special library and centralized corporate market, and Profound, aimed at the home or individual end user.

Search features

Profound's main menu has only seven icons—six smaller ones arranged in a circle around the "Custom Alert" stop sign–shaped icon in the middle. The custom alert is, as you may guess, a current awareness feature. In building a current awareness profile, the user specifies the frequency an alert will be run (daily, weekly, etc.), as well as search terms and the database to be searched. (I get mixed messages from the Custom Alert icon. Its central placement and larger

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size say it is the most important, but its shape and black and yellow vertical bars warn me to be careful.)

Five of the six remaining icon choices are for searching. The sixth icon, "utilities," is for changing software settings. Clicking on "news now" presents a search screen for searching current business wires; "quotes" leads the novice by the hand to get stock market information; "autosearch" allows novice users to perform preformatted searches by market sector, company, country, and date; and "briefings" allows searchers to choose preformatted reports by market, country, company, or stock reports.

"Worldsearch" is the advanced option for experienced M.A.I.D. users. It allows searching by free text and other fields—such as publisher—not offered in the easier search modes. Counter to the current trend, Profound does not offer a relevance-ranking search feature.

Each search option provides term choices with InfoSort, an online thesaurus of all company names, industry codes, geographic names, and subject terms used in all of the Profound sources. InfoSort is a hierarchical thesaurus used by Profound indexers to index every document entered into the system. A single thesaurus for thousands of sources is a real value-added benefit of the Profound system, even though it does contain a number of typographical and spelling errors.

Once a search is completed, many full reports are sent in Adobe Acrobat's Portable Document Format, PDF (the Acrobat reader is included in the Profound software). Profound reports may look much better than the plain ASCII text you get on many other online systems, but they may take longer to download and print.

Profound has also redesigned (and lowered) M.A.I.D. pricing. Corporate Profound has a subscription fee of $198 per month for a five-user site license. The end user version of Profound is $19.95 per month plus $6.95 connect hour for a single user. Document charges range from free to more than $100 for certain market research reports. All document charges are displayed before you download.

For more information, contact Profound, Inc., 655 Madison Ave., New York, NY 10021; 800-624-3462; 212-750-6900.

The downside of GUIs

There is a downside to the GUI trend. Each of these online systems requires its own customized GUI software. Although the software is often free, it means that the searcher has to load and use each one separately. I fondly remember the days when I could go to every system with my old faithful telecommunications package, Procomm. The power rested at the system's computer, not at mine. (Even the WWW is accessible with just one browser, such as Netscape.) Software proliferation is the downside of easier searching.

CORRECTION: In the first paragraph of "Internet Issues in Reference (*LJ*, October 1, 1995, p. 28,30) I stated that, according to the NCLIS 1994 report, 77 percent of large public libraries and 21 percent of all public libraries offered patron access to the Internet. Actually the former is the total number of libraries that had Internet access, whether for staff only or for public access. An American Library Association survey issued in September 1995 estimates that 23 percent of public libraries serving populations of 100,000 or more provide direct public access to the Internet, with an additional five percent offering public access with the help of library staff.