Read All About It

This article reviews the launch of CD-ROM editions of three national newspapers in December 1990 and the developments which have taken place since then in the convergence of user interfaces and the introduction of new titles.

The London Online meeting in December 1990 saw the launch of three British national newspapers on CD-ROM, five including the Sunday editions of two of the dailies: *The Guardian, The Independent* and *Independent on Sunday* and *The Times* and *Sunday Times*. They created considerable excitement amongst librarians and other information professionals, with much note-taking and comparison of the three. Our own stand was inundated throughout the show, though that may also have had something to do with the champagne we were offering to celebrate our launch of *The Guardian* on CD-ROM.

Though similar in content — news and features from quality newspapers — the three CD-ROM editions had quite different retrieval softwares. For a number of reasons the three had been developed seperately, by different organisations with different backgrounds. Each had its supporters and detractors. Before discussing recent changes which have made them more alike, it is worth reviewing how and why they differed so much.

The Times and Sunday Times Compact Disc Edition was developed by The Times Network Systems. TTNS worked with the Open University to produce a very simple and intuitive interface which could be mastered quickly by users of all kinds. It deliberately omitted much of the extra functionality of its competitors and benefitted from great speed of retrieval, thanks to excellent optimization of its indexing. It could really only be faulted for its lack of adjacency searching, a fault soon

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rectified by TTNS. It was ideal for unsupervised use in libraries, schools and elsewhere.

The Independent CD-ROM was developed by FT Profile, the major online host of news and business information, and reflected FT Profile's background in the corporate information sector. Running under Windows or in a command-language DOS version, its 'Personal Librarian' retrieval software enabled users to carry out highly sophisticated searches, looking automatically for words sharing the same stem as the search term and ranking search results in order of probable relevance. Even for users coversant with Windows, however, it took careful study of the user manual and some time with the tutorials before they could take advantage of all its functionality. It was designed primarily for information professionals already conversant with the computerised retrieval of information.

The Guardian on CD-ROM was developed by Chadwyck-Healey and reflected our own background, in our case in publishing for higher education and researchers. The user interface fell somewhere between those of *The Times* and *The Independent*, in terms both of ease of use and level of functionality. Running directly under MS-DOS and largely menu-driven, it offered adjacency and proximity searching and features such as Bookmark and Notepad, enabling users to tag articles of interest and add their own notes to them. It also included complete facsimiles of the front page of every issue, as we felt it important to retain some feel of the individual character of the newspapers.

The publication of these three national newspapers on CD-ROM was widely

welcomed by librarians and they have done much to stimulate interest in, and use of the medium. After the initial excitement of their launch, however, the multiplicity of user interfaces was seen by librarians as a significant obstacle to their wider use in libraries. The need to learn — and train users on — three different retrieval systems was simply too onerous and librarians have been urgently pressing for the standardisation of software. This has now been largely achieved.

At Chadwyck-Healey we decided to adopt the same Open University software as is used by *The Times*. The user interface is widely liked and the two newspapers are especially complementary, so the ability to search them both in the same way will benefit all users. At the same time we decided to drop the facsimile front pages, which researh showed were not much used, and to replace them with individual graphics such as maps, charts and tables, where these enhanced the text of an article. Both of these changes were implemented with the first disc of 1992 and the 1990 and 1991 backfile discs are being repressed with the new software. We also plan to introduce some additional features to the software, such as Bookmark, later in the year.

The Times, meanwhile, has also introduced graphics in the form of selected photographs and other illustrations, easily accessible from the text of the article they accompany, and has produced a version for the Apple Mackintosh.

Since launching *The Independent on CD-ROM* FT Profile has added CD-ROM editions of *Financial Times* and *The Economist,* forming a highly complementary stable of publications. Equally importantly, it has developed a simple and intuitive new interface as an alternative to the sophisticated Windows interface. Whilst the approach differs from that of *The Times,* it shares its ease of use and is ideal for the library environment. *The Economist* already incorporates graphics, such as maps and graphs, and it is expected that both the *Financial Times* and *The Idependent* will do so by the end of the year.

With most of the quality national newspapers now available on CD-ROM (and probably more to come), sharing just two user interfaces, both easy and enjoyable to use, libraries can offer their users simple and fast access to a mass of news information, from a variety of sources. We hope to see the introduction of CD-ROM workstations for newspapers in many libraries, public and academic, during this year and next.