4-1991

OCLC's EPIC: Reports from the Field

Terry Ballard
Gill Library, College of New Rochelle, tballard@cnr.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.cnr.edu/gill-publications

Part of the Library and Information Science Commons

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Gill Library at Digital Commons @ CNR. It has been accepted for inclusion in Gill Library Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ CNR. For more information, please contact lfazzino@cnr.edu.
OCLC's EPIC: Reports from the Field

Is EPIC being underused because people are not yet comfortable with it?

Terry Ballard

The implementation of new technologies in libraries is always a two-sided coin. On the one hand a new device or service will permit you to do things you couldn't do before; on the other, each change creates new issues of cost and training.

For this reason I wanted to look not only at OCLC's EPIC service itself, but at how it was being used in every type of library division. As we have seen many times in the past fifteen years, the importance of user acceptance of a new technology cannot be ignored.

OCLC and EPIC

As OCLC's database surpassed the twenty million record mark, it became obvious to many people that the bibliographic utility could be, in addition to its function as a cataloging and interlibrary loan tool, an important new source of information for reference librarians.

When word came out that OCLC was devising a service to provide subject and keyword access to its database, it caused a great deal of interest. During the 1990 ALA Midwinter meeting, OCLC celebrated the birth of the EPIC service, a service for searching the OCLC database using subject, keyword, keyword phrase, and Boolean searches. Like other systems, EPIC prints a cost message at log-off and has the capability for offline prints and command stacking.

OCLC also is offering access to other databases such as ERIC, Dissertation Abstracts, Book Data, and ABI/Inform (see Figure 1). Libraries may use existing dedicated-line OCLC terminals to get into EPIC via special passwords. The new Passport software also will provide a link to EPIC for those libraries that subscribe.

A search for EPIC in Library Information Science Abstracts in December 1990 produced only four hits. Two of these were an exhaustive field test report by Laurie Whitcomb of the Pasadena Public Library published in the January 1990 issue of Online and Carol Tepir's description in the March 1, 1990 issue of Library Journal. On July 25, 1990, R. Bruce Miller provided a use summary on PACS-L.

Trying EPIC

During a recent visit to Phoenix, I was given a demonstration of EPIC by Gillian Hock of the Arizona Interlibrary Loan Center at the Phoenix Public Library. Since it is a statewide service, it receives requests that local libraries cannot adequately identify.

Many of these questions call for the enhanced searching capabilities of EPIC. Ms. Hock had several of these on the day that I visited. The first was a title called "Silent Killer." The patron had not been sure if the title was correct, but said that the book was about a nurse who had killed infants in a hospital nursery.

Hock typed in the following: f (silent and killer) :TAB: "You always have to remember to type TAB rather than ENTER," she said. A few seconds later, EPIC responded that forty-five records fit that description.

Rather than look through every one of these, she decided to limit the search by the subject of nurses or nursing, so she then typed: f S3 and su Nurs? There were no records that matched. Next Hock limited the search by nurses or nursing in the title or the notes field: f S3 and ti,n nurs? This netted two titles, neither of which was the correct one. At that point, she called off the search.

Next Hock tried to find a conference publication for the "Society of Allied Weight Engineers." She input the name of the organization and drew several hits. She then limited the search to records with the word "conference" in the title fields. A successful hit came up within seconds. "I used to use the Compindex service in Dialog, but at this library there are always scheduling problems for that"

Figure 1. EPIC opening screens

Terry Ballard is an assistant professor and systems librarian at Adelphi University, Garden City, New York.
terminal. When we got EPIC in July, we were looking forward to using it instead of Dialog for a lot of our work.”

Another librarian tried a ready reference search for information on a French university. Even though he had little experience with the database, he was able to come up with some hits in response to a reference question.

**Interviewing Users**

I spent a two-month period talking to librarians in public, academic, and special libraries about the ways that they use EPIC. The sample included people found through my own networking and a few librarians suggested by OCLC.

There was one point that all interviewees agreed upon — they use EPIC strictly to search the OCLC database by subject and keyword. Although EPIC offers other databases including ERIC, and an entry into EASYNET, none had used these capabilities in any real problem-solving capacity. Still, some were anticipating using these other functions in the future because the cost of EPIC is more than competitive with the cost of other online services.

A librarian in a special library on Long Island, New York, is very pleased with EPIC because her library is not a regular member of OCLC and EPIC allows her the use of the OCLC database on a cost-per-use basis. She reports that her users ask for highly specialized materials, and that EPIC’s capacity to search by publisher is quite useful.

Another special librarian in Connecticut has regular OCLC, but is happy to use EPIC for difficult searches. Using a phrase that I heard often in this inquiry, she said that EPIC is “useful as a last resort.” She reports that it is especially powerful in searching series titles.

The director of a law school library says that his staff members also use EPIC as a last resort after they have tried a normal OCLC search. They will then search a consortium listing of libraries in Westchester County that also has keyword access. Because of this “last resort” status for EPIC use, he described his library as a light user of EPIC.

In fact, all but a few of the libraries that I talked to thought of themselves as light users. One university bought EPIC for its reference and cataloging sections, took the training, and never followed through by putting it to any practical use. At the other extreme, one public library checks EPIC four or five times a day, and one special library used it heavily.

**Adjusting to New Technologies**

Several factors might account for the wide variations in EPIC use. First is the previously mentioned “last resort” syndrome: librarians will try a more familiar system before they try a new one. This leads to a second factor: since they only use EPIC when they have exhausted other means, many users are not comfortable with the service.

The situation is reminiscent of a phenomenon described by the British author Colin Wilson. He wrote that when people acquire a new skill, their minds have “autopilots” that allow them to perform a task without thinking about each component. For example, unless you are a brand new driver, you don’t consciously think, “I am now putting in the clutch and simultaneously engaging first gear.”

The problem with new EPIC users, and one that is common in the introductory phase of new technologies, is that they haven’t performed enough searches on the new system. They have to think about each step in the process. This may be particularly true for librarians who use the regular OCLC service heavily. A reference coordinator at a New York university reports that she is still getting used to EPIC: “It’s not that user friendly.”

Perhaps a key factor is experience in searching online databases. I found that librarians who are used to searching online databases daily have an easy time learning to use EPIC.

A librarian in Washington, DC, who does not have access to regular OCLC service uses EPIC daily to check title
histories for the motion picture industry. Working in a research-oriented special library, she was used to searching databases and reported that "EPIC was easy to learn. "This has helped to eliminate lengthy paper searches."

Since EPIC was designed as an aid to reference librarians, it is not surprising that they are the ones most likely to use it. Only one of the librarians I spoke with mentioned using it as a cataloging aid. A library director in a private college in Vermont said that his catalogers are more apt to use OCLC's CD-ROM product.

However, there are other divisions, such as acquisitions, that can take advantage of the service's ability to search in creative ways. Several librarians mentioned that EPIC is useful for interlibrary loan personnel because they can search with an incomplete title.

Cost

In Laurie Whitcomb's field report on EPIC, she mentioned how easy it was for the staff of Pasadena Public Library to learn the search protocols in EPIC. I called the library to see how the service was being used after more than a year.

I spoke with a librarian who reported, "EPIC is scary to use for reference librarians. They are aware that the meter is ticking." She said that Pasadena Public Library uses their dedicated line terminals for regular OCLC searches and their dial-up terminal for EPIC.

Another librarian from Philadelphia explained that he also has that arrangement for a good reason. He said that when the librarians first started using EPIC, they found the response time was noticeably slower on the dedicated line terminals. Since EPIC charges by connect time, that led to more expensive searches.

A ready reference search that was conducted with over thirteen minutes online cost $6.36 for 138 displays. Many would consider this quite modest.

Summing Up

According to more than a dozen EPIC users, the service is a welcome addition to their libraries, but it is having growing pains. Users like the idea of accessing the OCLC database in a new way. All of them agree that it lives up to its promised capability and delivers information that they could not obtain any other way.

Gillian Hock at the Phoenix Public Library showed me a file folder with dozens of successful hits on EPIC where the patrons had words in the title slightly turned around.

On the other hand, as with many new technologies, there are still some questions. In her early and otherwise upbeat report on field testing the service, Laurie Whitcomb wrote that the automated training program was cumbersome. It may be difficult for users to find their way through the passwords and search protocols.

Even a midwestern librarian who uses EPIC daily told me, "EPIC needs to have more training." A special librarian said that she was never trained on EPIC and always feels a bit uneasy using it, even though she always gets the results she is after.

My own observation is that the best training in the world is ineffective if it is not followed up by substantial practice. Users of new technologies need greater opportunities, perhaps through arrangements such as those of some database producers whereby there are academic discounts or free service for the first few weeks. This would allow people to get over the initial apprehension period that comes with any new automated system. While the practice database allows people to use the mechanics of EPIC searching, it cannot be used for real-world problem solving. OCLC also might encourage the use of local or regional EPIC users groups.

References