

ALEF BIT

Online Database Services in Israel: the State of the Art

Cecilia Harel
University of Haifa

Introduction

Librarians and information specialists in Israel enjoy the benefits of computerized online access to hundreds of databases on a variety of subjects produced in the United States and Europe. This method of bibliographic retrieval has become commonplace the world over through the services of online vendors such as DIALOG, SDC, and BRS.

As a librarian who has recently become active in online searching, I am amazed at the relative ease with which we in Israel have access to these distant resources. Concurrently, as a reference librarian in an institution concentrating on the humanities and social sciences, I am frustrated by the lack of online access to the growing number of databases produced in Israel. These are of particular value to the researcher in Judaica and other subjects dealing with Israel.

Is there a need for an online vendor in Israel to facilitate and systematize access to online databases within the context of the Israeli library scene? What efforts are underway to facilitate remote online searching of Israeli-produced databases? These are questions I wish to explore in this article with the intent of making some recommendations for the future development of online searching in Israel.

The Online Vendor

In the United States, the commercial vendor or "information utility" is the agent that catalyzed the existing hardware, software and communication technologies in the 1960s to create online search services. Hoover (1980, p. 2) notes that the following technologies have been identified as contributing to the success of online services:

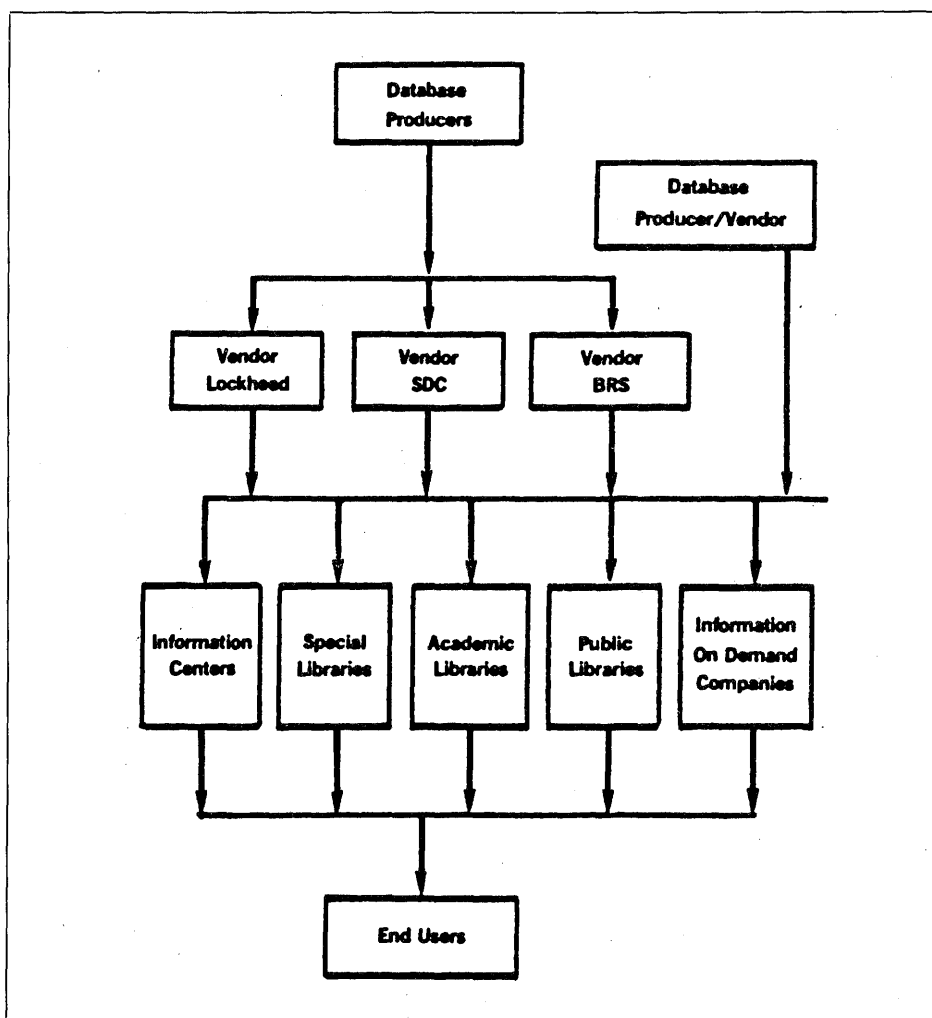


Figure 1. Flow of Information from Database Producers

(From: Fenichel and Hogan, 1981, p. 5.)

- * powerful time-sharing computers
- * machine-readable databases
- * fast access disc storage devices
- * interactive retrieval programs
- * fast, low-cost computer terminals
- * telecommunication networks

The diagram in Figure 1 illustrates the model of online service that has developed in the United States to link available databases to those who desire access to them. The vendor performs the following valuable functions for the online user community (Bahr, 1980, p. 68; Fenichel and Hogan, 1981, p. 21-22; Hall, 1977, p. 202):

General Services

- * provides access to numerous databases
- * provides fault-tolerant computer programs
- * maintains routine and reliable service hours
- * conducts training for searchers
- * publishes user manuals and newsletters
- * lists available databases as well as search aids from producers.

Special Services

- * presents records in uniform format
- * standardizes bibliographic element names
- * provides SDI (selective dissemination of information) services.

These services are a tremendous advantage for the searcher, but of course, are provided at considerable cost.

State of the Technology in Israel

To date no organization in Israel has assumed the role of vendor to coordinate and provide online services on a level of comprehensiveness comparable to that of any of the American vendors. This is the situation in spite of progress in the development of many of the elements required for such service, as listed above.

Hardware and Software

Significant progress has been made in recent years in the installation of computer hardware and the development of appropriate software suited to Israeli library applications.

Adler (1983) reported that several computerized systems have been developed in Israel which host dozens of unique Judaica databases. Other databases have been produced which include social science research about Israel, such as the Szold Institute's *Current Research in the Behavioral Sciences in Israel*, and *Mideast File*, produced by the Shiloah Center for Middle Eastern and

African Studies. Of these, only *Mideast File* has made the "big time," and has been available online as File 249 on DIALOG since 1983.

Telecommunications

A major element that is lacking, and which, as a result, has undoubtedly hampered the development of remote online access within Israel, is an effective telecommunication network. ISRANET, the Israeli public time-sharing network for data transmission, is now being installed, with nodes in place in Tel-Aviv, Jerusalem, Haifa and Beer-Sheva. The linking of interested parties to the network is proving to be a lengthy process fraught with technical difficulties. Once the network is operating satisfactorily, all subscribers, in Israel and elsewhere, will have access to each other's computers.

BITNET is another private telecommunication network, established with the assistance of I.B.M. Israel, to connect the large computers of Israel's seven institutions of higher education and research. This network enables researchers in member institutions to directly access each other's main computer for data transmission or database searching. BITNET is connected to the European networks, and via Europe to the United

States, thus enabling direct communication between Israeli and foreign researchers.

Searchers outside of Israel contemplating direct online access to Israeli databases in Hebrew should note that this is not currently possible because of differences in Hebrew character coding and terminal hardware standards (Adler, 1982, p. 239).

Cooperation as a Model for Online Services

The institution most closely approaching the concept of a vendor in Israel is the University of Haifa Library, which, via its HOBITS system, hosts three online bibliographic databases (Adler, 1983, p. 9).

The University of Haifa Library has, on its own initiative, engaged in informal and experimental cooperative arrangements with several other interested institutions to provide online access to its databases. The Tel Hai College Library in the Upper Galilee has dial-up access to the University of Haifa's *Index to Hebrew Periodicals* (On the microfiche version of this tool, see Libby Kahane's article in the REFERENCE DEPARTMENT of this issue. - Ed.) The University of Haifa Library and the Shiloah Center Library at Tel-Aviv University have a mutual agreement whereby each has dial-

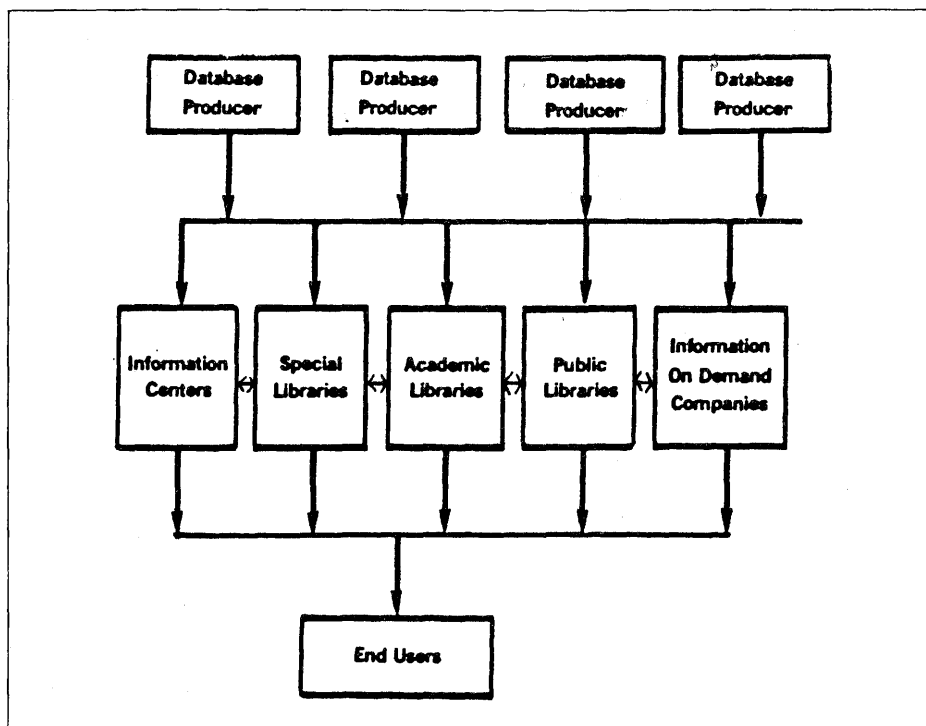


Figure 2. Flow of Information from Database Producers in Israel
(Adapted from: Fenichel and Hogan, 1981, p. 5.)

up access to the other's online database. The Shiloah Center, in turn, has a reciprocal arrangement for online access with the Truman Research Institute at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. The searchers in each of these institutions were trained by colleagues in the host library. Relevant thesauri and search aids were provided when available.

In spite of the view that interlibrary cooperation has been slow to develop in Israel (Sever, 1983), the exchanges just described indicate that prospects are good for coordination among institutions in the domain of online searching in Israel. The diagram in Figure 2 illustrates a possible configuration for database access.

Advantages and Disadvantages

The model of direct access may be entirely practicable in a country the size of Israel, where the number of database producers and/or hosts is relatively limited, and where site visits can easily be made for training on any system. Moreover, such a model of service ought to be more economical than that of Figure 1 since the fees imposed by the vendor, in the position of middleman between database producers and searchers, would be eliminated.

Searchers would, of course, need to learn varying search programs and command languages for the various systems. This may not be a serious problem, as existing Israeli software packages are increasingly being applied to new computerized bibliographic projects.

In order for such cooperative arrangements to be established, we first need a comprehensive guide listing available Israeli-produced databases, and specifying how and where they can be accessed. Directories of this nature have been compiled in the United States and Europe (Hall and Brown, 1983; Williams and Rouse, 1976), but no such source exists for Israel. There is particular importance in having a local guide to serve the specialized needs of Israeli users and scholars abroad for Hebrew language and Judaic information. Such a guide might be commissioned by the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities as part of its efforts to coordinate Judaica automation projects (Adler, 1983, p. 10-11).

Conclusion

Few attempts have been made to facilitate or promote remote online access to Israeli-produced databases. While some individual cooperative agreements exist, such arrangements are not yet pervasive. This may be due to a combination of factors: technical telecommunication

difficulties, lack of initiative on the part of librarians, and a lack of knowledge of available databases.

Because of a lack of systematic access, much valuable information is not retrieved, or is retrievable only at great expense and inconvenience. For those in scientific and technological areas in Israel, this situation may be tolerable, as their needs are readily met by services from abroad.

We in the humanities and social sciences, and specifically Judaica, on the other hand, are faced with a definite handicap which we must strive to overcome.

References

Adler, Elhanan, "Hebrew Cataloging and the Computer — The View from Israel," *Information Technology and Libraries* 1/3 (September 1982), pp. 238-245.

Adler, Elhanan, "Judaica Automation in Israel - An Overview," *Judaica Librarianship* 1/1 (Fall 1983), pp. 9-11.

Bahr, Alice H., "Producers and Vendors of Bibliographic Online Services," In: *The Library and Information Manager's Guide to Online Services*, White Plains, NY: Knowledge Industry Publications, 1980, pp. 65-96.

Fenichel, Carol; Thomas H. Hogan, *Online Searching: A Primer*, Medford, NJ: Learned Information, 1981.

Hall, James L., *Online Information Retrieval Sourcebook*, London: Aslib, 1977.

Hall, James L.; Marjorie J. Brown, *Online Bibliographic Databases: A Directory and Sourcebook*, 3rd ed., London: Aslib; distributed by Gale Research Co., 1983.

Hoover, Ryan E., "Overview of Online Information Retrieval," In *The Library and Information Manager's Guide to Online Services*, White Plains, NY: Knowledge Industry Publications, 1980, pp. 1-30.

Sever, Shmuel, "Cooperation in Israel's Libraries," *ISLIC Bulletin* [Israel Society of Special Libraries and Information Centres] 13/1-2 (December 1983), pp. 57-69.

Williams, Martha E.; Sandra H. Rouse, comps. and eds., *Computer-Readable Data Bases: A Directory and Data Sourcebook*, Washington, DC: American Society for Information Science, 1976.

Cecilia Harel is a Reference Librarian at the University of Haifa.

MOSES SCHREIBER

Hebrew, Yiddish & English Books

Export

16 Meah Shearim Street
Jerusalem
Tel. (02) 287033

ERRATA

JL Vol. 1 #1, Fall 1983

ALEF BIT

Judaica Automation in Israel - An Overview Elhanan Adler

The sections "Hardware and Software," "Library Automation Systems," and "The Hebrew University of Jerusalem" on page 10 should have appeared between the 4th and 5th paragraphs of page 9. In other words, paragraph 5 beginning "In libraries where ALEPH is fully implemented..." is really the second paragraph of the section "The Hebrew University of Jerusalem."

The editors sincerely regret the error which occurred at the final layout stage. We are pleased to note, however, that no one but the author noticed the error, which is a tribute to the quality of his writing.

ARCHIVES

Nashville Jewish Archives Richard W. Marcus

The story was originally reported by Annette R. Levy, Director of Libraries/Archives at the Jewish Federation of Nashville and Middle Tennessee. The final version was formulated by the column editor, Richard W. Marcus. We regret the omission of Annette Levy's by-line.



Gila Records

offers

classics of Jewish liturgy

sung by

Cantor Jacob Hass z"l

on cassettes:

FRIDAY EVENING SERVICE ... \$7

SABBATH MORNING SERVICE \$7

COMPLETE HIGH HOLIDAY
SERVICE (5 L.P. Cassettes) . \$50

Above prices include 10% library discount and postage.

CHILDREN'S RECORDS
ALSO AVAILABLE.

Send prepaid orders and requests for complete catalog of records and tapes to:

R. Hass
3188 Riverdale Avenue
Bronx, NY 10463

or call:

(212) 884-1961

Records and tapes are also available in selected Hebrew bookstores.