NEWSPAPER USE OF COMPUTER DATABASES
AND GUIDELINES FOR ACCESS;
A CASE STUDY: THE ST. PETERSBURG TIMES

by
Deborah Pam Wolfe

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of Mass Communications
in the University of South Florida

August 1989

CB480 078
Major Professor: Donna L. Dickerson, Ph.D.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## LIST OF TABLES

x

## LIST OF FIGURES

xi

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

xii

## ABSTRACT

xiii

## INTRODUCTION

1

An ocean of choices

Cost cognizance

8

10

## LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

13

Database costs

Summary

Research questions

32

33

34

## RESEARCH DESIGN

36

Problem statement

Researcher background: A personal perspective

The case study approach

The changing *Times*

One of the nation's ten best dailies

Independently owned

Circulation

The Library

Summary

Methodology

Content analysis of Library records

Survey research

Personal interviews

36

38

40

41

43

44

46

47

47

49

54
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PATTERN OF NEWSROOM DATABASE UTILIZATION</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Editor notification of database use</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of library database requests</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deadline requests</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The personal importance of database</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>information</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subgroup utilization patterns</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Database use by geographic assignment area</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effects of database use</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accuracy</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer reporters</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research time</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too much is a good thing</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Originality</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plagiarism</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local perspective</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Errors that &quot;live&quot; forever</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electronic &quot;facts&quot; may not be</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>published reality</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rating database information retrieval</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information delivery</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methods of information requests</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second requests</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News librarian professionalism</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defining the role of news librarians</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Librarian publication credit</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gatekeeping</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal pay for equal work</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COST FACTORS OF COMMERCIAL DATABASE USE</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Industry pricing strategies</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The price of technology</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determining average per search costs</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Royalty income</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local marketing</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future access restrictions?</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COMMERCIAL DATABASE MONITORING GUIDELINES</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Option 1</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major factors</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Types of monitoring data produced and suggested uses
Effects on departments
Flexibility
Variations
Option 2
  Major factors
  Types of monitoring data produced and suggested uses
  Effects on departments
  Flexibility
  Variations
Option 3
  Major factors
  Types of monitoring data produced and suggested uses
  Effects on departments
  Flexibility
  Variations
Summary

FINDINGS
Changing roles
Use of database information
Communications gap

LIST OF REFERENCES

GENERAL REFERENCES

APPENDIXES

APPENDIX 1. VITA FOR DEBORAH PAM WOLFE

APPENDIX 2. NEWSROOM ACCESS TO A COMMERCIAL DATABASE

Reporters' newsroom use of a public-access database
Personal searches
LIST OF TABLES

TABLE 1. REPORTERS' UTILIZATION OF COMMERCIAL DATABASE INFORMATION 59

TABLE 2. FREQUENCY OF DEADLINE LIBRARY DATABASE REQUESTS 67

TABLE 3. WRITERS', NEWS LIBRARIANS', AND EDITORS' POSITIVE EVALUATIONS OF THE EFFECTS OF DATABASE USE BY JOURNALISTS 75

TABLE 4. WRITERS', NEWS LIBRARIANS', AND EDITORS' NEGATIVE EVALUATIONS OF THE EFFECTS OF DATABASE USE BY JOURNALISTS 78

TABLE 5. FREQUENCY OF TIME FRAMES NEEDED BY NEWS LIBRARIANS TO ANSWER JOURNALISTS' RESEARCH REQUESTS 91

TABLE 6. FREQUENCY OF METHODS USED BY NEWS LIBRARIANS TO ANSWER JOURNALISTS' RESEARCH REQUESTS 111

TABLE 7. COMMERCIAL DATABASE EXPENDITURES FOR FIRST SIX MONTHS OF 1988/1989 114

TABLE 8. ELECTRONIC LIBRARY DATABASE VENDOR MAINTENANCE CHARGES AND ROYALTY INCOME CREDITS, 1989 120

TABLE 9. JOURNALISTS' AGGREGATE REQUESTS FOR 1988 PERIOD COMPARABLE TO 1989 FEBRUARY SAMPLE WEEK 194
LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1. CATEGORICAL DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONSE RATES TO NEWSROOM DATABASE QUESTIONNAIRE 52

FIGURE 2. FREQUENCY OF NEWSROOM REQUESTS FOR LIBRARY DATABASE SEARCHES 64

FIGURE 3. FREQUENCY OF REPORTER REQUESTS FOR LIBRARY DATABASE SEARCHES BY GEOGRAPHIC LEVEL OF COVERAGE 72
NEWSPAPER USE OF COMPUTER DATABASES
AND GUIDELINES FOR ACCESS;
A CASE STUDY: THE ST. PETERSBURG TIMES

by

Deborah Pam Wolfe

An Abstract

Of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of Mass Communications in
the University of South Florida

August 1989

Major Professor: Donna L. Dickerson, Ph.D.
A 1989 case study of the St. Petersburg Times, a 300,000 circulation (400,000 Sunday) daily newspaper, was conducted to gain a greater understanding of how electronic library and commercial databases are used by reporters and editors -- end users -- and how the new research tool may be changing their traditional news gathering roles. Monitoring guidelines were developed to monitor commercial database use and cost (online fees).

The research design consists of a content analysis of journalists' library request records, a series of personal interviews from a purposive sample of 30 journalists and librarians, and two questionnaires distributed to the newsroom and news library staffs. A 68 percent response rate was achieved for the newsroom version of the questionnaire; 100 percent for the news library.

Study results indicate reporters utilize database information primarily to obtain background information before beginning a story, to obtain interview and contact sources, to check facts, and to learn about specialty subjects. Local beat reporters are the most frequent users of commercial database information on a weekly and monthly basis.
Reporters and editors prefer to have database searches performed by an intermediary -- the news librarian. In this way, journalists have made the initial move to establish news librarians as new and key members of the news gatekeeping team. News administrators are making the next move by sanctioning news librarians to control commercial database access in an effort to reduce rising monetary costs and to avoid cumbersome research request clearances in the newsroom. Many reporters and editors now refer to news librarians as fellow journalists.

As journalists become more familiar with commercial databases, the frequency of use increases, and so does the cost. Based on the study, a framework for the discussion of monitoring guidelines for newspaper users of commercial databases was designed to apply to newspapers of any circulation size or ownership type. Three monitoring system options represent a range of choices primarily based on the level of restrictiveness assigned to the newsroom regarding database access.

A newsroom and news library database questionnaire in addition to personal interview questions are appended. A 95-item references section is included.