

**CCL-EAR Committee Review
Of Electric Library
October, 1999**

The California Community College Libraries, Electronic Access to Information Resources Committee (CCL-EAR) undertook a "hands-on" study of Electric Library.

Electric Library aims to group selected quality publications from a wide variety of sources in a single searchable database--convenient one-stop shopping for information seekers. The database currently includes 5 million documents, with some titles going back more than 10 years. Articles are selected from hundreds of popular magazines and scholarly journals, dozens of current newspapers and news wires, thousands of television and radio transcripts, thousands of photographs and maps and hundreds of reference and historical sources. The Electric Library interface allows users to search these items by individual format (books, newspaper articles, maps, images, etc.) or collectively, using either natural language or a pull-down menu Boolean search page. All items in the database are full-text. A dictionary and a thesaurus are linked from each article for clarification of unrecognized terms in the articles. Users may print or e-mail articles from the database. Electric Library is published by Infonautics.

Each CCL-EAR committee member independently, or in concert with other qualified professionals on their campus library staff, reviewed and evaluated Electric Library. Assessments were submitted on a Review Reply Form specifically designed by the Committee for this purpose. Though other staff may have helped in the review process, completion of the form was by the CCL-EAR committee member only and not transferred to another. Ratings were based upon the potential value of the proposal to the California Community Colleges as a whole and not solely on the needs of any specific campus.

Attributes of the information resource were assessed on a scale of 1 to 4 with 1 representing the "least value" and 4 representing the "most value". The following attributes were examined:

INFORMATION DATABASE

Consider its functionality, the appropriateness of format (bibliographic/full-text), the content of the information, the adequacy of coverage (retrospective, current), and its value to the California Community Colleges as a whole.

SEARCH INTERFACE

Consider the functionality and ease of use of the interface. Is it intuitive or is an excessive amount of training required? Are any crucial features missing from the search interface?

USER SUPPORT SERVICES

If documentation is required for successful use of product, is it available, comprehensive, and well written? Is online help adequate and user friendly? Does vendor supply training if it is needed? Is a telephone help line available?

COST

If cost is available, does it seem reasonable in terms of comparable products?

ACCESSIBILITY OF SERVICE

Is access/connection to product reliable and stable? Is response time adequate?

OVERALL ASSESSMENT

#1 --- No Support

#2 --- No Support at this time. Future support conditional upon enhancements noted below in Comments Section.

#3 --- Support and Recommend proposal be forwarded to California Community College libraries for their acceptance or rejection. Would like to see enhancements in product noted below in Comments Section.

#4 --- Outstanding offer and opportunity. Recommend proposal be forwarded to California Community College campus libraries for their acceptance or rejection.

Following are the results of the CCL-EAR Committee's review as well as comments taken from the individual Review Reply Forms.

INFORMATION DATABASE: 3, 2, 3, 3, 2, 4, 2, 3

Electric Library aims to offer one-stop shopping, i.e. it offers selections from magazines, newspapers, books, images, maps and TV and radio transcripts all in one database. They can be searched all at once, one format at a time, or in any combination desired. The list of sources included can be easily viewed by clicking on the icon for each format type (books, magazines, newspapers, etc.) or by clicking the "Source List" button. Source lists are updated daily. One of the major strengths of the database is that all items included are full-text.** ----- The database draws on magazines ranging from newsletters and trade publications ("Billing & Customer Care Review," "Concrete Products ," "Fiber Optics News," ...) to more mainstream publications ("American Demographics," "British Journal of Psychology," "The Economist." Newspapers represented are an equally diverse mix: "American

Banker," "The Atlanta Journal and Constitution," "AP Online," "Gannett News Service," "Los Angeles Times," and so forth. Books offered include "The Columbia Encyclopedia," "Countries of the World," "The Dictionary of Cultural Literacy," travel books, specialized dictionaries, "The Mosby Medical Encyclopedia," "The Complete Works of Shakespeare," "Great Works of Literature," and many others. TV and radio program transcripts represented include "60 Minutes (CBS)," "ABC Good Morning America," Capitol Hill press releases, Congressional testimony, "Fresh Air," "Talk of the Nation," and other NPR broadcasts as well as many others. A search on "intercultural marriages" brought up articles from the "Journal of Social Psychology," "Newsday," and "Time International." ** -

---- There seems to be a special effort made to include international and multicultural news sources (Africa News service, Asia Pulse, AsiaInfoServices, Israel FAXX, Jakarta Post, Xinhua News Agency etc., and to a lesser extent magazines (The Black Collegian, Hispanic Times Magazine, China Business Review, "People en Espaol," "Russian Life," etc.). Popular-level titles representing women and women's studies are also well represented.** ----- The inclusion of periodicals as diverse as "Jack & Jill," "Redbook," "Urology" and the "Journal of Genetic Psychology" in the same database seems a huge stretch, and the database, although it is quite broad in coverage, seems to lack depth for this reason. Although it's always possible to find several articles on a topic (and this is often all our students want), serious researchers would not find Electric Library a substitute for a product such as Gale/Infotrac's Expanded Academic ASAP or EBSCOHost's periodicals database. It should be emphasized also that the database is a hand-picked *selection* of articles, not comprehensive cover-to-cover inclusion of its sources. For this reason, college libraries might not want to use it as their *primary* electronic texts database. However, it would be an excellent supplement to a more comprehensive magazine and/or newspaper database.** ----- I'd guess that this database is aimed at an elementary and secondary school audience, with a nod towards community college or general users as well. Not many refereed journals are included. Considering the market that it's aimed at and the fact that it does not claim to be a comprehensive database, the contents are good.

This database is hard to evaluate for content since there is no clear listing (online or in their brochures) regarding the dates of coverage. A statement such as "selected articles back to 1995" would assist the librarian and user in the evaluation of coverage. I understand that it is a selective database but I want to know what it is I am searching and what the limits are. I could find these nowhere. Although I know that many high school libraries use this database and like its search engine for ease of use, I don't think this is a primary database for community colleges. It could be a secondary, supplementary database however, it is redundant of many of our current offerings. I liked the radio transcripts and the addition of Ethnic Newswatch as an optional addition.

Electric Library's library search interface is very easy to use. The layout of the search page is highly intuitive for people with minimal experience using online resources and very easy for librarians to teach others to find information. Students new to the English Language and those whose skills fall below standard college reading ability, and the instructors who work with them, will find the ability to sort by Reading level highly attractive. There are some features of the interface that I feel warrant attention: 1. Captions describing the "source buttons" should appear on the results page. Currently, captions are only listed when searching. 2. The placement of the "view publications" buttons is confusing in the Advanced search window. Users will think that they will see "the publications" that

come up as a result of their search. A second "search" button would be preferable. 3. On the results page, the "Go to the Best Part" button is questionable. It goes to the highest concentration of keywords but not necessarily to what might be considered the best part. 4. The fact that a dictionary and a thesaurus are available should be obvious from the Search Screen. Having it show up in "Document Options" on the results page is almost useless. Students need the help of such resources when they are forming their search, not after they get the results. 5. Availability to retrieve information in languages other than English should be more highlighted.

This is a well-organized product. A very broad range of topics is included and the currency is exceptional, with a daily upload. The wide variety of formats and ability to search for a particular format is another plus. Every search I tried returned some useful results. I would expect it to be most useful to general users, students doing their first research projects and those in search of current information.

This database has lots of information and is easy to use. The problems outweigh the usefulness and cost. The almanac is out of date. Frommer's guides are free on the internet. The encyclopedias and dictionaries are not top line for American users. The magazine list seems unfocused. The overall theme of the database is not readily apparent. The database seems a potpourri of information that is easily available free over the internet.

Electric Library is a 100% full-text index to 6 different kinds of information sources: magazines, newspapers, books, pictures, maps TV and Radio transcripts. The results of the search can contain all of these types of sources or can be limited to only the type the searcher wants. The magazine database contains several hundred sources many of them popular titles although the majority seem to be trade type of publications. There were not a lot of scholarly journals. The newspaper area did have some ethnic newspapers and the transcripts were from programs such as 20/20, Nightline, and Congressional Testimony. The Electric Library has an extensive database of photographs that can be searched and access to information in over 25 reference books. This database has quite a breadth of information and it is easy to access the list of sources although they do not have the span of years available on-line. With the variety of sources, the ease of access this could be an important database for community colleges.

Useful perhaps for the K-12 or home user, but not comprehensive enough for the community college level. The source list is too small and not broad enough in scope for community college needs. The use of keyword searching only is too limited.

The content of Electric Library is good for a general, all-purpose source of fulltext periodicals and news. However, it has two major weaknesses which will prevent librarians from relying upon Electric Library as a primary source of periodical literature. 1) The source list, though easily accessible, gives no indication of what the retrospective coverage is. We need to know when coverage begins for each source. 2) The lack of subject indexing reduces the usefulness of the database. Keyword searching alone is not enough.

SEARCH INTERFACE: 3, 2, 3, 4, 3, 4, 2, 2

I found the interface uncluttered and pleasant to look at, clear and easy to navigate. It is simple and well arranged and our students find it easy to use. ** ----- Electric library offers two search pages. The main search page offers users the choice of a "Natural Language" or a "Boolean" search. Examples are given for each. Natural language sometimes works for very simple topics, though even the simplest of topics sometimes gets few or no good hits. ("What is a kiva?" resulted in numerous articles about Kiva software, a review of a restaurant named Kiva, and almost no articles on the Native American kiva.) Searches can also be limited by date, and it is possible to search for a specific author, title, journal title and publication date, all from the main search page. ** ----- For more complex searches, users also have the option of going to a special menu-driven "Build a Boolean Search" page where they enter their search words or phrases in search boxes and select the appropriate Boolean operators from a pull-down menu. It is not possible to limit a search to refereed journals, and there don't appear to be many included in the database anyway. ** ----- Search results can be sorted by relevancy, date, file size ("I just want something short."), or reading level, and the lists can be displayed in either a "condensed" (article & journal titles only) or a "detailed" (relevancy ranking, titles, author, date, file size & reading level) format. The ability to sort by reading level is especially helpful when working with beginning ESL students. A "Go to Best Part" feature jumps immediately to the searched words in each document. Documents can be reformatted and printed or e-mailed. ** ----- The most serious drawback to Electric Library is its search engine and the fact that keyword searching is the *only* option. The usual false hits caused by this type of search occur commonly. Articles are often ranked as 100% relevant simply because they include all the search words, but not necessarily in the phrases indicated (with or without quotes) or in the context intended. A search on "Earthquake AND Hector Mine" resulted in 20 hits. The first six were relevant, then we arrived at the "100% relevant" Act III of the "Duchess of Malfi" where "mine" appeared repeatedly (mine eyes, etc) "earthquake" appeared once and there was one reference to the Greek Hector. Five or six other relevant articles were interspersed with many non-relevant ones. ** ----- This unfortunate problem limits use of the database to those who need only a couple of articles on a topic rather than those wanting to do more comprehensive research. I would rate the search *interface,* i.e. the appearance and navigational features a 4, but I rate the search *engine* a 2.

I liked the search interface since it seems straightforward and easy to use however I found major problems with their "boolean" searches which yielded only OR results. A search under "Pasadena City College" retrieved EVERY incidence of city and college, not linked to Pasadena. The relevancy formulas should also be tweaked so that more appropriate results are displayed first. The natural language example did not work well at all. The feature that allows a user to go to the "best part" of the document showed the pitfalls of full text keyword searching -- the words were there but the article was irrelevant. I did like the reading level sort which may be useful to the ESL population.

Electric Library's library search interface is very easy to use. The layout of the search page is highly intuitive for people with minimal experience using online resources and very easy for librarians to teach others to find information. Students new to the English Language and those whose skills fall below standard college reading ability, and the instructors who work with them, will find the

ability to sort by Reading level highly attractive. ** ----- There are some features of the interface that I feel warrant attention: 1. Captions describing the "source buttons" should appear on the results page. Currently, captions are only listed when searching. 2. The placement of the "view publications" buttons is confusing in the Advanced search window. Users will think that they will see "the publications" that come up as a result of their search. A second "search" button would be preferable. 3. On the results page, the "Go to the Best Part" button is questionable. It goes to the highest concentration of keywords but not necessarily to what might be considered the best part. 4. The fact that a dictionary and a thesaurus are available should be obvious from the Search Screen. Having it show up in "Document Options" on the results page is almost useless. Students need the help of such resources when they are forming their search, not after they get the results. 5. Availability to retrieve information in languages other than English should be more highlighted.

I found the interface quite intuitive and easy to use. The number of options for moving about the search list, document page, etc. is great. Very little scrolling is necessary. The special buttons to move to the top, bottom or best part of the document are very nice features. The variety of options should make this a popular product since it allows the student to search using their favorite method including key word, guided key word and natural language. One slight confusion is that the buttons at the top of the screen in the navigation bar do not function when the results list is displayed. I particularly liked the dictionary and thesaurus options. This should be very helpful for the many students for whom English is a second language. (It would be nice if there were a button on the dictionary/thesaurus definition screen that would return the user directly to the document they had been using. It appears to be necessary to use the back button to return to the document or results.)

This is a very easy database to use. The directions are simple and the icons are self explanatory. The Help screens, on the other hand are not designed for the low reading levels that are the featured targets of the products. It is true that many users do not make use of this feature but it should interface well with the database.

This search interface is very functional and easy to use. The screen is uncluttered and everything is labelled. There are two ways to search natural language and Boolean. Boolean can be done in the search box or with an easy to use template. I did a search using both methods and received very similar results. The searcher can limit the search to all the 6 types of sources or can select only the type of information sources they want. It is also very easy, using a pull-down window to limit the dates the searcher wants from "all dates" to a date before or after a certain date or to various months and years. The searcher also on the first screen can limit how many results they want 30,60, or 90 articles. that should be enough for most users. The result pages also offer options with a detailed list (full citations) or condensed (just article titles). A nice feature is the ability to sort in six different ways, relevance is the default and there is the options of alphabetical order by article title or publication title, date, reading level etc. All the results are on a continuous scrolling screen. The buttons at the top are easy to find. At the bottom of the articles are your print and E-mail options. And to avoid getting unwanted material from the screen the user needs to change the view to print view which is a little bit of a pain. The whole process of searching was easy and the look of the graphics and screens made it fun.

The search interface is intuitive, allowing both for natural language and boolean searching. The advanced feature allows for limiting searches by publication, author and dates. A brief example of boolean searching is provided at the initial search screen as well as the use of " " for phrase searching. The ability to sort results (by relevancy, most recent first, source, etc.), to show detailed or brief hit results, and to limit the number of potential hits are nice features. No reference was made either on the initial search screen or in "help" mentioning the availability of using truncation or wildcards in the search strategy. There appears to be no subject authority-all the searching is strictly keyword. The relevancy ranking does not seem to be very effective-too many 100% ratings for hits that were not really very adequate. For example, I searched "drug abuse" and prisons and had a number of results that did not appear very useful, yet the relevancy ranking showed 100%

No thought seems to have been given to accessibility for those using assistive technologies, not even the simple use of ALT tags for graphics which convey meaning. All of the functions buttons (Search, Build a Boolean Search, Help, etc.) are graphics with no ALT tags, which renders Electric Library useless for those employing a text-only browser. However, if that problem can be corrected, the interface is otherwise both easy to use and powerful. (Putting aside the accessibility issues, I would give the search interface a score of 3.8.) 1) Being able to sort out the types of sources (magazines, newspapers, etc.) is a useful feature. I would also like to be able to make a further distinction between popular magazines and research journals. 2) There are adequate "advanced" search features but not so many that users are overwhelmed. The way that dates or examples of the appropriate date format appear in the search boxes when you choose a Publication Date Range is a very good solution to the problem of showing users how to input the dates correctly. 3) The email document option is handled very nicely, confirming that the email has been sent and allowing the user to return to the document or other results list. 4) The view printable copy feature is also commendable.

USER SUPPORT SERVICES: 3, --, 3, 3, 4, 4, 2, 3

Online help is excellent. A "Help" button is prominently displayed at the top of every page. Help comes in two levels: a concise and clear "Tips" page and more "Detailed Help." "Detailed Help" offers a thorough hyper-linked Table of Contents leading to information on topics like searching, natural language or Boolean, limiting by date, evaluating results, refining a search, printing, e-mailing, navigating, troubleshooting, etc. ** ----- A "Contact Us" button, prominently displayed at the top of every page, links to customer support and tech support telephone and e-mail information. (Infonautics technical support has always been excellent. However in the past, it has been **extremely** difficult to get competent *customer* support from the company. I hope that by now the company's growing pains have subsided.) ** ----- One serious problem is that no use statistics for Electric Library are provided by Infonautics. Community college libraries need such statistics to help justify database costs to our administrators.

Did not explore

Help page is helpful for general information. However on the "Troubleshooting" page there is no active link to contact customer service. ** ----- Received prompt attention when calling to request a new temporary trial password after the League trial had expired.

The context sensitive help is very useful. Some sort of help or useful information for using the product is available at every screen and possible opportunity for a question. The "tips for getting the most out of Electric Library" is a nice introduction to the product for the new user.

The users support is quite good with many good features. There are simple trouble shooting explanations and very good definitions for common Internet vocabulary.

The help screens were available for all parts of the search process. They were very complete and easy to read. There is a "contact us" button to get access to their tech support with a number and e-mail address.

The online "help" documentation was not extensive but adequate and user friendly. Several of the examples for boolean searching were inconsistent in terms of the highlighting of the boolean operators. I don't know if the vendor supplies training. I didn't notice the availability of a telephone hotline.

The "More Detailed Help" screens are good, but the user may not find them if she doesn't scroll all the way to the bottom of the not-very-helpful main Help page. I recommend a link to the detailed help at the top of the main Help page. There is an 800 number for customer service and both an 800 number and an email address for technical support. They are easy to find under "Contact Us".

COST: 2, 1, 3, 2, 1, 4, 2, 2

This database is overpriced, especially for consortial pricing. Given that it does not offer complete contents of its journal and newspaper sources, and given the limitations of its search engine and the fact that it could not really stand alone as a college library's primary full-text database, the cost is way too high, especially for a site license. If it were priced considerably lower, it would make a good supplementary database.

This pricing seems exorbitant for a secondary database. I would not purchase it unless it was in the \$2000 range.

Reasonable pricing for market and contents.

As a stand alone product the cost seems reasonable, however, I would suggest that most community college libraries would need additional resources many of which have overlapping content with the Electric Library. The cost of the EL as an additional resource may be unjustifiable in this context.

The cost is not realistic for the product. Encyclopedia Britannica is now available on line for free and

Internet Public Library does much of the same. Both of these databases are more up-to-date.

Because of the variety of sources available with this product the price seems appropriate.

Considering the lack of a more comprehensive list of relevant database sources available for the community college audience and the lack of any subject authority for searching, I think this product is too expensive.

The price of \$4500 for unlimited simultaneous users is quite reasonable compared to other general purpose fulltext periodical indexes. However, since Electric Library will not replace other general periodical databases (due to lack of controlled vocabulary), most community college libraries will not be able to afford this price.

ACCESSIBILITY OF SERVICE: 4, 3, 4, 3, 4, 4, 3, 3

I experienced no technical problems or inaccessibility at all with Electric Library. Response time was as quick as that of any of our other online databases.

Seemed acceptable to me

Always easy to connect and retrieve results in reasonable time. The product was available at each attempt to gain access. The screens load quickly and overall the response time was good.

Reliable connection with excellent response time over the period I used it.

I did not have any trouble accessing the product and the response time was adequate.

I had no problem accessing the product in a timely way.

OVERALL ASSESSMENT: 3, 2, 3, 3, 2, 4, 2, 2

Electric Library is a unique database that fills a certain niche. With its one-stop-shopping approach and its very simple user interface, it's a good place to begin for those users who are intimidated by computers or who are new to database searching. Our ESL (English as a Second Language) students are also fond of it, presumably because it feels self contained and manageable in a way that our other databases do not and because they have to learn only one search tool to obtain any of a number of different types of materials (books, periodicals, etc).** ----- Unfortunately, I think the search engine is weak, and the database is considerably overpriced for what it offers. If the price were lower, the database would be a useful supplement to a community college library's primary periodicals database.

1. Captions describing the "source buttons" should appear on the results page. Currently, captions are

only listed when searching. ** ----- 2. The placement of the "view publications" buttons is confusing in the Advanced search window. Users will think that they will see "the publications" that come up as a result of their search. A second "search" button would be preferable. ** ----- 3. On the results page, the "Go to the Best Part" button is questionable. It goes to the highest concentration of keywords but not necessarily to what might be considered the best part. ** ----- 4. The fact that a dictionary and a thesaurus are available should be obvious from the Search Screen. Having it show up in "Document Options" on the results page is almost useless. Students need the help of such resources when they are forming their search, not after they get the results. ** ----- 5. Availability to retrieve information in languages other than English should be more highlighted.

Overall I found this an excellent product. It would be most useful as a single source for a very small library or as a supplement to a more robust periodical database in a larger institution. The variety of information and formats is a real plus. It is difficult to determine the range of dates and quantity of information that is included for an individual source.

I liked this product because it is easy to use, has good help screens, and allows the user to customize their search easily using pull-down screens. Having access to pictures and different sources such as reference books and TV and Radio programs is also a bonus. I do have some concerns about the titles in the magazine database but each library would have to compare them with databases they may already have. It does offer sources are unique.

If I were looking for an affordable source of fulltext periodicals for my own use at home, Electric Library would be my choice. However, the criteria I must apply as a librarian would prevent me from choosing Electric Library as the main source of periodical literature in my library. Most of the problems I see with this product could be fixed: add more information about retrospective coverage to the source list and bring the interface into compliance with web accessibility standards. But the lack of subject indexing is not so easily overcome. (I suspect it simply would not be cost-effective because home-users will not pay more for subject indexing.) Unfortunately, in the community college libraries especially, we do not have the budgets for "useful luxuries", e.g., a database that duplicates much of what we already have (in whatever general purpose periodical index does fit our criteria) yet is convenient for quick searches and popular with our users.

Rating for home campus only: 3, 2, 3, 3, 1, 4, 2, 2

Comments based on utility for home campus:

Our college already subscribes to Electric Library, though it is not as heavily used as some of our other databases. (Of course this is hard to judge since we get no use statistics from Infonautics!)

I think one of the librarians summed it up succinctly: If we gave students the choice of databases, I think this might be a first choice (based on high school experiences and the nice title), but I don't think it would be the best choice.

I am undecided whether the amount of additional content would justify the additional cost for our campus.

This product is not up to our standards for quality and cost.

It costs too much for what one could easily get free from other sources such as Yahoo or Google.

I think our students would get a lot of use out of Electric Library because of the variety of sources.

I like the fact that this is a full-text database and that the coverage includes a variety of information sources beyond simply newspaper and magazine information. I would not be interested in purchasing the product for our campus, however, based on the lack of a more comprehensive database of resources and the fact that the search interface (ranking by relevancy and based strictly on keyword searching) is not adequate enough for our needs.

Same as above.

Last Updated: February 26, 2002