The California Community College Libraries
CCL-EAR Committee Review
Of NewsBank 'InfoWeb'
April, 1999

The California Community College Libraries, Electronic Access to Information Resources Committee (CCL-EAR) undertook a two-week "hands-on" study of the NewsBank Inc. Web-based information resource called "InfoWeb".

InfoWeb is a Web-based collection of primary source information from regional, national and international newspapers, newswires, government and international documents, regional business journals and, periodicals. The resources in NewsBank InfoWeb support interdisciplinary research on a broad range of subjects including: social science, economics, political science, international relations, science and technology, and business.

Each CCL-EAR committee member independently, or in concert with other qualified professionals on their campus library staff, reviewed and evaluated NewsBank InfoWeb. 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 helpline 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 Community College campuses 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 Community College campuses 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: (3,3,3,3,4)

Newsbank Newfile fills an important niche, I believe, for newspaper coverage for community college students from 1991 to the present. The fact that it is a full-text database is particularly important since we retain few newspapers beyond two months in hardcopy or in microfilm format.

I could find no indication of how long data stays in these databases. As new data ("more than 70,000 articles annually") are added, do previous years remain, making the database bigger and bigger? If years are removed as new ones are added, what years are included? Is there a backfile that can be searched? I assume that items in these databases are *selected* for inclusion as opposed to the publications being indexed cover to cover. (The "NewsFile" description says "more than 70,000 articles selected annually.") Is this correct? Offers quick access to a couple of headline stories for today and for past month. Also offers access to a collection of simple maps. (Are these separate databases or are they a free feature of any NewsBank sub?) NEWSFILE -4 Includes over 500 U.S. and Canadian newspapers and news sources, and domestic and international newswires. (No international newspapers) Particularly useful for little stories of local interest and stories which don't make it into the mainstream press. Includes wide variety of sources, from major national newspapers (Los Angeles Times, Wall Street Journal, Christian Science Monitor, etc.) to small local newspapers (Janesville Gazette (WI), Missoulian (Missoula MI),
Sioux City Journal, etc.). Does *not* include New York Times or Wall Street Journal. Our faculty want these, so we would have to subscribe to them separately, at additional cost. Not sure if this would be the case at other colleges. Includes National Public Radio transcripts. GLOBAL NEWSBANK - 2 - "Global NewsBank offers varying perspectives on international issues and events" and "contains comprehensive coverage of news summaries, broadcasts and transcripts from hundreds of international sources." But, searches I did seemed to result in mostly *U.S. sources* on global news. I'd like to see more emphasis on international news sources since the U.S. press is already included in NEWSFILE and in numerous products from other vendors. I don't really think that community college students' news needs are so sophisticated that they need two separate news databases, one for U.S. news, and one for global news. (As a matter of fact, the fewer databases and interfaces we offer them, the less confused and overwhelmed they are. They want one-stop shopping.) Seems to me our students need a combination of the two databases, perhaps with fewer titles from each to offset the cost of combining the two.

STATBANK - 3 - Our college is *VERY* interested in finding a general statistics database, but this one doesn't feel like it would be as helpful as we'd like--partly because of the lack of a search engine, but the content also feels thin. I couldn't find a database description other than the one you get on the main NewsBank page when your mouse passes over the StatBank title, and this one won't hold still long enough to read it. Source list seems to be composed entirely of U.S. publications. Where are World and country stats coming from? A number of the U.S. sources are available for free on the web, though it's nice to have everything brought into one database.

Coverage is much better than UMI's five title newspaper service.

Although the coverage is not comprehensive for all the sources included in the database, it is still a valuable information resource. The regional coverage will be particularly useful for smaller libraries, which have no budget for items such as newspapers from other regions of the US. One thing that is lacking, however, is explanation of the indexing criteria and date coverage for each source. The bibliographic format is fine. The "estimated pages when printed" is roughly accurate and will be appreciated by users who must pay for printouts. Coverage is weaker in the earlier years (1991-1992) of the database. Again, information on when indexing begins for each source would be very helpful.

Unfortunately, the subject indexing is not strong. For instance, I found only two articles under the heading "Los Angeles Riots (1992)" although, obviously, the database contains many more.

The full-text news articles availability in Newsfile, Business and Global Newsbank is the most appealing feature of InfoWeb. Coverage is good, especially for Newsfile, which goes back to 1991. StatBank is very promising and will be in great demand from our students. The UNaccess database may be unique but might be of limited value to Community Colleges.

**SEARCH INTERFACE: (2,3,3,4,4)**

The search interface is functional. There's not too much information on the screen to overwhelm the user. The ability to select a search by relevancy or by chronological order is a very useful feature. A brief mention of the use of and, or and not plus quotes for phrase searching are helpful starting points for more likely useful hits. Also, the link to more information regarding search operators is useful. The
highlighting of search terms is helpful. And I like access to the two levels of searching, keyword and customized. On the negative side, Newsbank discourages the use of truncation. A search for child* will not necessarily result in hits on the word children. Also, if one is keyword searching more than one concept, I find clicking on "related topics" often brings up a lot of links to topics that are not useful. For single concept searching, this feature works quite well. I also would like to see a print button option next to the e-mail button option rather than rely on the print icon button on the Netscape menu.

Overall the search interface is better than most. Moving around the search, list, and fulltext screens is not confusing. The "Related Topics" button next to the results list is an excellent feature! The simple search screen is clear and uncluttered. It would be nice, though, to have a couple more search examples and to make them a bit more prominent. I question the use of the term "customized search" when "advanced search" is commonly used in other databases, search engines, etc. The weakest feature is subject searching (by topic). The process for getting a list of the indexing terms is clumsy and not readily apparent, especially for users who are less familiar with the web environment.

The NewsBank interface is *very* aesthetically appealing. Layout is clean, simple, clear and well-organized. There are NO bouncing arrows, NO spinning or pulsating logos, NO unnecessary graphics and no advertisements clumping up the screen or slowing down the loading of pages. It's easy to see what choices need to be made. Two modes of searching are offered, "Keyword" and "Customized;" "Keyword" is the default. The "Customized" search allows a combination of keyword searching and browsing a list of *preselected* items and fields. (This can sometimes get to be pretty confusing, as in Business NewsBank where if you search for a company or organization in the regular keyword fields (title, lead paragraph, etc.) you sometimes get different results than if you searched the company or organization in the "company name" field. There is apparently no true "authority" searching possible, though search results pages offer an option of displaying "related topics." Users can select to have results listed by relevancy or in reverse chronological order. This choice is very handy since for some topics currency is the higher priority and for others it's not as important. Instructions re. Boolean operators and phrase searching are right on the front search page which will save lots of trips to the "Help" pages. E-mail feature allows users to send as HTML (for POP mail users) or ASCII text (for text browser users). Very handy (assuming that a sender knows which type of mail system the receiver will be using). Problems and Suggestions: NEW SEARCHES There is no "New Search" button. In a Customized Search, you have to select "Edit Search," then click the "Clear" button to begin a new search in the same database. In a Keyword Search, the process is different--click "Edit Search" then manually delete the original search from the search box. A "New Search" button which automatically returned users to the original search page and cleared the previous search would be MUCH more intuitive and convenient. One that returned them to the database home page instead of the NewsBank home page would serve the same purpose. SEARCH TYPES Since the search type choices offered by many electronic databases are "keyword" or "browse," NewsBank's choice of "keyword" or the hybrid "customized" search can be confusing. I suspect that this would be problematic particularly for new users and ESL students. Furthermore, the opening screen doesn't *tell* users that to "browse," they have to do a "Customized Search." "RELATED TOPICS" FEATURE o Our students need LOTS of help focusing and refining their searches. They often start with extremely broad topics like "art." The "Related Topics" list offered on NewsBank's search results screens offers users *some* help in refining a topic, but the subject thesaurus used is not LCSH, and it is often sparse or misleading. For example,
there were only four related topics offered for a search on "Northern Ireland:" Orangemen (Northern Ireland); Great Britain; Northern Ireland (?); and Ulster Unionist Party. Nothing about the country's education, economy, history, etc. A similar search in IAC's Expanded Academic ASAP database offers *90* subtopics for Northern Ireland (e.g. --agriculture, --art, --business and industry, --education, --environmental aspects, --foreign relations, --history, --politics and government, and so forth) as well as 38 related topics (e.g. Belfast, Northern Ireland; Catholics in Northern Ireland; Northern Ireland Women's Coalition; Northern Ireland Assembly, etc.) Our students would never stumble across most of these subtopics and related topics in a long list of results from a "keyword" search since they rarely look beyond the first 10 articles listed and NewsBank offered no related terms which would get them there. (As another indication of the inadequacies of keyword searching, a NewsBank search on "Environment" offered a long list of related topics, most of them quite useful but also included "working conditions," "prison conditions," and "workplace," obviously not the "environment" our student was looking for. ) Unfortunately, the related topics feature apparently only goes one layer deep; under the "Environment" search above, a click on the related topic "pollution" does NOT lead to another choice of related topics which might have included "air pollution," "water pollution," "toxic waste disposal," etc. The "Related Topics" feature is useful, but it does not make up for the lack of true hierarchical subject authority searching. o Every click on the "Related Topics" link brought a pop-up window warning that this was an insecure server and asking if I wanted to proceed. I know that this option can be turned off in my browser, but why on earth would a "Related Topics" search *need* a secure server when the original topic search does not? o A useful addition would be a "related works" type link from a specific article so that if you come across the perfect article, you can quickly select another one that has all the same indexing terms. STATBANK INTERFACE: - 2 Search screens are again visually attractive, clean and easy to follow, but there is no search engine. Users must search by selecting from menu categories and browse lists. Must start by selecting area of the world: U.S. National Topics, States of the U.S., World Topics or Countries of the World. Then must select from: Society, Economy, Government, Earth or Transportation. Then browse topics list and select topic. This is a pretty clunky way to search, and is a major drawback for this database. Some tables (e.g. States - California - Society - Crime on Campus - Santa Rosa Junior College) are very easy to read and interpret, while others (e.g. U.S. - Society - Teenage Pregnancy) are less intelligible . In general, the statistical displays themselves, which use a straight text format, are not very attractively presented. In some, the columns are so far apart that it's difficult to see how the numbers line up with the text items. One nice feature of SB interface: Your search history is laid out at top of page in series of buttons. All you have to do to return to an earlier step is click on the corresponding button. Another is that you can return to the StatBank home page, not just the NewsBank home page as in other databases. Selection method (e.g. Countries - Europe - Ukraine - Society - Debt, Foreign) takes stats out of original source context and are often only one or two lines long. But World Totals for same categories (Society - Debt, Foreign) are for the whole world. There doesn't seem to be a place where you can view a chart showing the foreign debt for all the countries in the world (or in Europe, Africa, etc) in one list. BUSINESS NEWSBANK None of the truncation symbols I tried (*, ?, character string) seemed to work in Business NB. I'm not sure many community college students could make effective use of all the choices in Business NewsBank's "customized search," but the only other choice in--a simple keyword search--can often be useless. (For example, a simple keyword search for "hersheys chocolate sales" rates as 99% relevant an article about a cellular phone company in Scottsdale which dumped 10,000 Hershey's chocolate kisses into the sales office for a celebration. But if you do a customized search for "hersheys" in the company name field, combined with
sales and chocolate in the regular keyword fields, you find more relevant information. Perhaps Business students are more sophisticated users than many of our others.

Screen design is clear and neat. The navigational tools are easy to use which makes searching intuitive, without any need for training. The browsable source list from customized searching is good. The interface can be improved by the addition of "sort" and "limit" options after the search results are displayed; especially if a keyword search produces a large number of hits-- "more than 200" as in this case. Also, a "NEW SEARCH" button on every screen for users to start a new search will eliminate too much "BACK" clicking.

**USER SUPPORT SERVICES: (3,3,4,4,4)**

Customer support at Newsbank has been superb. We have been loyal subscribers of some Newsbank products since 1970's. I called to gain access to the trial (to bypass our set IP) and I received immediate assistance. The online help screen is good and covered all the navigational techniques. The tips on keyword and customized searching could be separated from the general help folders. It will be helpful if it could be "database specific".

As mentioned above, I think the help access online is very useful. I like the ability to maximize or minimize the help choices in the left hand frame. Again, being able to browse the newspapers and newswires included is useful as well as the "how to cite Infoweb" access. I believe the regional rep is available for staff training, if requested. I also think the company is very willing to hear input on how to improve the product. I have found the Newsbank staff to be responsive to suggestions for product improvement.

Help screens are reasonably clear.

Although they are not context sensitive, NewsBank's online "Help" instructions are *excellent,* and I'd recommend that any user read them before doing anything else. The instructions are simple, clear, concise and well organized; they answered every question I had about how to use NewsBank. "Help" offers a description of the database being searched; instructions on NewsBank's different features and navigation buttons and how they work; tips on search techniques; and tips for troubleshooting. Good examples are used to illustrate each concept, and screen shots are often included. In addition, "Help" provides a source list for the database; instructions on how to cite NewsBank database articles, a description of web browser requirements for use of NB (which versions are needed, etc.) and contact information for NB customer support. "Help" opens in a new browser window so that users can keep the "Help" window open while going back to their search and trying the techniques suggested in "Help." "Help" layout is clear, with "Help" topics in the left frame and instructions on the selected "Help" topic in the right frame. Aside from the fact that "Help" is not context sensitive, the only problem I found with it is that if users don't actually *close* the "Help" window when finished, it can be obscured by the main NewsBank window when they return to their search. Then when they try to open "Help" again, it appears that nothing happens (because the "Help" window is already open, *behind* the main window). Many of our students are not computer-saavy enough to understand what's happening here. Contact
information for customer support is easy to locate from within the databases.

Online help is quite good. The pop-up browser window is easy to use and the help topics are well-organized. It is clearly written and the example searches are fairly helpful. A full description of advanced searching features (operators, truncation, stopwords, etc.) is included as well. An email address and an 800 number for customer service/tech support are listed on one of the help screens. I do not have any information regarding vendor supplied training.

COST: (4,3,3,3,1)

The cost of Newsfile is still a little more than what we are paying right now. But well... I think the cost is reasonable.

I pay less now than the price currently on offer for schools 10K or larger. (At 12K I currently pay $5390.) I wonder if this is lowest price they could offer us at all levels of FTE.

Costs seem reasonable, with the possible exception of StatBank. For the StatBank price offered, I'd want to see a keyword searchable database rather than "search by menu."

The cost is good for this type of resource.

ACCESSIBILITY OF SERVICE: (3,4,4,4,4)

Access is reliable and response time is good. Plain text and no pdf files and applets do contribute to shorter response time.

Seems very reliable; the *only* time I lost connectivity was when I was timed out. (Given the vagaries of our campus network, this is close to miraculous!) (Well, there were also the times that Javascript crashed the browser or the computer I was using, but this has nothing to do with connectivity.) Top level page takes *FOREVER* to load over a modem, presumably due to large number of images. Response time for other pages and for searches can be slow over modem, but seems generally acceptable. Times out too soon (1 minute of inactivity). But user-friendly message asks if user wishes to continue or log out. Timeout should be at least 3 minutes. Students are often rummaging through a backpack, looking for a pencil or trying to find some part of their assignments while in mid-search. It takes a while. :-)

I accessed the Newsbank site several times over a period of three weeks. I found the response time very good and had no problems connecting. The email delivery feature was almost immediate for the one test email I sent. I am giving a 3 rating here (rather than a 4) because I haven't used the product enough to get a sense of how reliable/stable it is for regular use over a significant period of time.

Connections are consistently good.
We have been accessing Newsbank Newsfile for almost a year online and we have found the product to be quite reliable and the response time to be quite dependably adequate.

**OVERALL ASSESSMENT: (2,3,3,3,3)**

The pricing is too high. The content of the database is enough to warrant a second look. Although the interface needs some changing.

Since Newsbank Newfile fills a unique niche and does so quite well, I think it's a good candidate for a core collection for community colleges. This product in combination with an additional online full-text newspaper database that features more of the big five or so newspapers nationally would make a useful package. I would very much like to see a more robust truncation capability.

I would like to give the product a 3.4, but the little box only takes one character. So I rounded down. I think the Newbanks Newfile is a strong product. The areas that need improvement are: 1) details on indexing/coverage of the sources included in the database 2) better interface for subject searching 3) stronger subject indexing

See extensive comments under "Search Interface" section. I had a number of problems with JavaScript features when searching on an iMac on the campus network. Worked sometimes, then stopped working until I rebooted computer. No problems on Pentiums or Mac 5400s on the campus network. Didn't try on older machines. JavaScript crashed Netscape once on a G3 PowerMac over a modem connection. URLs given in articles are not hot. I'd like to see them linked to the websites they are for so users don't have to copy and paste them into the location box to get to the sites. StatBank glitch: A search for China - Society - Students Television Viewing Habits gets data from the U.S. Department of Education's "The Condition of Education, 1993." China - Society - Cancer Rates is taken from the American Cancer Society's "Cancer Facts & Figures." As far as I know, neither of these publications reports statistics outside the U.S. Reset "timeout" to at least 3 minutes. Extend "Related Topics" feature more than one layer deep. Consider a "related works" link from each article. Reduce the image load on the NewsBank Home page.

**Rating for home campus only: (4,4,3,2,1)**

Although I rate this product quite high and I think it would be of great value on my campus, I still doubt that we will be able to afford with our current budget.

We need the full-text coverage this product offers.

On database content: Rating would differ from one database to the next. NewsFile - 3; Global NewsBank - 1; StatBank - 2 But overall rating: 1 Our librarians are completely and unequivocally sold on the combination of hierarchical subject authority searching and keyword searching which is offered by our current IAC databases. We feel that this is essential for the level student we deal with, and it just makes searches a lot more effective for any of us. (IAC has recently added a "Natural Language" option
as well.) IAC's "Subject Guide" (i.e. authority) searching gives our students (and everyone else including the librarians) a quick and visual way of grasping the scope of a topic and also a quick way to refine a topic. If a topic gets no results in an authority search, IAC automatically reverts to a keyword search, without the user ever having to understand that that's what is required. After spending hours fooling with keyword search engines on the web, students are *delighted* when we show them the subdivisions in the IAC databases. Although we wish that our IAC databases had more full text than they do, what they have is generally sufficient, and we continue to make the tradeoff of adequate full text availability and excellent indexing, excellent search engine and excellent online help instead of more full text and more sources, with an unhelpful interface. Our current full-text newspaper subscriptions seem to be sufficient, though the vendor's search interface is less than satisfactory. We've considered business databases a number of times before, but it was generally agreed that we don't get enough business questions to justify the cost of a business database, and there are other databases which have had a higher priority. We're VERY interested in finding a good statistics database; it's possible that we might consider StatBank at a later date, but only if we can't find one that offers a search engine. The interface relies too much on algorithmic searching. Boolean, field searching and limiting are not as functional as they could be. Printing is atrocious. The page is designed with an unnecessary frames format. This format has the upper frame selected so that nothing prints from the lower frame. This could be easily dealt with in the code of the page but until now the programmers have not made the change. If I am looking at my article I should be able to hit the print button. I should not have to wait for it to pull up a second time in another format. Another issue is the splash screen. The students have consistently had problems figuring out what to click to actually get into the database. The "Newsbank" that lights up red on mouseover is not clear enough.