

BIDS - PUTTING THE SEARCH INTO RESEARCH

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BIDS is now perhaps the best known on-line bibliographic data service in UK academia. This article describes the service, support arrangements, database coverage, and then goes on to look at some findings of a recent survey on user satisfaction with BIDS. It concludes with a brief look at future developments.

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Introduction

BIDS has grown in the four years since its establishment to be perhaps the most widely known and used on-line database service in UK academia. Since the launch of the first database, the service has seen steady growth in the number of users, the number of sites subscribing, the range of databases and the facilities provided for users. The number of people accessing the ISI (Institute for Scientific Information) databases alone is now peaking at over 30,000 per week.

Because the first databases mounted (ISI) are multi-disciplinary, the service has attracted interest from a wide variety of subject specialists, many of whom had little or no previous experience in using networked information services. There is evidence of a widespread awareness of BIDS services, both within the UK academic community, and elsewhere, in industry and overseas.

This article sets out to describe the current service and the databases available through it. It then goes on to review some of the experience of the first four years of operation, with particular reference to a detailed survey¹ by Harry East and colleagues of the Centre for Communication & Information Studies (CCIS) to be published shortly. Finally, some conclusions will be drawn and the article will finish with some speculation as to the future.

The BIDS Service

BIDS (Bath Information & Data Services), based at the University of Bath, has been operating a networked end-user bibliographic information retrieval service since February 1991. On payment of an annual fee, anyone at a subscribing institution with a terminal or personal computer linked to the network can connect to the service. Searches of commercial bibliographic databases, often previously mediated by library staff to save connect-time and search costs, can be carried out directly by end-users. Results are shown on screen, or can be e-mailed back to the user's mailbox. See references 2, 3 and 4 for a more complete description of the development of the BIDS service.

In summary, the key features of BIDS data services are:

- End-user services, free at the point of delivery
- On-line access via JANET, or any Internet-connected network
- Menu-driven interface - designed for non-expert searchers

- Well supported, with wide range of printed support material
- Extensive, context-sensitive, on-line help
- Weekly updates for most databases (twice-weekly for Inside Information)
- E-mail option for delivery of results
- End-user document ordering facilities

Connection to BIDS is available to anyone at a subscribing institution with a terminal or personal computer linked to the network. Back-data can be searched rapidly, and the databases are kept up-to-date with at least weekly updates. Facilities are provided for saving and re-using search strategies, and the service can be used to check on new additions since a previous search.

Access is through a simple, menu driven interface, with extensive online help. [See Fig.1]

Results (bibliographic details of individual articles, or complete contents pages of selected journals) are shown on screen, or can be e-mailed back to the user's mailbox in a variety of formats. It is also possible to order copies of articles for delivery by fax or post. Payment can be by credit or debit card, or from an account. The current supplier is the British Library Document Supply Centre, though other suppliers will be added in due course. The Blackwell UnCover service also offers document delivery, though only by fax.

BIDS is largely funded by the JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee), the organisation that funds the UK Higher Education

Fig.1

portion of the Internet (JANET), and also supports a number of other IT initiatives. The JISC, in turn, gets its funding from the Higher Education Funding Councils. BIDS has also entered into partnerships with other organisations with common interests, such as the British Library.

Support services

From the outset, BIDS has put a lot of effort into providing a wide range of support materials and services. These take a number of different forms.

- Extensive on-line, context-sensitive help screens
- A widely publicised e-mail address for help (bidshelp@bath.ac.uk)
- A telephone hot-line, particularly for supporters of the service
- A wide range of printed support materials -
 - ~ User Guides - simple folded cards covering the basics of the services with examples
 - ~ Self-Help Guides - A5 sized booklets (42 pages - ISI, 72 pages - EMBASE) containing a large number of worked examples of how to use the databases
 - ~ Reference Manuals - in both ring-binder and bound formats
 - ~ Instruction Packs - containing full support material for presenting courses at overview, basic and advanced levels,

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      Connected to: Science Citation Index
      Searches cover years: 1981 to 1995 inclusive (use Options to change)
      Language subsetting: OFF
      Document type subsetting: OFF
      Last search found: 1083 hits

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-- Search Menu --

1 Word(s) in title
2 Word(s) in title, keywords or abstract
3 Author name(s)
4 Journal title
5 Research front
6 Cited patent
7 Corporate address
8 Save/retrieve sets
9 Use previous sets

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or Display(D) Output(P) Options(O) Issues(I) Citations(C) Order(B)
or type HELP or EXIT

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and designed to be integrated into other courses

- ~ Flyers - A5 coloured sheets describing each database service, used to help promote the services to both non-subscribers, and to individuals in subscribing institutions
- ~ Posters - A3 posters for display in libraries, departmental noticeboards etc.

The printed materials have been very popular. Nearly 300,000 User Guides alone have been distributed. Another very successful product is the Self-Help Guide; over 12,000 of the ISI version have been sold.

The takeup of the training pack has also been encouraging. It was recognised early on that BIDS itself did not have the resources to support and train end-users directly, and that librarians and computing service staff were going to have to be the "front-line" for BIDS services. The Instruction Pack (and to some extent the Self-Help Guides) was an attempt to provide useful support to those who were going to have to carry out this proxy training. Around 130 training packs have been sold, and nearly a 100 different sites took up the recent offer of a free update kit for the Instruction Pack to reflect the new service interface.

From the outset BIDS has made great efforts to involve outsiders, especially librarians, in its design and development. Different groups have contributed to the initial design of the service, and in particular to the development of the various training support materials just described. There is also an independent BIDS User Group which actively canvases opinion on suggested developments and then puts pressure on BIDS to implement them.

Databases available through BIDS

The following is a summary of the main databases currently available through the BIDS service:

The three Citation Indexes (SCI*, SOCSCI*, A&HCI*), and ISTP* supplied by the Institute for Scientific Information*. The data covers around 7,500 journals going back to 1981 (1982 for ISTP). Abstracts are included in data since 1991 (SCI) and 1992 (SOCSCI).

The current site licence to UK HE is £7,000 pa.

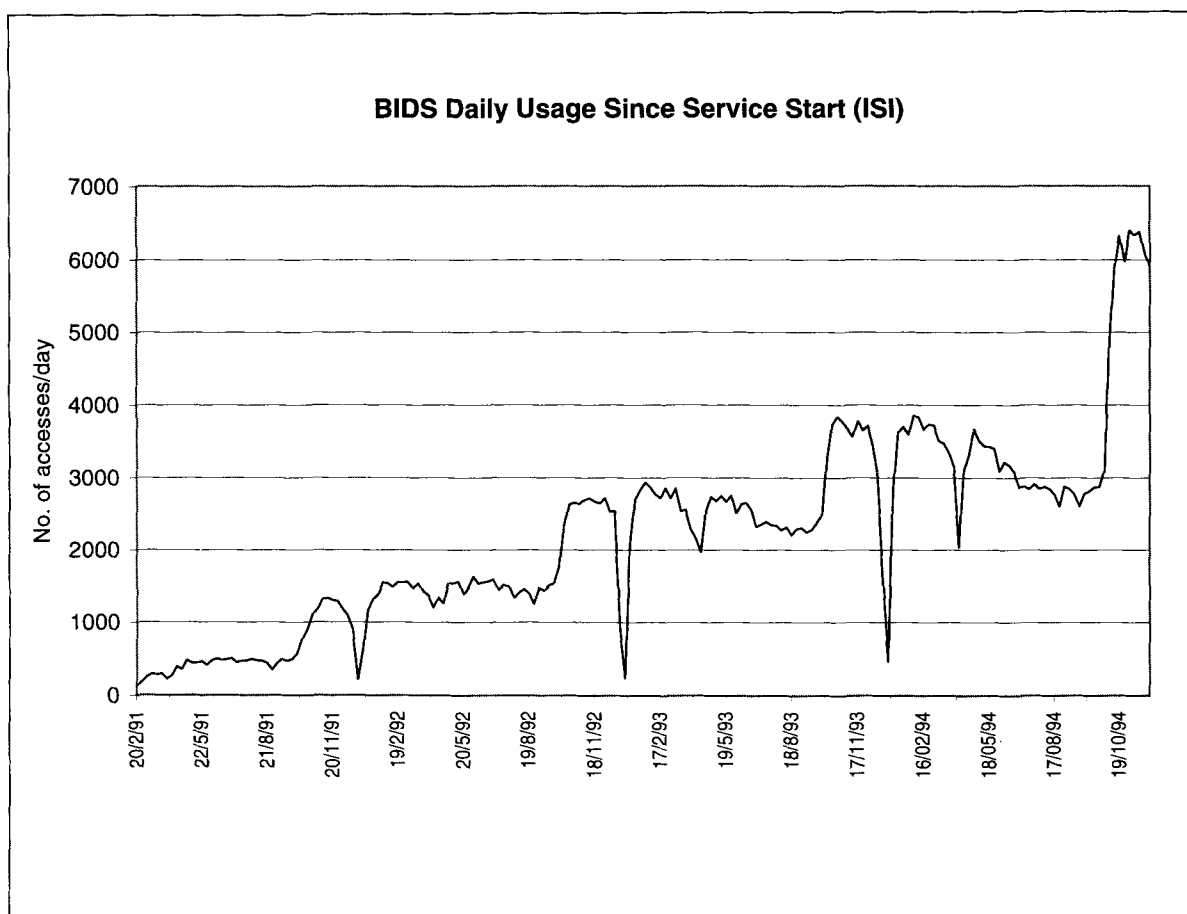
- EMBASE is supplied by Elsevier Science B.V. It covers about 3,500 biomedical journals going back to 1980 with good coverage of drugs and toxicology. About two-thirds of the articles include abstracts. The current UK HE site licence fee is £5,000 pa; EMBASE is also available to non-UK HE sites.
- Inside Information is a bibliographic database supplied and maintained by the British Library Document Supply Centre (BLDSC). It covers details of articles in 10,000 of their most requested titles. BLII is available to European (inc UK) academic institutions for an annual fee of £3,000.
- Ei Compendex*Plus and Ei Page One are supplied by Engineering Information Inc, Compendex*Plus covers over 2,600 journals and also includes abstracts. Page One covers 5,400 journals at contents page level. The annual site licence fee is currently £5,000 pa for UK HE; non-UK HE site licences may also be possible.
- IBSS ONLINE - International Bibliography of the Social Sciences - is supplied by the British Library of Political and Economic Science at the LSE. It covers over 2,600 selected international social sciences journals and around 6,000 books per annum. IBSS ONLINE is jointly funded by the ESRC, the BLPES, and the JISC, and site licences are available free of charge to UK HE.

BIDS mounts some specialist databases including the CAB Health database supplied by CAB International and others. In addition gateway access is provided, in collaboration with B.H.Blackwell, to the UnCover database.

Experience of the first four years

By most measures, BIDS appears to have been successful. The level of penetration has been high. Over 100 institutions currently subscribe to one or more databases, and fresh enquiries continue to be received, particularly from the new UK universities, but also from elsewhere in Europe. Institutions in Norway and Sweden are among the subscribers. And within institutions there is

Fig.2



evidence of end-user accesses to the services across a wide range of disciplines.

The number of accesses to the service has grown relentlessly since the launch of the first database in 1991. The graph shows the growth in use of the most popular database (ISI). Each of the other databases have shown a similar pattern of growth, with large increases at the start of each academic year. Each year's increase seems to be built on top of the previous year's usage. [See Fig.2.]

Very recently a survey of BIDS users has been carried out by the Centre for Communication & Information Studies at the University of Westminster. This survey, which is to be published shortly, was carried out on behalf of the British Library Research and Development department and the ISSC (Information Services Sub-Committee) of the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC).

The survey used three basic approaches: analysis of data provided by BIDS, supplemented by information from subscribers, in-depth interviews of a representative sample of end-users, and finally a wider questionnaire-based user survey.

The results of the survey, which at the time of writing were only available in draft form, make intriguing reading. In the overall impressions section one user, who is described as "by no means uncritical", encapsulated his feelings about BIDS by saying "It's not ideal, but it's a huge leap forward for me in terms of finding information".

The survey asked users about their reactions to the statement "My use of libraries and the way I search for information has changed since using BIDS ISI". The majority (57.5%) agreed with this. The survey report adds "In our view it would be difficult to identify any other library/information service that has had such an impact on all types of user (with the obvious exception of photocopying)".

Another finding will come as no surprise to many librarians. 62% of respondents agreed with the statement *"Since using BIDS ISI, I am more likely to want articles that are not held in the University library"*.

In the section on publicity, libraries and librarians have obviously been pulling their weight. The questionnaire survey found that over 60% of users had first learned about the service through library publicity, with a further 5% learning about it through "demonstrations", most of which, it is assumed, were library operated. More than a quarter (28%), however, had heard about it through the "grapevine" by word of mouth.

On a more specific topic, it is interesting to see how the findings of the survey on the use of the unique citation searching feature of the ISI databases contrast with BIDS' own recorded figures. The survey found, for example, that 68% of social scientists claimed to use citation searching, a surprisingly high figure, especially when compared with the 48.2% figure for scientists (arts and humanities users registered 43.6%). BIDS on the other hand has sample figures suggesting that only around 4% of searches are citation searches.

It is possible that both these figures are correct, suggesting that while only a small minority of searches are citation searches, a much larger proportion of users sometimes employ the citation searching method.

Document ordering

Using this facility, users are able to flag references that interest them, and then ask to have the original article delivered by fax or post. Payment is made online, either using a credit or debit card, or by debiting an account. A copyright-cleared article delivered by post currently costs £7.70; for fax delivery this rises to £8.99. This service has been in place since October 1993.

So far this has been used relatively lightly. There are two possible explanations for this. One is that it has not been heavily promoted, and is not very visible to many users. It is in the list of alternative options at the bottom of the screen (see earlier example), and some may not know what it is for. Another explanation, which is almost certainly a factor, is the unfamiliarity that most

academics in the UK have with the notion of paying directly for this sort of information. Traditionally, copies of articles in journals not available in the library have been obtained by the library on behalf of the enquirer, and absorbed by the library's budget.

Nevertheless, the idea of paying for support services is not entirely novel - witness the large amount of money taken by library photocopy machines. So it will be interesting to see how this service develops in the future.

Developing BIDS

BIDS continues to grow and develop. At the time of writing, the services are being transferred from the original ICL 39/80 computer system which ran Status to a new DEC Alpha configuration running BasisPlus. The menu-driven front end is being re-implemented by BIDS staff, incorporating some improvements in screen design and presentation.

Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that one of the findings of the survey just described is a fairly general lack of enthusiasm for the interface. Part of the reason for the current design was an insistence that BIDS should be accessible by any terminal, no matter how "dumb", so it had to be designed with the lowest common denominator in mind. This made it rather unattractive in appearance, especially when contrasted with the PC-based software used to access CD-ROMs.

The most recent BIDS service developments have taken the step of assuming a slightly less dumb terminal that can cope with VT100 features such as reverse-video, screen clearing, navigation with "arrow keys" etc. Even this rather modest change evoked some cries of "foul" from one or two sites who still had terminals not capable of recognising these functions.

BIDS is already looking ahead to the next interface developments. It seems inevitable that these will take the form of client-server arrangements, enabling searchers to use their favourite PC or MAC-based client to search a range of networked sources, of which BIDS would be just one. The explosion of interest in the World Wide Web (WWW), especially through the Mosaic and similar clients, has possibly shown the way ahead, although Z39.50 is likely to be

needed too. There are however difficulties still to be overcome, particularly in the areas of authentication and security for what is still a closed, semi-commercial, service. Meanwhile, BIDS has established a WWW homepage with descriptions of the individual services, copies of recent news bulletins, documentation order forms etc., together with a "click here" to connect to the actual service.

BIDS is also in discussion with a number of potential partners, in publishing, computer technology and libraries, with a view to exploring the development of the next generation of online services including the delivery of full text, images, graphs etc. over the network. The future for BIDS certainly looks interesting!

Conclusion

BIDS seems to have helped to demonstrate that there exists a large and growing appetite for desktop access to networked information that is of direct relevance to students, teachers and researchers. The particular services that BIDS has established have a number of features that would appear to have found favour with these users.

These features include the fact that it is a bibliographic service, free at the point of use, and available from anywhere on campus. It accesses current, structured, quality-controlled information covering publications in a wide variety of disciplines. It has been designed to be easy to use from simple terminals on an occasional basis with little or no instruction or training. The popularity of the printed materials that support these services appears to show that even with a very simple menu interface, there is enthusiasm for having at least a brief printed reminder of the main features of such a service.

So far we have insufficient experience of the online document-ordering service to draw sensible conclusions about how this might grow. Does the early light use of the service indicate

resistance to the idea of end-users paying directly for the information they need to support their studies or research? If so, is this a deeply embedded resistance that will only change very slowly with time, or are we in the middle of a culture shift which will see academics and students picking and choosing their information sources and paying for what they need, when they need it?

Finally, the popularity of problem-oriented self-help training material, and the widespread take-up of the training support materials that were developed appears to show that there is also a demand for more formal, structured training in the use of services such as BIDS.

Further information about BIDS services can be obtained by sending e-mail to **bidshelp@bath.ac.uk** or by linking to the BIDS World Wide Web server (<http://www.bids.ac.uk/>). The BIDS User Group also has an email address (**bidsug@bath.ac.uk**)

References

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