ALC: Active Library on Corrosion[1]

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I readily admit that I am not an IBM enthusiast. When it comes to personal computing, I am a partisan. Furthermore, I remain strong in my position that Windows is a clunky and slow imitation of someone else's idea. I say this by way of introduction not to spread my own version of computing gospel but to say that I was prepared for the *Active Library On Corrosion* to be a disappointment. As a "hypermedia" system (again, someone else's idea) launched from Windows, I did not begin my investigation of this product with great expectations. However, in this case, my preconceived notions did not serve me well. I found the *Active Library on Corrosion* to be an interesting, informative, and highly navigable compact disk product.

The *Active Library on Corrosion* (ALC) is a joint effort between Elsevier Science Publishers and the National Association of Corrosion Engineers (NACE). Producers of CD-ROMS are marketing specialized, niche products to the individual scientist and engineers (rather than to a traditional market such as a library). ALC follows this trend. While some of the information contained in this CD is derived from standard print sources (such as *Fundamentals of Designing for Corrosion Control* by R. J. Landrum and NACE's *Corrosion Engineer's Reference Book*), other sources of information include the NACE COR·SUR database (corrosion behavior of metals and alloys) and the NACE COR·SUR2 database (corrosion behavior of nonmetals). *Corrosion Abstracts: Abstracts of the World's Corrosion Control Literature* (also produced by NACE) are not included in ALC.

There are several "library sections" to ALC:

Reference Cube, a unique three-dimensional searching tool. At three axes, the user selects a combination of a corrosion type and/or a material and/or an environment (e.g. water, atmosphere, acids). The reader will then view documents relevant to the selection.

Case Histories, a database of studies of corrosion damage (studies derived from *Corrosion Atlas*, by E. D. D. During).

Corrosion Control.

Quick Reference, which consists primarily of tables of physical and chemical data, standards, testing, and coatings. Largely derived from NACE's *Corrosion Engineer's Reference Book.*

Books, the full-text of some standards works on corrosion engineering.

Databases, contains the NACE COR·SUR database and the NACE COR·SUR2 database.

Dictionary, an alphabetical list of corrosion jargon.

On-line Help.

As is typical in a hypermedia environment, the user can create links from one section of ALC to another. For instance, when viewing a document within the Reference Cube, the user, by clicking on the appropriate hot key, can navigate to related documents in the Case Histories section, the Corrosion Control section, and the Quick Reference section. There is also a free-text search option that utilizes boolean operators and simultaneously searches several library sections.

Yes, the *Active Library on Corrosion* is replete with razzle-dazzle, hot keys, colorful displays, and a maneuverable interface. As a librarian, who works in a library system with an outstanding engineering collection that already contains the aforementioned printed tools, I ask myself if the *Active Library on Corrosion* is a useful, unique tool or whether it duplicates the information readily accessible in the printed sources. If it is a duplicated effort, then why spend the added money? A practical test. I searched in ALC for information regarding pitting of stainless steel that is subjected to seawater. I searched the Reference Cube and obtained some introductory level information, as well as a case study. I then did a free-text search in the corrosion control sections, and I retrieved some appropriate design options as well as references to ASTM standards and a brief bibliography. This search took less than 10 min. A search for a similar amount of information, but retrieved from print sources located in the Engineering Library, was, of course, a lengthier process. However, the library also has many monographs on the corrosion of stainless steel and corrosion of materials in seawater. It also has other indexes and abstracts (such as *Corrosion Abstracts*) not included in ALC. Yes, there are trade-offs. I would not consider ALC a *comprehensive* source of corrosion information. However, large engineering libraries are not in everyone's home town.

I do have a few criticisms of the design. Some of the icons become confusing. For instance, a bull's eye represents a "hitlist". (A hitlist is created when the user retrieves a set of documents.) A boldface bull's eye surrounded by a boldface square means the hitlist is "active" and the currently displayed document is part of the hitlist. A greyed bull's eye surrounded by a boldface square means that there is a hitlist, and the currently displayed document is part of the hitlist, but the user is not currently traversing through the designated hitlist. A greyed bull's eye and a greyed square means that there is a hitlist but the currently displayed document is not part of the hitlist. An even more grey bull's eye surrounded by a more grey square means that no hitlist has been created. I, for one, cannot remember all this. A similar scheme is repeated with something called the "trail" icon. (A trail is a series of documents that can be saved to a file.) It took a great deal of "playing", as well as reading and rereading the manual, to decipher when it is appropriate to use the "hitlist" as opposed to a "trail" as opposed to the "backtrack" button (the backtrack is for redisplay of previous screens). Also, where does one obtain technical assistance? The manual does not list a telephone number.

The *Active Library on Corrosion* requires, at minimum, a 80286 processor (I tested ALC on a 386 SX/20, and the access time was reasonable but not lightning fast. My guess is that ALC running on a machine with less oomph would be detrimental to the response time, not to mention the fact that Windows running on a 286 is, well, I hate to think about it.), 2 MB of RAM, Microsoft Windows 3.0, a Microsoft Windows

compatible mouse, a VGA color monitor, at least 3.5 MB free disk space, and a CD-ROM drive accessible from Windows. Although machines with these capabilities are old hat with business and industry, my experience with libraries, particularly academic ones, is that these machines are uncommon. This is indeed a shame. As a librarian, I see libraries as the natural habitat for all kinds of information, regardless of format. When excellent products such as the *Active Library on Corrosion* are marketed, my worry is that libraries will continue to marginalize their places as information centers, because of their traditional mission of housing print collections.

Overall, I find ALC a fascinating product of interest to individual scientists and engineers, special libraries, and academic libraries. It provides a variety of easy-to-use access points to information, and contained in one package are standard corrosion engineering references sources. At $1200, I would consider ALC a bit on the pricey side. (How are CD-ROMs and other electronic information products priced? If a publisher could give me a plausible explanation, I would sure like to know.) NACE offers a free 30-day trial of ALC. If you are on the fence about whether or not such a product would be useful to you, this trail may help you decide.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

(1) *Active Library on Corrosion*; Elsevier Science Publishers: Sara Burgerhartstraat 25, P.O. Box 2400 1000 CK Amsterdam, The Netherlands; telephone (+31-20) 5862911, in conjunction with National Association of Corrosion Engineers, 1440 South Creek Dr., Houston, TX 77218, telephone (713) 492-0535. List price is $1250.