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Library Catalogue on Most Expensive CD-ROM

LONDON. What has been called the world's most expensive compact disk-read only memory (CD-ROM) has been launched by Britain's Arts Minister, Richard Luce. It makes 5.7 million entries from the British Library General Catalogue accessible by personal computer in seconds.

Mr. Luce said the £9000 publication, consisting of three disks containing the entire General catalogue for printed books up to 1975, was less expensive than the printed version. It was "amazingly good value" he added.

The British Library was the world's first national Library to put its original collections on CD-ROM. This enterprise, a collaboration between a national and a commercial enterprise was very forward looking.

Until now, researchers have only been able to find the books they want without difficulty if they already know the author's name. To do so in any other way could mean reading through the entire 360-volumes catalogue, which would take one person six months.

Shelf Mark

Now access is possible to any book by keying in any word of the title, the name of the publisher, the place where the book was published, or combinations of all of these. Subject access is also possible for the first time by keyword-a word conveying the subject matter, such as "revolution," or by shelf mark.

Because every part of the catalogue entry is searchable-such as date of publication, illustrations or maps-a reader can also complete complex searches for books with common characteristics in a few seconds.

More than 50 firm orders have so far been received for the disks, from universities and city or county libraries in Australia, Denmark, Finland, West Germany, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the Irish Republic, Spain, Switzerland, and the United States, as well as all parts of the United Kingdom itself. A number of other countries, including Japan, have asked to have the system for a trial period.

As well as English, the CD-ROM screen instructions are available in French, German and Italian, and a Spanish version is also planned.

In 1975 just over half of the British Library's volumes were in English. It has the largest number of pre-imprints of any library in the world, and some of its special collections of pre-20th century overseas works are more complete than those in their countries of origin.

Disks Indestructible

Percentages of the overall collection in other major languages are French (14%), German (6%), Slavonic and other east European tongues (4%), and Spanish and Portuguese (4%). Entries in Cyrillic Greek and Hebrew-all included on the disk-and other non Roman alphabets comprise 3% of the total.

Because the CD-ROM system is read-only, data cannot be lost and the disks themselves are virtually indestructible, while in book form the catalogue takes up 13 metres of shelf space.