ERL AT HKUST LIBRARY

By K.T. Lam
Hong Kong University of Science & Technology Library

When the Library of the Hong Kong University of Science & Technology (HKUST) opened in October 1991, its online system featured a large-scale CD-ROM network, the first such installation in Asia. At that time, the CD-ROM networking technology was still immature, and many CD-ROM products were not network capable. We, therefore, encountered quite a few problems installing CD-ROM databases on our network. One of the exceptions was SilverPlatter's products, they were always simple and straightforward to install. Today, the Library subscribes to 19 SilverPlatter titles.

SilverPlatter has been very active in integrating new technologies into their products. The release of ERL (Electronic Reference Library) technology has been most welcomed by the library community including the HKUST Library. ERL allows multi-platform and common client interface access to databases in a client/server environment, a solution that the HKUST Library had been searching for in past years. By mounting the CD-ROM databases and search engine on a server and providing multi-platform versions of the client interface running on a standard network protocol such as TCP/IP, these databases become accessible by new groups of users from various types of platforms and networks. The provision of a gateway to allow access via the popular WWW browsers further increases the availability of these databases; and at the same time achieves the goal of common client interface access. ERL technology has been following these trends.

In September 1995, the HKUST Library released its ERL server for campus access. The server is running on a SUN Solaris machine with 30 GB of hard disk storage. Fifteen SilverPlatter CD-ROM databases that were originally mounted on the CD-ROM network were migrated to the ERL server. Users on campus can access these ERL databases via TCP/IP protocol from Macintosh and Windows clients.

SilverPlatter has developed various versions of the client interface for different platforms, including DOS SPIRS, WinSPIRS, MacSPIRS, and Unix-SPIRS. The HKUST Library did not adopt its DOS and Unix versions because the packet drivers supported by the DOS version was incompatible with our campus network and it was extremely difficult to map the function keys on various types of keyboards to communicate correctly with the Unix version. Presently, the Library is testing SilverPlatter's newly released WebSPIRS client, an interface that allows WWW browsers to access the ERL server and search its databases as WWW resources. We plan to release WebSPIRS in June 1996. By that time, our users will be able to access SilverPlatter databases through the Library's WWW server (http://library.ust.hk/).

— K.T. Lam is Head of Library Systems at the Hong Kong University of Science & Technology
ibkt@ustbh.ust.hk