

On-line services like America Online®, CompuServe®, DELPHI™, GENie®, and Prodigy® provide a high-tech town meeting place where people trade information. For isolated designers, desktop publishers, computer technicians, programmers, or prepress production people, these services can be a lifeline. In this article, we will examine the five major on-line services as well as some other services and bulletin boards which may be useful to PostScript,™ scanning, and imagesetting professionals.

Range of services

¹ Strict rules surround what may be put in a library for downloading. Of course, it is illegal to swap software programs, fonts, or other licensed material. Libraries often contain freeware (items that you may use without charge), shareware (software for which you must pay a small fee to the developer if you continue to use it), and software updates.

The major on-line services check uploaded files for computer viruses. This is why there is generally a delay between the time you upload a file and the time it shows up in the library. Keep in mind that smaller non-commercial bulletin boards may not check for viruses and so you should check the files yourself.

Costs

All of these services require that the user have a computer, communications software, a phone line, and a modem. Most on-line services have a membership or monthly subscription fee, or, they charge an hourly fee for logging on. Some have both. On-line service subscribers may dial up the service's computer with a modem and:

- Upload or download files – On-line services provide a library of files of shareware, freeware, bug fixes, or software updates that users can select and transfer to their computer (download). In some cases a user may want to send the service something to put in a library (upload).¹
- Send and receive electronic mail (e-mail).
- Take part in informal chats, conferences, bulletin boards, or forums.
- Peruse syndicated news stories, stock prices, job listings, financial information, airline schedules (or whatever it is that the service provides).

Not all on-line services provide the same laundry list of functions. In fact, the personality of an on-line service is a combination of the services it offers plus the contributions of its subscribers.

The most useful tool for a graphic arts professional is the bulletin board system (commonly abbreviated as BBS) that the on-line service provides. A BBS allows users to post messages and read responses. Often, a question raised by one user is answered by one or more other users. America Online, CompuServe, DELPHI, GENie, and Prodigy all have active computing, PostScript or desktop publishing bulletin boards (sometimes referred to as forums, round tables, or special interest groups (SIGs)).

Cost varies from service to service, and since prices change, please note that the prices shown here are accurate as of December 1993. Remember that prices for your first month's usage may reflect incentives to join or 'free' on-line time. Don't allow yourself to be surprised by large on-line charges. All services provide an on-line method for checking current account balance.

In general, you should do whatever you can to limit your on-line time. If it is possible to type your messages off-line, then do so. Some software programs are also available that perform searches of your favorite stopping places (CompuServe Navigator, for example). These programs gather information much faster than you could at your keyboard. Remember that it is very easy to get lost in thought while reading interesting messages. Before you know it you may incur large charges (or even long distance phone charges if the access phone number is not local).

There may be surcharges added for use of particular areas of the service. (Most on-line services have an indicator of some kind that appears in the corner of the screen to tell you when you are in a free, limited charge, or extra tariff area. Keep an eye out for this!) Bulletin boards or user forums often are charged at a higher rate than other areas. A higher rate may also be charged for logging on at faster modem rates.

User interfaces

Graphical user interfaces (GUIs) use mouse-controlled buttons to guide the user. While some of the on-line user interfaces are graphical, that doesn't necessarily make them easier to use. And often, the added overhead of the GUI slows down the process. Character-based user interfaces (CUIs) require the use of short commands (for example, 'dir' to see a list of the current directory). CUIs can provide very direct access for the user who is familiar with the commands, but can be daunting to the novice.

If your computer doesn't happen to be a Macintosh® or IBM or IBM compatible PC, you may find that some services with GUIs do not offer a front end for your computer. This effectively locks you out.

What you see on screen (and how fast it appears) also depends on the hardware and software that you use to access the on-line service. Some on-line services (principally the ones with GUIs) provide their own software package; others allow you to make your own choice, or simply to use any communications package. Finally, for whatever reason, you may just find something annoying about the way that a bulletin board is set up. If the information is important enough to you, you will probably just put up with it. If not, other services may suit you better.

The life of an on-line service

Activity on any on-line service's BBS is an evolving, organic process. It depends greatly on the people who participate in it. For any BBS to be successful, there is a critical balance between thoughtful participation, cost, speed, and ease of use. If a service is cheap, it will attract many people. This in turn may stimulate interesting discussions that draw even more people to the service. At some point, the number of people may exhaust the capabilities of the board, causing speed or log-on problems. The BBS may lose the appeal that it had when it was formed by a small core of dedicated users. Perhaps the service will increase the price to cover the cost of the added activity. But raising the price may effectively kill participation on the BBS. And so it goes. It is a delicate balance.

What are they like?

To get a feel for the major on-line services, the author joined each of the on-line services listed below and logged on numerous times. All have a computing, desktop publishing or PostScript area. The author posted a query asking users what they thought of their on-line service (particularly for PostScript, scanner and imagesetter issues). The results of that research, along with some user comments are shown below.

Note: For this research, the author used a Macintosh IIcx with a Hayes ULTRA™ 96 modem. Most services were accessed at 2400 baud. Where the service did not provide software, Smartcom™ II was used. The author logged on during normal working hours. (This is sometimes an issue with access or speed.)

America Online

America Online (often abbreviated as AOL) is based in Vienna, VA (800-827-6364). AOL started in 1985 as Quantum Computer Services, Inc. and was initially intended for Macintosh users. Later, in 1991, a DOS version was released (DOS users may be familiar with the name Promenade). As of December 1993 AOL has 500,000 subscribers.

For those interested in PostScript, the first place to check is the Computing and Software Department's Desktop Publishing special interest groups.

There is a Service Bureau SIG containing all sorts of queries and responses on PostScript and service bureau issues. In the Graphic Arts and CAD area there is a Photoshop™ SIG. (One user felt that a subscription to AOL was worth it solely for the access it gave him to John Knoll and Kai Krause, two Photoshop developers.) AOL also offers good access to technical support from software vendors.

AOL has a nice trial period (you get 10 free hours during your first month), and the charges generally seem to be reasonable: \$9.95 per month, which includes 5 hours of on-line time. Additional hours cost \$3.50 per hour. (Outside the 48 contiguous United States there is a 20¢ per minute surcharge.) The interface is very nice and graphical as accessed from the Macintosh, although there is an annoying delay for downloading artwork for menus. (This becomes less of a problem after you have logged on a couple of times and have had the artwork downloaded to your computer.) The system is quite easy to figure out and there is a wide range of information regarding computers, including MacWorld on-line and a software virus information center.

As a relative newcomer to on-line services, the graphic user interface, combined with a nice introductory tour function, made using AOL a pleasant experience. There is some concern, however, among users of other on-line services, that AOL has increased in size too quickly, with the result being slowness and difficulty in logging on. Some have been discouraged by AOL software, company attitudes, and pricing.

CompuServe

² Linotype-Hell does not currently provide vendor support on CIS or any of the other on-line services. We have participated as CIS Vendor of the Month. In addition, we have posted items like PPDs. However, more extensive technical information is available on the Linotype-Hell Service bulletin board which is open to Linotype-Hell service contract customers and user group members.

³ If you want a taste of the CIS Desktop Publishing Forum (without even having to log on), consider purchasing the book *The Best of the Desktop Publishing Forum on CompuServe*, published by PeachPit Press (800-283-9444).

DELPHI

⁴ You pay for the graphical user interface in overhead. If you know where you are going, and can remember some simple commands, non-graphical interfaces can be great.

CompuServe Information Service (800-848-8990), often abbreviated as CIS, is a Columbus Ohio based division of H&R Block. The CIS desktop publishing forum is popular with many involved in prepress. Vendor support is extensive on CIS, and includes vendors like Adobe, Aldus, Corel, Microsoft, and Novell.²

The CIS Desktop Publishing Forum (GO DTP) is very professional in orientation.³ It has categories like: High Res. & Service Bureau, Type & Typography, Printing & Prepress, and Scanners & Gizmos. The DOS & Windows section also has a lot of active participation. CIS also has an extensive Graphics Forum, as well as forums for many different computers.

The CIS standard price plan costs \$8.95 per month plus \$8/hour for access at 2400 baud (\$16/hour for 9600 baud). Many users consider CIS to be expensive. (They use the abbreviation CI\$). However, with a program like CompuServe Navigator or even frugal use of CompuServe Information Manager, actual on-line time can be reduced. Some CIS users see higher pricing as an advantage, because it limits access to the service to those who have a more professional approach to desktop publishing. One Canadian user, while admitting that charges are high, said that that was offset by the fact that CIS offers local Canadian access numbers.

Boston-based DELPHI has been bought recently by a consortium headed by Rupert Murdoch. Delphi Internet Services (800-695-4005) draws its name from the Oracle at Delphi, and has over 100,000 users. It is probably best known for providing Internet access. (While some of the other services offer Internet e-mail capabilities, DELPHI is the first to offer broad access to the Internet. See the section on the Internet below for more information.) DELPHI doesn't have a graphical interface, but this isn't necessarily a drawback.⁴

The messages left by the author on DELPHI brought the most enthusiastic feedback of any of the desktop publishing forums queried. A wide range of active discussions take place in DELPHI's Desktop Publishing forum. The focus currently stresses PC issues, low resolution output, fonts issues, etc.,

but DELPHI users stated that that was not always the case. (Topics vary depending upon the current participants.) DELPHI users are approachable and friendly, which makes it a good choice for many beginning DTP users, but probably not as useful for high-end imagesetting or scanning questions.

One DELPHI user made the point that no one service can possibly suit all of anyone's needs. This user is a member of AOL, Prodigy and DELPHI (and is considering a CompuServe account). He feels that the DELPHI DTP SIG is the best place for general desktop publishing questions. It is true that some DELPHI users found the bigger on-line services intimidating and preferred the homier aspect of DELPHI.

One DELPHI sysop (sysop is short for systems operator, in short, the person or persons who run the bulletin board, forum, or SIG) views America OnLine as the big guys, informative, but intimidating (especially to new users). Another user thinks that DELPHI is a good value for the money. (DELPHI's 20/20 plan provides 20 hours of use each month for \$20 and a \$1.80 per hour fee after the first 20 hours, and a \$19 one-time enrollment fee.)

GEnie

GEnie stands for General Electric Network for Information Exchange. It is a division of GE Information Services, Rockville, MD (800-638-9636). GEnie pricing is quite reasonable, depending on when you log on. For U.S. users, there is an \$8.95 monthly charge, which includes 4 hours of standard connect time. Beyond that the hourly connect charge is \$3.00. BUT, there are significant surcharges for prime time usage (\$9.50/hour) and 9600 baud access (\$6/hour).

GEnie's user interface is the least accessible of the on-line services reviewed. It has a character-based user interface which is mystifying at times. Logging on from a Macintosh was also something of a liability. A majority of GEnie users use PCs, and many of them use a front end called Aladdin. Aladdin has versions for PCs, Ataris, and Amigas, but not the Macintosh. (This is not to say that there isn't a core of enthusiastic Macintosh users who graciously offered their help to the author, it's just that it shouldn't have to be that hard to get around.)⁵

⁵ Both a Macintosh and Windows GUI are in the works for GEnie.

There are, however, other reasons that may make it worth sticking it out despite interface problems. GEnie is the only on-line service that has not only a DTP SIG (in their case they sometimes call DTP Design to Print instead of Desktop Publishing), but also a PostScript language RoundTable. For those involved in the nuts and bolts of PostScript programming, the PostScript RoundTable (PSRT) is certainly worth a look. Users speak enthusiastically about very useful responses they have received to their questions (so useful that they used them to provide recommendations to change company policy). And there is a core group of scanner operators, service bureau employees and designers who use equipment from a wide range of high-end graphic arts manufacturers.

Real-time conferences provide another means of interaction. (Other on-line services also provide this type of conference.) Recently, Aldus has been a guest on conferences to discuss both PressWise™ and TrapWise.™ PostScript Green book author Glenn Reid has also participated. These conferences allow users to ask questions live on-line. Users may find the live give and take interaction of an on-line conference particularly appealing.

For more general computing issues, the Computing Services area of GEnie has a number of computer RoundTables covering Apple/Macintosh, Atari, Commodore & Amiga, and IBM PC/Tandy. (Here the lack of a GUI may make it more accessible to a range of computer users.) Finally, one GEnie sysop recommended the GEnie Home Office/Small Business RoundTable. Obviously there are other areas that may interest the reader but this area is particularly appropriate for service bureaus, design houses, or print shops.

Prodigy

Prodigy Services Company (800-776-3449) is based in White Plains, NY, and co-owned by IBM and Sears. Founded in 1984, it became national in 1989. It is the only on-line service that earns revenues from advertisers and on-line merchants (in addition to moderate subscriber fees). Advertisements run across the bottom of the screen and can be annoying. (You even get ads while on hold to their 800 number!)

On the bright side, Prodigy is inexpensive (see below), relatively easy to use, and has provided an easy introduction to on-line services for many novice computer users who would otherwise never even have tried. Unfortunately, at 2400 baud it is quite slow compared to the other services at that rate. (Remember that this is for a Macintosh user during normal working hours.) Prodigy does offer 9600 baud modem service at no extra cost, but despite trying several times, the author could never consistently log on at 9600 baud.

To get to the Desktop Publishing area look for Computing, the Computer BBS and then the Computer BB. Prodigy users in the DTP area are very loyal. While they feel that America Online is more professionally oriented, with more manufacturers, technical support, products and people, they feel that Prodigy has a lot of good people logging on, and, its easier to navigate around in than AOL. One user wrote that she goes to AOL for technical help, but to Prodigy for 'real' user input.

Prodigy has a Value Plan that costs \$14.95 per month and includes two hours of 'Plus' usage (like the Computer BBS). After those two hours, there is an hourly rate of \$3.60. However, Prodigy does not offer libraries of freeware and shareware, and it is not easy to upload files to other Prodigy users.

Beyond on-line services

Of course, there is a lot more that you can dial up with your modem than just on-line services. There are many freestanding bulletin boards, information services, download services, and gateways. A few in particular are worth mentioning for Linotype-Hell customers:

Adobe – Adobe Systems Inc. has a First Class BBS containing tech notes, PPDs, software updates, and more. The access number is 408-562-6839.

AppleLink – AppleLink is run by Apple Computer, and was originally just for Apple employees, dealers, developers, user groups, and universities. Now it is open to anyone, but its appeal is still to the sophisticated Apple computer user. Macintosh users in particular will appreciate things like updates to system software and the latest AppleTalk and EtherTalk network installers. For information on AppleLink, call Apple Computer at 408-996-1010.

Linotype-Hell service bulletin board – Linotype-Hell service contract customers and Linotype-Hell User Group members can log onto a Linotype-Hell service BBS at 516-434-7877. (The Fall 1993 LinoTalk has log-on info.)

Microsoft's download services – Microsoft's download service is probably one of the best known. Its number is 206-936-6735.

Internet gateways – For those who are particularly interested in the Internet (see more below), some services provide access to the Internet for a fee. Two examples are crl (404-577-3250) and Panix (212-787-3100).

User groups – The Berkeley Macintosh User Group (510-549-2684) and the Boston Computer Society (617-290-5700) provide BBSs to members.

The Internet

There has been a great deal of excitement surrounding the Internet, and there are even places on it to get information about desktop publishing and PostScript. In essence, the internet is a network of networks, a massive electronic superhighway system (pardon the tired cliché) for people to share all different kinds of information. Each network shares the same technical

rules for passing data from computer to computer. The Internet is difficult to navigate without the right tools, but is a rich source of information for those who can. And, best of all, nobody owns it.

The first contact that many people will have with the Internet is e-mail. Since most colleges and universities are connected to the Internet, and since students can log on easily, it becomes a pathway for parents and friends to communicate with students away at school. In fact, the on-line services that are offering access to the Internet often limit access solely to the use of e-mail. The Internet also makes it possible for users of different on-line services to communicate with each other.

⁶ A company called Merit Network, Inc. has a tutorial that provides some very good basic information on the Internet. (Write to them at Merit Network, Inc., 2901 Hubbard, Pod G, Ann Arbor, MI 48105-2016.)

Another good source of information on the Internet is *The Internet Navigator* by Paul Gilster, published by John Wiley and Sons, Inc.

Of course the Internet can provide much more than e-mail, but the ins and outs of archies, gophers, and veronicas go well beyond the scope of this article.⁶ However, those who are interested in PostScript and desktop publishing should look into the Usenet (which can be accessed through the Internet). The Usenet contains, in part, discussion topics that relate to PostScript. These groups have names like comp.lang.postscript, comp.source.postscript, and comp.text.desktop. Once you get to these areas, you can find lists of frequently answered questions (FAQs). Access to the Internet can be intimidating, but one good thing about DELPHI is that it offers a news reader for the Usenet that simplifies the procedure somewhat. AOL is promising access to Usenet news groups by early 1994.

Modem standards

One difficult procedure is setting up your modem so it will work correctly. Don't be surprised to get a message like this from the on-line service:

- Set up modem for local echo, half duplex, 2400 baud, eight bits, no parity, one stop bit. (This is the GENie log-on procedure.)

This, along with terms like XMODEM, YMODEM, ZMODEM, Kermit, or v.32bis can be very confusing for the non-modem professional. (One tip: Use ZMODEM where possible. It provides faster data transfer and can pick up where it left off if the connection is broken during downloading of a file.)

Conclusion

If you have the computer, the modem, and the software, it's not too hard to do your own pre-flight testing of these on-line services. Generally the first month's memberships are not too expensive, so that if you want to try, you can always cancel without investing too much.

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