World's Greatest Speeches. Social Studies School Services,

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Even as a dry reference volume, <i>World's Greatest Speeches</i> is a lack-luster CD-ROM that fails to deliver its full potential. Softbit, the original design and production company, produced a CD-ROM that provides neither the speeches' context for the lay-user nor the essential elements of control for the lecturer. As a reference volume the selection of "Greatest Speeches" is questionable; its text support is non-existent; and since neither Softbit nor the new copyright owners, Social Studies School Services, have plans to update the volume, its interface and navigation will quickly outdate it. As Social Studies School Services is currently presenting this CD-ROM, it has a limited value to the lecturer, student, librarian and the researcher. It would not be surprising to find this volume collecting dust from lack of use in a CD-ROM library. <p> On one CD-ROM, Social Studies School Services (SSSS) brings together in full text, four hundred historical speeches from political, social and religious actors from around the world broken down into eleven categories.[1] Spanning over two thousand years of history, four continents, and three major seats of civilization, SSSS has sought to capture the greatest wisdom and teachings, then provide it in an easy access format. One can easily find oneself whiling away hours scanning through the files and reading the speeches--a journey through the thoughts and tenor of different societies and times. <p> Additionally, there are thirty minutes of audio and video files highlighting some of the more recent speeches of the twentieth century. From Franklin D. Roosevelt's "We have nothing to Fear" through John F. Kennedy's "Ich bin ein Berliner" to George Bush's "Commencement of the Bombing of Iraq," the disk offers users the opportunity to listen to the consequential policy makers and influencers of the last seventy years in their own words. Along with the standbys that one expects on such a volume (i.e. Martin Luther King's "I have a Dream," and Richard Nixon's "Resignation Speech"), there are some pleasant surprises in the audio/video selection (i.e. John Foster Dulles' announcement of the fall of Dien Bien Phu and Edward Kennedy's eulogy for his brother Robert Kennedy) that lend variety to what otherwise might have been too predictable of an audio volume. Again, like the text speeches, one finds oneself clicking through the audio and video selections watching each of the vignettes and reviving the power the words originally had. <p> SSSS has made a volume that conveniently puts the words of important historical figures in the instructors' and students' hands. With one volume, they have eliminated hours of stack searching and text transposing (a blessing to upper division or graduate assistants). SSSS should continue their efforts in this type of educational software by compiling an oral history series beginning with the twentieth century (i.e. Vietnam veterans, Depression era, the Immigrant ex-

perience, World War II, etc.). Such a tool would ease much of the work for oral historians and would give undergraduate students a different glimpse into the world of historical research.[2] <p> A second strength of the volume is its convenient indexing by country, category, date, alphabetically by author and alphabetically by title. The volume is easy to scan through quickly. A simple search engine makes the disk more accessible. <p> Finally, as one travels through the volume, one can "bookmark" any point on the disk under a Netscape-like bookmark menu. This gives the user a convenient way to return to favorite speeches quickly. <p> Unfortunate for all of the retrospective trekking and positive aspects in the CD-ROM's content, there are some problems with the disk, which severely limit its classroom use. <p> First, the disk requires more than a beginner's level of computer literacy. On two different machines I loaded the disk (one running on Windows 95 and one running Windows NT). In every case, I had to open the disk manually to start the set-up program. Even after the reader program was loaded from the CD-ROM onto the hard drive, neither machine was able to start the disk automatically; one required that I re-run the set-up program even though the program had been running only moments earlier. Once running, the interface was easy to navigate, albeit dated in design given even simple current HTML, Java, and VTML technology. Although Softbit published the disk in 1995, even Softbit, with whom I spoke to about the volume, agreed that the interface is fast-reaching the point of being out of date. Given the pace of new machine development, the technology may be one of the volume's foremost detractors. <p> The second problem with the volume is its limited audio/video selection. The disk holds only twenty audio clips and nine video clips (one of which has no audio track).[3]

SSSS packages the disk as "A complete Multimedia Reference Library--The World's Best Known Speeches Come Alive Through Images, Audio and Video." Unfortunately, this is somewhat misleading. This leaves the preponderance of the four-hundred speeches as text files. Having the text for four-hundred speeches is convenient, but little could be as deadly to an effective lecture as reading the text of a speech that is projected on an overhead screen. Had SSSS the foresight to update this portion of the volume by reenacting audio versions of the speeches, "World's Greatest Speeches" would increase its value to lecture delivery and live up to its packaging claim more fully. A clear, well-delivered audio file of speeches elicits a stronger classroom response. Further, were SSSS to give lecturers the ability to start and stop speeches on marks, they would have dramatically increased the volume's value. <p> The third shortfall is an outgrowth of the second in that the video files are too short and their screen size is too small. Understandably, the memory requirement for delivering all of a video speech is large, but with little lead in for each clip, the salient points are lost to those who are unfamiliar with the material. Even with familiarity of the situation that prompted the speeches, the spots were often so short as to require a second or third playing to hear everything. In addition, whether on a desktop monitor or through an overhead projector, the video clip screen size is extremely small. In all but the smallest classrooms, overhead projection will not overcome this problem. Even if this issue is repairable on some campuses through in-class projection magic, the quality of the clips is not where it should be for a presentation. Grainy, out-of-focus and jumpy, the clips lose the tone of the speeches through eyestrain and annoyance. <p> Next, the volume lacks a preprinted listing of the speeches and clips available. This simple addition would make the volume much more convenient to use. Such a simple oversight seems odd given the nature of the disk and an implied hope of the manufacturer to produce an easily accessi-

ble database of knowledge. <p> The last major shortfall of the CD-ROM to classroom use is the inability to transfer the speeches and clips in part or in whole or to run other programs while the audio portion runs in the background. SSSS has locked the files so to the disk in inaccessible files, and has set the parameters to stop the audio portion of the disk from working while another presentation program is running. This prevents lecturers from using the clips in customized multimedia presentations or in course specific on-line cybraries. This limitation prevents the effective use of the audio portions of the disk and immediately strikes it from consideration by those who use higher technology in their pedagogy. Alone, this oversight is enough to reduce the force of the disk to mundane and lack-luster. <p> It is not necessarily the flair of a volume such as "World's Greatest Speeches" that makes it a value, rather it is the manufacturer's attention to the end-user's needs. Softbit and Social Studies School Services missed this focus and predictably, the volume disappointingly fails to deliver the potential it holds. As neither company plans to update the disk or the volume, they are at least giving this volume the respect to die peacefully by itself. We should not mourn this passing. <p> Notes: <p> [1]. Argumentative Speeches, Farewell Speeches, Foreign Policy, Inspirational Speeches, Lectures, Political Speeches, Religious Speeches, Freedom and Liberty, War and Peace, Trails and Debates. <p> [2]. There are number of excellent oral history CD-ROM volumes available spanning a number of different episodes through the twentieth century. H-NET Reviews has listed several of these volumes. <p> [3]. "Mao Says Farewell to Khruschev"--with no

audio to this clip I question its categorization as a "Great Speech."

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