

2003

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Recommended Citation

Blessinger, K. D., & Olle, M. (2003). Comparison of Three Primary Aggregator Databases. Retrieved from https://repository.lsu.edu/libraries_pubs/42

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Comparison of Three Primary Aggregator Databases

Kelly Blessinger
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ABSTRACT. This article explores the results of a study conducted by Louisiana State University Libraries to determine the strengths and weaknesses of three aggregator databases: EBSCO Academic Search Premier, Gale Expanded Academic ASAP, and ProQuest Research Library Core. Main ideas discussed are title coverage, full-text availability, and search features. It is hoped that this article will aid institutions in determining the acquisition of an aggregator database that best meets their institutional needs. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2003 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

KEYWORDS. Aggregator databases, journals, serials, evaluation

In fall 2001, a study was conducted by a group of librarians at Louisiana State University to evaluate three databases under consideration by the LALINC¹ Resource Development Committee. The three databases,

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The Serials Librarian, Vol. 45(1) 2003
<http://www.haworthpress.com/store/product.asp?sku=J123>
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10.1300/J123v45n01_06

EBSCO Academic Search Premier, Gale Expanded Academic ASAP, and ProQuest Research Library Core,² were chosen for their appeal to a broad academic audience. Special attention was given to the varying search functions available within each of the databases. Other factors included accessibility of journal lists, format of articles, data delivery, availability of help screens, and links to outside resources. The three databases will further be referred to in this article by their vendor names—EBSCO, Gale, and ProQuest.

JOURNAL LISTS

The first feature explored was the accessibility to the lists of journals indexed in each of the databases. All of the databases provide links to their title lists within the databases as well as from their commercial Web sites. In regard to coverage changes, the databases update their respective journal lists monthly. Gale maintains a separate list of title changes from its main list of journals so changes can be ascertained at a glance. ProQuest manages a listserv discussing title changes while Gale occasionally posts messages to its listserv. All three databases provide MARC records for inclusion in the library catalog, and all of the databases update their products on a daily basis unless the materials are restricted by embargo periods.

The three prospective databases' journal lists were accessed in April 2002 to compare the number of journals that were indexed and represented full text within each of them. EBSCO had 4,327 titles indexed in its database with 3,393 full-text titles (78% of those indexed), Gale provided indexing to 3,068 titles with 1,865 titles available full-text (61% of those indexed), and ProQuest had 3,516 titles with 2,413 available full-text (69% of those indexed).³

SEARCHING

Basic Searching

From the basic search mode, Gale and ProQuest allow easy access (radio buttons and dropdown boxes) to options for keyword searching in the citation and abstract or the full text of an article. In EBSCO, unless a specific two-letter field code is defined, the keyword search results will contain references where all search terms are located in the citation or the full text of an article.

Advanced Searching

Advanced search options for each database include Boolean operators, wildcards, truncation, proximity operators, and the use of quotation marks. Only ProQuest provides natural language searching at the time of this article, and the few searches conducted retrieved accurate results. EBSCO provides a natural search option for images but this feature does not seem as effective as some image searches that are available freely through the Internet. All of the databases allow for searching by author in the advanced search options.

EBSCO and ProQuest both provide basic, guided, and expert or advanced searching while Gale only provides basic and advanced search options. EBSCO and ProQuest offer multiple dropdown boxes for intuitive advanced searching. In contrast, Gale's advanced search provides one dropdown box, making it more complex to use.

Limiting Searches

All three databases have the ability to limit searches to refereed journals, full-text journals, and articles in specific journals. EBSCO and ProQuest can both limit by publication type (i.e., periodical or newspaper). Additionally, EBSCO can limit to primary source documents, number of pages in an article, cover stories, and to articles with images. ProQuest can limit searches to 28 different article types (e.g., interview, book review, and classified ad).

Each database allows the user to limit searches by date range and to a specific date. ProQuest varies from the other two databases by limiting within predefined date ranges ("Current" is from 1999 to Present; "Backfile" is 1986 to 1998; "Deep Backfile" is prior to 1986 as far back as 1970). ProQuest also allows searching in specific ranges and six other date options, such as last seven days, last thirty days, last month, last quarter, last year, and before this date. Gale also allows for searching before or after a certain date.

FORMAT OF ARTICLES

Gale is the only database of the three that provides PDF images for every article it provides full text. However, in some instances the PDF files are ASCII text and not actual scanned images of the articles. Of the 1,865 full-text titles in Gale, 1,473 of those titles provide PDF images of

the actual articles, which constitute 79% of those titles. In EBSCO, 2,908 of its 3,393 full-text titles are available in PDF format (86%). Finally, ProQuest offers 2,290 of its 2,413 full-text titles in PDF format (95%).⁴

DATA DELIVERY

All three databases profiled allow users to print, save, and e-mail their search results. ProQuest gives the additional option to save URLs as “durable links” in the list of marked records. These links are valid for a period of thirty days, during which time the links can then be shared with authorized users of ProQuest. Each database allows for records within search results to be marked, and for the list of marked records to be isolated for retrieval. EBSCO and ProQuest also provide options for exporting records into bibliographic data software such as ProCite and EndNote.

HELP SCREENS

All three databases provide help screens, but present help in different manners. EBSCO provides very thorough help screens arranged like a book, with the subjects on the left hand side in a framed window. The user then has the option to go through these help topics one by one to learn more, or to use an index and search engine provided for help topics. Gale provides an index of the help options and a basic guide, but no search engine for help topics. Gale and ProQuest both provide intuitive help in which the help screen displays information about the screen that the user is currently located at in the database. ProQuest provides an index of help subjects, glossary of terms, quick print guides and a Training Resource Center for library instruction. All of the help screens are easily understandable, with EBSCO and ProQuest’s help screens being especially comprehensive and superior to Gale’s.

LINKS TO OUTSIDE RESOURCES

As more information becomes available electronically, databases are offering options to link to outside resources such as Web pages as well

as interacting with online catalogs. Each database in this study has added options to link to outside resources at an additional cost.

Gale currently links to the SFX server, a link server from Ex Libris that allows context-sensitive linking between Web resources including other databases, online catalogs, and Web pages. The software for this feature is available from Ex Libris. Another outside linking product is Total Access. This product allows the user to search across multiple databases, including subscription databases that Gale is able to configure, as well as public Web sites and online catalogs. In the summer of 2002 Gale plans on partnering with Ingenta, a document delivery database with more than 5,400 scholarly journals. For institutions with access to both databases, this partnership will allow users to access integrated result sets of both Infotrac and Ingenta content.⁵

EBSCO links to online journals in EBSCO Online, a database that provides full-text articles from scholarly journals published online, and to other databases in EBSCOhost. If a publisher provides free online access to a journal, EBSCO will also provide free online access. Another linking product is the CrossRef journal collection, a service comprised of more than 60 publishers representing metadata for over 3,800 full-text journals and 2.9 million articles. EBSCO also offers the EBSCOhost ILS linking option, which allows seamless linking to a variety of targets including OPACs and union catalogs, ILL/document delivery services, book vendors, and linking servers. EBSCO has recently partnered with ISI to provide links from within Web of Science to full-text articles available in EBSCO Online for institutions with access to both databases. This product has not yet been released.⁶

Through the product CrossLinks, ProQuest provides links to full-text sources for their non-full-text titles if the institution offers another database or resource that provides full text. ProQuest also offers IntelliDocs, a feature that links from keywords in full-text documents to reference sources. Outside sources include *Hoover's World Book Encyclopedia* and *Best of the Web*. SiteBuilder provides stable links from Web sites to ProQuest content. This allows professors to include URLs to articles from their online syllabi or class Web pages.

CONCLUSION

While these databases provide similar functions, there are certain important strengths to consider when determining which database to select. Two main factors to contemplate are title coverage and search

capabilities. EBSCO provides the highest percentage of indexed and full-text titles of the three databases with 19% more indexed titles than ProQuest and 29% more than Gale. ProQuest offers the most intuitive search capabilities, being the only database that provides natural language searching. Searches in ProQuest are made straightforward in both the basic and advanced searches by well-designed search screens. ProQuest also provides the most options in regard to limiting searches by article type. Depending on institutional needs, other variables discussed in this article may be deemed to be more significant.

NOTES

1. Louisiana Academic Library Information Network Consortium.
2. With the 15 subject specific modules: Arts, Business, Children's, Education, General Interest, Health, Humanities, International, Law, Military, Multicultural, Psychology, Social Sciences, Sciences, and Women's Interests.
3. EBSCO Publishing, "Academic Search Premier Database Coverage List," Accessed 19 April 2002. Available online from <<http://www.epnet.com/academic/acasearchprem.asp>>; Gale Group, Inc., "Expanded Academic ASAP," Accessed 19 April 2002. Available online from <<http://www.gale.com/servlet/HTMLFileServlet?region=9&imprint=000&fileName=catalog/counts.htm>>; ProQuest, "Research Library Core," Accessed 19 April 2002. Available online from <<http://www.proquest.com/division/tl-discovery.shtml>>.
4. See note 3 above.
5. Gale Group, Inc., "Gale and Ingenta Join Forces to Integrate Periodicals and E-Journals," 19 January 2002. Available online from <http://www.galegroup.com/press_room/article/jan02_ingenta.htm>.
6. EBSCO, "EBSCO and ISI® Announce Linking Agreement," 20 September 2001. Available online from <<http://www-us.ebsco.com/home/whatsnew/isi.stm>>.