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Access to Information in both CitaDel and FirstSearch: a Comperative Study of Dissertation Coverage

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Theses and dissertations submitted to universities and colleges in the United States are accessible in many different formats and through many different vendors. Electronic access is provided by such vendors as DIALOG, BRS, FirstSearch (OCLC), and CitaDel (RLIN), and CD-ROM access is also available.

This article presents a comparative analysis of CitaDel and FirstSearch. The effectiveness and ease of use of these two systems in providing end-user access to thesis/dissertation information, and the strengths and weaknesses of the searching capabilities of these two systems are discussed. Examples of direct retrieval comparison of thesis/dissertation information from the FirstSearch WorldCat database and Dissertation Abstracts on CitaDel are provided.

It is concluded that both FirstSearch and CitaDel offer great potential to libraries seeking convenient access to dissertations and theses. FirstSearch WorldCat offers the added advantage of providing the option for users to pay for information as they use it, whereas CitaDel's Dissertation Abstracts database can be subscribed to only through an annual fee. One drawback to searching for thesis/dissertation information through the WorldCat database, however, is that, unlike CitaDel, this source provides no abstract.

Given the fact that both systems offer benefits and that both retrieved unique citations not duplicated by the other, it is concluded that both systems should be used for truly comprehensive thesis/dissertation retrieval.

Access to dissertations and theses poses a real challenge for the academic librarian. It is well known that, for many disciplines, the "cutting edge" of current practice, application, and research design is first evidenced in dissertations, which is one reason scholars demand access to them.[1] Yet efficient methods of accessing dissertations and theses have vexed many librarians as they attempt to balance judicious access to this source of information with the least amount of frustration to the user. In fact, problems posed by locating, cataloging, and storing dissertations, not to mention thorny collection management issues, have been the focus of much solid research in the field. Joan Repp and Cliff Galviano, in an article published in College & Research Libraries, suggested as a topic worthy of further research the "full study of the content and coverage of various general dissertation indexes with the intent of determining their reliability in providing full availability of dissertation information to prospective disciplines."[2] It is partially with this aim in mind, that we offer our own comparisons of dissertation coverage as provided by both CitaDel and FirstSearch.

Theses and dissertations submitted to universities and colleges in the United States are accessible in many different formats and through many different vendors. Major hard copy sources include Comprehensive Dissertation Index, 1861-1972; Dissertation Abstracts International (DAI), Sections A and B; American Doctoral Dissertations, and Doctoral Dissertations Accepted by

American Universities. Access to masters' theses is provided by Masters Abstracts and Masters Abstracts International.

Electronic access to theses and dissertations is provided by such vendors as DIALOG, BRS, FirstSearch (OCLC), and CitaDel (RLIN), and in addition, CD-ROM access to dissertations is now also available.

The CD-ROM product available for dissertations, Dissertation Abstracts OnDisc, is made available by UMI utilizing their Proquest software. Currently, the usefulness of this format is limited to either single-user access or networked access, if the library has signed the appropriate licensing agreements for this product. The usefulness of the CD-ROM format is also limited by the nature of the Proquest software. Kathleen Kluegel, in her review of this database, noted that one major flaw is its inability to "streamline the search process of changing a disc," a problem encountered when searchers need to search the same keywords on more than one disc.[3] Other barriers to searching the CD-ROM product effectively are built into the software itself, a problem compounded by inadequate documentation, lack of an index, and poor organization that fails to provide sufficient support.

At the time of this writing, the options provided for unlimited institutional access to dissertation information through an annual subscription are limited to RLG's CitaDel and OCLC's FirstSearch. Therefore, we have chosen these two systems as the focus of our study in an effort to recommend the best and most comprehensive access to dissertations from remote locations.

In February 1992, the University of Arkansas evaluated the FirstSearch system during a month of free trial use and subsequently evaluated the CitaDel service during the months of October and November of the same year.[4]

The results of these evaluations have proven useful in assessing patron response to both systems and in demonstrating the effectiveness of both systems for retrieving information under various subject areas. This particular study attempts to provide a comparative analysis for end-users of these two vendors by proving their effectiveness and ease of use in providing needed citations to theses and dissertations. The strengths and weaknesses of the searching capabilities of the two systems are highlighted and pricing options are discussed. Finally, a comparison of the retrieval of thesis/dissertation information from the FirstSearch WorldCat database and Dissertation Abstracts (DSA) on CitaDel is presented.

FirstSearch

FirstSearch is a comparatively inexpensive online interactive search service introduced by OCLC and geared to the end user. It presently contains over forty-three databases with more to be added in the near future. FirstSearch caters to the general patron by providing popular citation databases such as Newspaper Abstracts, Periodical Abstracts, Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature, Reader's Guide Abstracts, and Business Periodical Abstracts, among many others. It caters to the subject-specific user by providing access to many databases in the humanities, social sciences, and business. It further provides access to science and technology information by making available databases such as Biosis/FS, General Science Index, GeoBase, INSPEC,

Biological and Agricultural Index, Concise Engineering Index, a subset of the Compendex Plus database, and Applied Science and Technology Index. FirstSearch is also offering a full-service document-ordering service for some of its databases.

CitaDel

CitaDel is a bibliographic service provided by the Research Libraries Group (RLG) that is also targeted for end-user searching. It provides access to citation databases and, like FirstSearch, also offers a full-service document delivery component. Databases such as Periodical Abstracts, Newspaper Abstracts, ABI/Inform, and PAIS 80 focus on the general user. Another category targets graduate students and researchers by providing access to Dissertation Abstracts (DSA) and EIPageI. Three specialized files are also available on CitaDel; these include the Hispanic American Periodicals Index, Current Bibliography of the History of Science and Technology, Index to Foreign Legal Periodicals, and Index to Hispanic Legislation, with others to come in the near future.

Coverage

FirstSearch and CitaDel both offer open access to multiple users, thus avoiding the headaches and cost of mounting and maintaining databases on a local system. This ease of access has become more apparent as institutions are realizing that licensing tapes and mounting them locally represent an enormous investment. Instead, libraries often decide to integrate into their local systems only those databases that are critical to their curricular needs.

Vendors like FirstSearch and CitaDel, however, are presently offering the option of providing end-user access to a wide range of databases that have never been offered before in this type of institutional setting. While both systems offer databases for general and specific interests, the scope of coverage in FirstSearch is somewhat larger, catering to the current awareness needs of clientele by providing access to databases in all disciplines. For example, FirstSearch recognizes the needs of scientists and technologists by offering select databases in these subject areas, databases that previously were never offered before at a price users and libraries could afford.

Pricing Policy

FirstSearch offers two pricing options. The first allows patrons to control costs by charging by the number of search statements rather than by the number of online connect hours or by records printed or displayed. Libraries or individuals may order access to the FirstSearch catalog in open and/or card blocks of 500 searches each. Open blocks provide access under a single authorization number with multiple log-on capability. Card blocks act as a series of subauthorizations to a main account. These card blocks allow libraries to distribute searches in a controlled manner with either 10, 25, or 50 searches per card. The cost per search depends on the number of searches purchased. For example, if 500 searches are purchased, the cost per search is 90 cents, whereas if 40,000+ searches are purchased, the cost per search is 50 cents.

The second option offers institutions annual subscription pricing for selected databases. Under this option, a base package is required for purchase. Using this method, one simultaneous log-on

with access to WorldCat, Article1st, and Contents1st would cost $6,500 annually, while ten simultaneous log-ons would cost $65,000.

Through CitaDel, institutions pay a fixed annual fee for access to each citation database they select. Subscription pricing is available for all files on CitaDel. The price is determined by the file and the number of simultaneous users. For example, the cost to access Dissertation Abstracts is $12,000 for 1 to 10 simultaneous users, whereas for 51 to 100 simultaneous users the cost is $34,500.

With this pricing policy, libraries do not have to keep track of searches and be concerned if their budgets have been exceeded. Indeed, libraries can budget up front for this service. However, the challenge then would be for the library to market the service aggressively to get the best return for dollar value. Libraries that subscribe to these databases would have to budget substantial time and effort at the initiation of these services to understand users' needs thoroughly and to decide which database(s) to subscribe to in order to gain maximum benefit. However, with this pricing policy, libraries with a limited number of potential users in any one particular area might find the cost of subscription prohibitive. CitaDel does allow a free 30-day trial, however, so that the institution can determine if any of the available files is a good "fit." In addition, FirstSearch offers the option of an open authorization account that could make the databases accessible from both local and remote locations. If libraries opt for this open authorization method, the urgent need to analyze the information needs of users would be greatly minimized in preference to providing information from a wide range of sources in all subject disciplines. In the long run, this method would seem more logical for an institution struggling to maintain access to a wide range of services for a diverse clientele at a moderate cost. It will also provide information from the less popular sources on demand that would not have been available otherwise at such a reasonable cost. The other option of individual passwords or authorization cards for FirstSearch could be awkward and a nightmare to administer and monitor in large libraries. However, this option meets the needs of the individual who is not attached to an institution, because many institutions may, at their discretion, decide to sell card blocks of searches to individuals having a legitimate research need. These cards can then be used to search any of a number of databases from any remote location.

Methodology

Similar searches were performed in both the CitaDel DSA database and OCLC's WorldCat to critically examine the capabilities of these two systems for searching and retrieving thesis and dissertation information. These two databases were chosen because they were the most comparable. The results are presented in tables 1-7. It should be noted that this study is a comparison of databases just as much as it is a comparison of the two systems themselves.

[TABULAR DATA OMITTED]

Discussion

Both FirstSearch and CitaDel provide access to theses and dissertations in the WorldCat and DSA files, respectively. These files provide fairly comparable access to theses/dissertation

information, but with distinct advantages and disadvantages posed by each system. Table 8 provides a listing of the search characteristics of the two systems.

[TABULAR DATA OMITTED]

One of CitaDel's principal advantages is that it allows for Boolean searching using the OR operator, with the practical result being that several search terms or synonyms can be strung together in a single statement. Certainly, the chief complaint against FirstSearch is by now familiar. Not only is there no provision for a search history, but also synonymous terms must be typed in separately. Even though FirstSearch just recently introduced the OR Boolean operator, still only two of them may be used per search statement. After that, each group of three synonymous terms incurs a separate charge.

However, WorldCat in FirstSearch does provide for maximum retrieval using a controlled vocabulary in the form of Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH). Although Dissertation Abstracts in CitaDel does not provide for searching using LCSH headings or other controlled vocabulary, it does allow freetext searching of the abstracts, which WorldCat does not include. The ability to search by words in the abstract is an important retrieval feature in Dissertation Abstracts via CitaDel.

In the example concerning gender or sex differences in conflict resolution (see table 2), CitaDel enables a searcher to construct a single search query using the two synonyms together for ease in retrieval. FirstSearch provides the searcher with the ability to do this by using the appropriate LCSH heading, thus avoiding the entering of synonymous terms. This feature, however, assumes that synonym variations are in fact subsumed under the appropriate subject heading (as in the example where "sex differences" also retrieves "gender differences"). If there are no appropriate LCSH or MeSH headings, then FirstSearch protocols require users to enter all appropriate synonym variations for a truly comprehensive search. Again, groupings of synonyms must be entered in separate search statements, with a separate charge for up to three synonyms. This is unfortunate, because experience shows that it takes an average of anywhere from six to twelve searches in FirstSearch to get the desired result.[5]

[TABULAR DATA OMITTED]

What is curious about this particular comparison of synonym construction is that, in most of the search examples FirstSearch retrieved more master's theses than did CitaDel; however, both systems retrieved an approximately equal number of dissertations. In fact, in many of the search examples, CitaDel typically retrieved dissertations extending further back in time. Another curious anomaly in most of the examples was the relative paucity of common citations, especially of dissertations, retrieved by both systems.

In the search example on feminist criticism of Latin American literature (table 3), CitaDel generally located more citations in one statement due to the fact that the truncation symbol (#) represents true truncation, retrieving all variations of the word "feminist"; while with FirstSearch, the + symbol merely retrieves simple plurals and possessive forms of the word. Luckily, in the aforementioned search example, "Literature, Latin American" was a valid subject

heading in CitaDel's DSA; without this provision, several other search queries would have had to be constructed. (For example, the search command "fin tw Latin American Literature" retrieved nothing.)

[TABULAR DATA OMITTED]

In FirstSearch, several different queries had to be pieced together to approach the success of CitaDel's one statement. Feminism had to be entered in two different ways (su:feminism and su:feminist), whereas CitaDel was able to process both variations (Feminis#) with one search statement. Even considering that the LCSH for Latin American Literature was used in FirstSearch, five different search statements had to be entered. Cumulatively, none of these statements was as successful as CitaDel's one successful query, and the citations retrieved were not duplicated by any in CitaDel.

In the two queries on quality circles and industry and biological control of agricultural pests in corn, rice, and soybean, FirstSearch's WorldCat retrieved more citations, even on a one-to-one comparison of title searches. Again, FirstSearch was favored by its ability to search the LCSH "Quality Circles," as well as its ability to search several fields at once, with the su: command, which searches titles, notes, contents, as well as subject headings. Even given the fact that Citadel's search engine is essentially one that is title- and abstract-driven and that there is little provision for true subject searching in CitaDel's DSA (beyond UMI's very broad subject constructs), the key point seems to be that when WorldCat was also commanded to search for titles only, it still located more citations. In the search on Protocalliphora, for example, WorldCat retrieved five citations, including four master's theses and one doctoral dissertation, with dates ranging from 1946 to 1989, while DSA retrieved only one dissertation.

Similarly, in a search for biological control of agricultural pests in corn, rice, and soybean (table 4), a search in WorldCat found seven master's theses and seven doctoral dissertations, whereas the same search in DSA retrieved only two doctoral dissertations. This is also true for a search on apple diseases as in table 7, where WorldCat retrieved six master's theses and two doctoral dissertations, whereas DSA retrieved just four doctoral dissertations.

[TABULAR DATA OMITTED]

One possible explanation for FirstSearch's higher retrieval ratio is that libraries typically catalog theses and dissertations as soon as they are available and then input the cataloging data into OCLC's Online Union Catalog (updated daily), which in turn makes this information available immediately to WorldCat. The scope of coverage in WorldCat, in any case, far exceeds that of DAI. Over 16,000 libraries entered their cooperative holdings into the WorldCat database, whereas DAI contains citations for dissertations and master's theses from about 550 universities, including North American graduate schools and many European universities. There are 2,611,017 theses and dissertations listed in WorldCat, with only 1.3 million records in DAI, as of December 1993. To its credit, DAI does include many, if not most, of the top-level graduate schools, while WorldCat would not contain records from major research institutions if they are not OCLC member libraries. Furthermore, DSA covers dissertations back to 1861 and master's

theses back to 1962. Moreover, DSA has a greater number of doctoral dissertations than master's theses, and it contains no bachelor's theses.

In general, WorldCat retrieved more theses of all types (bachelor's theses, master's theses in all fields, etc.), as well as unique dissertations, than did a comparable DSA search, even when the fields searched on both systems were as similar as possible. The conclusion reached by the authors is that CitaDel is handicapped by the lack of a field qualifier capable of searching several fields at once, such as the su: field in FirstSearch, which, when used consistently, retrieved several more citations than did any comparable field qualifier in CitaDel due to FirstSearch's ability to search for content notes, titles, and subjects through this one qualifier. FirstSearch, however, is equally handicapped by the lack of the OR Boolean operator.

It may be concluded, then, that CitaDel's DSA appears to be much more restrictive in its dissertation coverage. It certainly does not seem to cover the full range of master's theses that WorldCat seemingly indexes in abundance due to WorldCat's many optional fields for searching. WorldCat, moreover, is favored by its provision for using exact LCSH and MeSH headings for maximum retrieval, with the advantage that in these cases the searcher does not have to construct a list of possible synonyms for words that might be in the title, as the searcher is required to do in DSA.

In CitaDel, however, the searcher is capable of searching words in the abstract as well as constructing synonyms using the OR Boolean logical operator. Also, CitaDel does include dissertations from many prestigious graduate schools, many of which are not OCLC member libraries, and the dissertations retrieved tend to extend further back in time than those retrieved through WorldCat. Furthermore, CitaDel is more forgiving of backspacing and typographical errors than is FirstSearch, which, when searched through the Internet, does not typically forgive any spelling errors - even one that is immediately corrected, and as a consequence, search terms are sometimes misinterpreted by the system, with the result that the searcher is still charged for a search statement. As a general rule, all these CitaDel features result in searches that tend to be less expensive - and less cumbersome - than FirstSearch.

Conclusion

Requests for locating dissertations, as noted in the introduction, represent one of the most frequent challenges for academic librarians. This challenge is made more difficult by the interdisciplinary nature of many dissertations and by historical problems with poor bibliographic control.[6] Given the additional fact that many librarians have found the CD-ROM product to be less than perfect in this regard, both FirstSearch and CitaDel offer great potential to libraries seeking convenient access to dissertations and theses. In addition, both systems provide retrospective and current information in the form of several databases to meet the needs of their diverse clientele. These benefits are especially important in an environment where funds are scarce and ownership and control have become paramount issues. FirstSearch offers the added advantage of providing the option for users to pay for information as they use it, whereas CitaDel's databases can be subscribed to only through an annual fee. Access to FirstSearch's WorldCat database especially offers great potential for thesis/dissertation information at an affordable price. One drawback to searching for thesis/dissertation information through the

WorldCat database, however, is that unlike CitaDel, this source provides no abstracts. Therefore, many patrons feel that the value of the summary is lost and that they may still need to locate the abstract through the paper copy of DAI to decide on the relevance of methods or procedures employed. Given the fact that both systems have beneficial qualities and that both retrieved unique citations not duplicated by the other, we are forced to conclude that both systems should be used for truly comprehensive thesis/dissertation retrieval.

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Abstract

A study compared the effectiveness of the FirstSearch WorldCat database and Dissertation Abstracts on CitaDel in providing access to dissertations. Results indicate that both systems are useful and that search results were unique to each system.

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