

Biz of Acq — A Database By Any Other Name

by Sue Wiegand (Periodicals Librarian, 123 Cushwa-Leighton Library, Saint Mary's College, Notre Dame, IN)

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Column Editor's Note: *When evaluating and selecting electronic resources, we struggle to understand the differences and similarities between products. This problem is exacerbated because the vocabulary we use, like electronic resources themselves, is in flux. We don't all understand the same terms in the same way. In this month's column, Sue Wiegand, Periodical Librarian at Cushwa-Leighton Library, St. Mary's College, argues persuasively that if we standardize our terminology, we might neatly classify electronic resources and almost instantly understand what a given product is. — MF*

Classification of organisms revolutionized biology because it gave scientists a common vocabulary. Just because they seem to change faster than a virus mutating, should electronic resources be any different? In any science, the first thing you do is define terms. A database is a database — or is it? When a citation index includes any full-text it becomes an e-journal, according to some. But it's more like a *Reader's Digest* version of the journal article. Essentially, either is reprinted content.

The text itself is the same, although reformatted to fit the constraints of each particular interface, which, of course, varies according to the vendor. Often, graphics — pictures, charts, etc. — are not included, making the electronic version problematic in some disciplines, notably math and science. Some of the articles and other parts of the journal, such as letters to the editor and advertising, are left out. Other articles are taken out later because of copyright problems in this post-*Tasini* age. The *Tasini* decision requires free-lancers to be paid for articles that are re-published in electronic form from a print edition, but some publishers, instead of paying the free-lancers, are simply removing the articles. Worse, in some databases even the citations to articles affected by the *Tasini* decision have been removed, leaving no clue that they were ever there.

Then there are the well-known archiving and access problems of aggregated databases. Access may be here today and gone tomorrow, depending on the license, and it's hard to tell if anyone is taking responsibility for archiving electronic content. The issue of archiving also affects definitions of resources because it may affect which content is preserved and how it is to be cited. Future researchers will have to be, literally, on the same page to find the correct citations.

Just as *Reader's Digest* or *Utne Reader* has its appropriate place in library collections, aggregated databases can serve an important function. But databases vary, and it might be helpful if we were to explore and define the various kinds of databases and group them

accordingly. I would suggest, first of all, that the term "e-journals" be reserved for journals in electronic form and not aggregated databases/indexes with some full-text. Whether or not a print-on-paper edition is available is not as pertinent as whether or not any online edition is fully equivalent to the print version. In its purest form, if a true e-journal has a print counterpart, they are equivalent, having the same text and graphics. This is rare in any format; even microform editions of the same newspaper or journal sometimes routinely exclude portions, such as the ads. **JSTOR**, an archival e-journal database, comes close, but even then, there may be citation issues. Possibly, we should develop alternate designations for most of these entities. Those with a print counterpart might possibly be called e-versions, e-formats, or even e-editions.

When it comes to defining electronic resources, just when you think you've got it pinned down, they change what we're talking about. It's difficult and time-consuming at best to compare databases when you can't figure out exactly what's there. It also makes it harder to avoid duplication of resources during collection development. A first step might be to define our terms. If we start thinking about pinning down some elusive terms, at least we will be on the same page when we discuss electronic resources preparatory to acquiring and managing them. It will also help us to read between the lines of descriptive advertising of these resources, and in teaching patrons what they are, if we stick to a common vocabulary.

For instance, when I mention e-journals, someone might say, in the ensuing discussion, that **Academic Universe** is good. But wait — I consider **AU** to be an electronic database of citations, abstracts, and/or some full-text (and here's a disclaimer: I could be wrong about what any of these actually are!). When I say e-journal, I mean an electronic, individual journal, full-text, usually from the publisher, searchable, with its own interface, and equivalent to the print version (if any.) I would consider **Project Muse** an e-journal database or collection of e-journals, and **JSTOR** an archival e-journal database. The **Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature (CINAHL)** is a citation index, published in print and electronic formats, but now there is a full-text version available. Still, it's not the same as if each individual journal included had its own site, with its own interface to its editorial content. It's still a citation index with some

full-text, and an overall interface exclusive to whichever vendor you purchased it from. Each journal included in the index is not an e-journal, at least not in this format. The question of canceling print based on inclusion in an aggregated database may be different from the question of canceling print based on online availability as an e-journal from the publisher. Each must be examined separately, once we're all on the same page with terminology.

Here are some other examples I can think of, just as a start to discussion:

Electronic Index is a fairly self-explanatory term: the electronic equivalent of print citation indexes, which may or may not be available also in print. Unfortunately, as I said, a common usage seems to equate electronic indexes with full-text e-journals, leading to disappointment both in acquisitions (especially when you see the prices) and from patrons, who do not often want to go find the paper versions of the perfect citations they've uncovered through the magic of keyword searching.

The clearer we can make this upfront, the fewer unfulfilled expectations we will have (we hope.) A database index by any other name is still just that, an index.

Electronic Index with some or selected full-text is an option that is becoming more and more common, leading to the above-mentioned disappointment when the particular perfect article does not happen to be one of those available in

full-text. We need a better, shorter name for this. Again, the clearer we can make it to our patrons that any particular article in this database may or may not be full-text, the better.

Electronic Database or Aggregated or Aggregator Database: a collection of electronic indexes and databases (i.e., **Academic Universe**, **ProQuest**, **FirstSearch**) with its own interface and search engine. It usually includes some or "selected" full-text. I consider these the electronic equivalent of *Reader's Digest* or *Utne Reader*, because they've been collected and "re-published" with a different interface, with or without graphics. I don't mean it in a derogatory sense — these are good, all-purpose databases and offer a lot to our users, depending on their needs. Each one works differently and must be searched separately, at least for now, although there is new software out there to solve this problem and search across all platforms and databases, using Z39.50 compliance or other methods. There is a great deal of duplication of titles of-

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ferred, and no guarantees of stability or archival considerations.

Electronic Resource: a generic type of term, meaning anything needing a computer to access, from CD-ROMs to the Web. More specific terms would allow better precision in communication and description.

Web page: individual page on the Web, put there by an individual or organization interested in the topic. Ok, this is obvious — to us, but possibly not to all of our patrons.

Website: collection of related individual pages on the Web. Web pages and Web sites are what we warn students to scrutinize very carefully when discussing critical thinking and evaluation of sources, since there is no “stamp of approval” through peer review.

CD-ROM or DVD-ROM index or resource: electronic, but not delivered over the Internet — can be stand-alone or networked.

A CD-ROM index would be citations only; a database may include some full-text, etc.

Electronic Abstracts are the electronic equivalent of an index plus abstracts (for instance, General Science Abstracts.)

In library history, descriptive cataloging of books was an obvious step forward, allowing comparisons among editions and avoiding duplication when ordering. It gives us a common point of reference. For comparing different versions of databases, it's really only a matter of taking bibliography into the electronic age. A good first step to defining terms is any collection management tool that charts or compares databases based on criteria that can be used for evaluation before purchase or licensing, such as **Judy Luther's** “Whither Electronic Journals?” (*ATG*, April 2000, pp.24-26) and “An Update: Sources for Electronic Journals on the Web.” (*ATG*, June 2000, p. 42.) Next, we should use these and other criteria to develop standard terminology analogous to a classification scheme for discussing and comparing electronic resources. Percentage of full-text would seem

to be one important criterion for comparison. Inclusion of graphics might be another.

What do we mean by e-resources? It was clearer in print — you had indexes, you had abstracts, and you had journals. We could compare apples to apples, and oranges to oranges. But part of the reason it was easier was because the terminology had developed to describe and compare print resources efficiently. Probably everyone has different ideas of what these terms mean, but that's all the more reason we should discuss these ideas, in search of a consensus. Most people seem to mean some variation of full-text when they say electronic journals, but should we call it something else when it's not equivalent to the print version? What if it's online but not searchable? Or if it's printable only for a fee — do we then call it Document Delivery? What of the many linking options to come, when it will really get confusing? Our first question has to be: “What are we talking about, anyway?” 🌱