LAST BYTE

Evaluating Evaluations

When selecting full-text databases, advises **Sam Brooks,** factors to analyze abound

Opinions will always differ when it comes to the subjective side of database evaluation—the color of an interface, the layout of search screens, etc.—but when it comes to examining the full-text content of a particular database or database package, much of the subjectivity gives way to facts.

Vendors tend to describe individual databases in terms of the number of publications indexed and/or the number of publications available in full text. For evaluation and direct comparison, this information is simply not enough. Instead, evaluators must look at subsets of these numbers (in addition to the specific publications) to gain a true understanding of the value of a given database.

Inside the numbers
Let's assume that we are comparing two scholarly databases designed to meet the same research need for an academic audience. A baseline question might be, "How many and which publications are available in full text?" To ascertain the true value of this list, we had to ask the following: Of this list of full-text titles, how many and which publications are "active" (i.e., have ongoing full text in the database)? Of the number of journals that are active, how many are peer-reviewed? Of the number of publications that are no longer active, how many are naturally ceased (i.e., no longer published) vs. the number that are unnaturally halted in the database (i.e., full text has ended, but indexing continues because the journal continues to be published)?

Embargoes
Also, consider embargo periods. First of all, vendors do not arbitrarily impose embargo periods on full text; these delays are publisher-imposed. As such, if one database has an embargo period on a given title, it is a near guarantee that a comparable database will have the same restriction. If a given database has more journals with embargoes, it is likely that the same database also has more journals without embargoes. Does it make sense to have a negative reaction to a given database for having more journals with embargoes, if the other database does not provide coverage for these journals at all? After all, the publisher of a journal with an embargo may never participate in full-text databases if not for embargoes.

Comparison services
Over the last few years, comparison services have emerged to help librarians make more informed decisions about database purchases. Unfortunately, these lists tend to entail the basic "surface" data but no information "behind the numbers." They often provide comparisons in three simple compartments: 1) Unique titles offered in Database A; 2) Unique titles offered in Database B; and 3) Titles in common to both Database A & Database B. They might further break down full text and indexing-only.

Librarians may encounter problems when using such lists as the means for database evaluation. If a publication had full text available in a database at any point, for example, it is considered a full-text journal by these services. As a result, reports from these comparison services may show that Journal X is available in full text in Database A from 1922 to the present, while the same journal is available in full text in Database B from 1995 to 1998, but will classify this journal simply as a title in common to both databases. So, without scrutiny, more than 80 years of back file including current coverage is apparently "equal" to four years of coverage in a full-text window that ended eight years ago.

Furthermore, because competing vendors don't standardize their database coverage lists, two completely different publications may show the same name and may or may not include an ISSN, making them difficult to distinguish. The opposite might also be true, where the same publication is listed with different names by competing vendors.

Due diligence
Every librarian wants to make the best decision when it comes to selecting full-text databases. While intentions are always clear, performing due diligence will result in the selection of the most appropriate full-text databases for your library. When you've done the proper research, have a representative from each company visit to clarify any questions, provide demonstrations, and generally "tell their story." After all, when you select a database, you are also selecting the people who come along with it. ∎

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