

ETHNIC NEWSWATCH, GENDERWATCH, ALT-HEALTHWATCH
RESULTS OF CALIFORNIA COMMUNITY COLLEGE LIBRARIES, EAR COMMITTEE
REVIEW
November, 1998

The California Community College Libraries, Electronic Access to Information Resources Committee (CCL-EAR) undertook a two-week "hands-on" study of the Web versions of the Ethnic NewsWatch, Alt-HealthWatch and GenderWatch databases. These three databases are produced by Softline Information of Stamford, CT, a developer and publisher of electronic full-text databases.

Ethnic NewsWatch, introduced in 1992, was the first electronic full-text database of the newspapers and magazines of the ethnic, minority and native press in America. Today it contains news, culture and history from 200 publications and offers access to more than 400,000 complete articles dating back to 1990. GenderWatch, formerly Women 'R', is a full-text database of women's publications and was introduced in late 1996. GenderWatch includes 125 international publications plus reports, pamphlets, papers and conference proceedings devoted to women and gender issues. Archival material dates back to the mid-1970's. Alt-HealthWatch is a full-text and image database covering alternative, complementary and integrative health care and medicine and was introduced in late 1997. It includes 120 international publications dating back to 1990.

Each CCL-EAR committee member independently, or in concert with other qualified professionals on their campus library staff, reviewed and evaluated the three Softline databases. Assessments were submitted on a Review Reply Form specifically designed by the Committee for this purpose. Though other staff may have helped in the review process, completion of the form was by the CCL-EAR committee member only and not transferred to another. Ratings were based upon the potential value of the proposal to the California Community Colleges as a whole and not solely on the needs of any specific campus.

Attributes of the information resource were assessed on a scale of 1 to 4 with 1 representing the "least value" and 4 representing the "most value". The following attributes were examined:

INFORMATION DATABASE

Consider its functionality, the appropriateness of format (bibliographic/full-text), the content of the information, the adequacy of coverage (retrospective, current), and its value to the California Community Colleges as a whole.

SEARCH INTERFACE

Consider the functionality and ease of use of the interface. Is it intuitive or is an excessive amount of training required? Are any crucial features missing from the search interface?

USER SUPPORT SERVICES

If documentation is required for successful use of product, is it available, comprehensive, and well written? Is online help adequate and user friendly? Does vendor supply training if it is needed? Is a telephone helpline available?

COST

If cost is available, does it seem reasonable in terms of comparable products?

ACCESSIBILITY OF SERVICE

Is access/connection to product reliable and stable? Is response time adequate?

OVERALL ASSESSMENT

#1 --- No Support

#2 --- No Support at this time. Future support conditional upon enhancements noted below in Comments Section.

#3 --- Support and Recommend proposal be forwarded to Community College campuses for their acceptance or rejection. Would like to see enhancements in product noted below in Comments Section.

#4 --- Outstanding offer and opportunity. Recommend proposal be forwarded to Community College campuses for their acceptance or rejection.

Following are the results of the CCL-EAR Committee's review as well as comments taken from the individual Review Reply Forms:

INFORMATION DATABASE: (4,4,2,2,4,4,4,3,2)

Based on past use of the CDROM product the coverage seems excellent. The range of titles included is reasonably comprehensive. Full-text is an absolute requirement, and this database meets that requirement. Coverage of non-mainstream perceptions of current events is also a necessary component of any adequate research. This will introduce students to that easily-missed pool of information.

The California Community College System has a very diverse student population who require library services to support their multicultural needs. In addition, various courses are mandated to infuse a multicultural approach into the presentation and study of concepts with the curriculum. The uniqueness of these three sources make them invaluable to the CCC. These full-text databases simplify the access to this type of resource. The titles held in these databases are difficult to acquire since several would require direct subscription to the publisher. With the exception of Gender Watch, access is provided back to at least 1990, thus allowing for adequate retrospective and current coverage.

To the CCC, Ethnic NewsWatch is an indispensable ethnically rich resource that would greatly enhance any CCC Library collection. Several community colleges have women studies programs on their campus and Gender Watch would prove to be an essential resource for the CCC Library collection. I would also recommend that campuses subscribe to Ethnic News Watch along with Gender Watch so that a much more balanced picture of gender relations are presented throughout the world. Allied Health programs and health-conscious community college students would be good reasons for a Library to subscribe to Alt-Health Watch, however, I would rate the usefulness of this particular database as a 3 since the interest is focused on only a small segment of the discipline.

The functionality of this database seemed a little glitchy as I clicked back and forth. It was not unusual to have a JAVA script error. I liked the full text format and the content since so many of these newspapers are not indexed OR readily available elsewhere. In light of the multi-cultural population of California, this source seems to fulfill a need for alternative points of view. I tried a variety of searches (ESL students, floods in Central America, Korean Americans and riots, Chinese in Los Angeles) and found the keyword article search to pull many useful citations. The subject heading search, however, left much to be desired. The "thesaurus" used to index these articles seems to lack a good sense of conventional thesaurus structure. For example, there are no cross references from the term physical fitness (or fitness) to the established headed "Recreation and Sports." an article on Lupus in dogs revealed a subject heading of "Veterinary Holistic Medicine." The theory of specificity in subject headings is greatly lacking. Another example was a keyword search under Koreans and riots. While I did retrieve an article on "A Korean American perspective of Koran-Black Relations and the LA riots," the subject headings Segregation/Discrimination (Racism); and Social/Societal (Violence) left me wondering who was doing the indexing!! There also appears to be a timelag. when I searched the database by date (search on November 9th, there were no entries for November and only two of the titles were entered for October.

The three databases covered areas not offered by the other major aggregators. The articles are full text. Linked bibliographic citations are available with a click on the "biblio" button.

The list of 200 publications indexed did not show beginning and ending dates. Locating the list is not easy. One has to go on "browse" under publication titles in the other search options to find it. Although the description said the coverage is from 1990, it is not consistently applied. Many of the publications might be too new or too short-lived to go back to that date. As to be expected, the source list consists of minor regional publications.

Good retrospective as well as current coverage. Full-text in entirety is very appealing. Excellent resource for gender-related issues. Based upon my experience with this database in the past, I think its content and coverage are good. Of course, the continual addition of titles would be welcome.

It is a bit lacking in the area of currency. Searching the database on 11/14/98, the most recent articles I could find are dated 9/30/98.

The fact that the database is fulltext is very important.

Finding only citations to publications that most libraries do not subscribe to is frustrating for undergraduate students.

The content is the most appealing aspect of this database. I think it is valuable not only for the minority perspective, but as an alternative to mainstream press coverage.

I found these three databases to contain interesting alternatives to "mainstream" periodical databases. The coverage of all three is adequate for community college students as they usually want current materials.

Most of the records I accessed were full text, another important criteria. But the narrowness of these databases, except for EthnicNews Watch is problematic. I don't believe that the information in the other two databases would be accessed that often by community college students and that the more general periodical databases cover this material adequately for their research needs. Although I reviewed all three databases, my rating is based on EthnicNews Watch and not the other two. If they were to be purchased as a package, I would change the rating to a 2.

Scope is good - 200 publications, retrospective to 1990, full text articles; Languages limited for an ethnic database articles are in Spanish and English only; Good variety of magazines and journals not indexed elsewhere; this last factor is reason enough for us to consider subscribing in spite of the databases shortcomings.

SEARCH INTERFACE: (2,3,2,1,3,2,2,3,2,2)

I like the grouping of all choices in the upper, first viewed part of the screen. The layout allows for an easy start by both novice and expert searchers. I'm not sure I like the opening of a second window for field searching. Some novice users may be confused by this, but it is an interesting way to solve the problem of dual tasks. These qualities would give the database a score of 4. But if the students can't take the article home, then the database is useless. Printing brings the score down to 2.

Because of the designer's reliance on frames, the printing process is exceedingly cumbersome. Our students pay \$0.10 per page and can't afford to make mistakes in printing. Good design means that the actions required follow the immediate instincts of the user (press the Print button they've always pressed in Netscape to print).

Requiring the user to go through a total of 8 decisions/actions before printing takes place is not acceptable. That wastes the researcher's time and wastes our time in explaining the steps when we could be spending that time helping students with real research issues.

I like the English/Spanish language search options that are available in Ethnic News Watch. I believe that several of the CCC users would utilize that option. Not certain as to whether, the user would be searching and retrieving items from the English portions of the database as well.

The search interface is extremely easy to use. One simply enters search word(s) in the box or fields listed below. There are options to search by Words in Articles; Years (1997+, 1995-1996 & 1994-Back); Articles Per Page (10, 20, 50 & 100); Words in Titles; Subject(s); Publication Name; Publication Date; Author/Byline; Type of Article; People (Names); Geographic Location(s); Ethnic Group of Pub; and

Language of Article(s). The Counts only option is useful in alerting the user of the potential need to expand or narrow the search without performing the actual search. (I found this feature very handy.) When the desired search is configured, one just clicks Submit Search button to perform search.

The Pop up dictionary browser box is somewhat cumbersome to use since one is unable to scroll A-Z through the list in order to see and select multiple (like) terms, i.e. women or feminism. One must first search and select one then hit OK and then call up the search again and then proceed. This method is almost useless for students to endure. A considerable weakness in this part of the search engine.

The summary of search results screen was comprehensive with the number of records found, the title, publication, date and article type information (Column, Article, Book Review, Obituary, Editorial, Biography, etc.) Very intuitive methods for retrieving the full text, marking articles for printing or exporting. It would be much desired to have the ability to mark and select article while in the full text portion. This capability is lacking. Users also have the option to sort titles by: Date or Title in Descending or Ascending Order. Search terms are highlighted within the text of the article.

The Print/Export option was easy to use. Several options are available: Article, Article + Citation, Citation, Index, Publication Information, Current Document, Selected Documents, All Documents, and Document Range (From: xx To: xx). Text document formatting was available for Export. Prior to Print/Exporting, the print interface reformats the article into report format, which leaves a window to close out of.

Printing from the browser (Netscape) without first selecting the print option inherent in the Softline print interface cause Java error messages to occur.

No email option is available for sending search results.

Seemed straightforward and intuitive. Subject searching was "clunky" and was limited to a range specified by the user. No scroll bar to extend subjects.

The initial search screen is just too busy. All the search options are displayed on one screen. The "browse" function of the optional search columns are clumsy and required careful reading the instructions to scroll through. The help button does not provide good and easy to follow instructions. There is also no search hints for phrase searching, wildcard symbols, etc. I put in a search term consisting of three words--same sex marriage--and a search error: invalid posop was returned with no explanation. The same search with quotation marks yielded good results, with the phrase as well as the keywords in the articles.

Pretty intuitive. Would have been helpful to have some mention of Boolean search and truncation capability. Also, the print is very small.

The search interface looks and feels as though it were translated directly from DOS to the web. Some specific problems/suggestions: 1. It is not clear on the opening search screen that entering terms in the additional search fields (words in titles, subeject(s), etc.) is optional. In my experience, novice users want to fill up all the boxes & usually inappropriately; 2. The navigation buttons (next, previous, etc.) have no text, making them a bit cryptic. The "BIBLIO" button might be better labeled "CITE"; 3. An email function built

into the search interface, i.e., not relying on the browser email function, which is not enabled on many library computer stations, would be helpful. (IAC implements this feature nicely). Laudable feature: 1. The use of "pop-up" browser windows is very nice. Too often users get lost when having to click Back and Forward in web databases.

The search interface seems a bit clumsy. There appears to be too many choices to make when one first encounters it. I do not understand why, after selecting a title, article, or subject in the browse area, it does not go directly to the records but to the search screen again. I also had mixed results in the number of hits I received in comparing using the browse boxes and typing in my own terms. For instance I had many fewer hits using the browse boxes in the first three categories than by typing in the terms myself. In one of the categories it did not come up at all and I had to use the term crime instead which seems strange in a database about ethnic issues. I also had uneven results with Black Panthers. I am not sure if boolean operators and truncation work. But I think they have an attractive design, the articles and the bibliographic information were displayed nicely and that navigating using the buttons was a breeze. But printing the way they suggested was also cumbersome.

Help screens are poor. There is no information on how to construct the search syntax; no hints about using boolean operators; Screens are difficult to read with some emulations; typeface is too small; Ethnic group divisions are too broad - for example, we were looking for articles on Hmong and didn't find a specific division; Subject terms are too broad

USER SUPPORT SERVICES: (3,3,2,2,3,3,3,3,2)

Documentation requires the use of images or replications of the object discussed. The instructions contain all the pertinent information, but the presentation is deadly and would cause most readers to lose interest immediately.

The interface is fairly intuitive, however, there is no way to receive assistance with out going into the help option and searching for the solution.

The help documentation is somewhat brief and not well organized. Unsure about telephone help or training.

Minimal online help. I have no information regarding vendor training.

Online help is very inadequate. I don't think there is any references to training or support services on the home page. But I do know the sales personnel from Softline have visited campuses to demo the product and the salesperson did mention training sessions. I don't think training is an issue here because our librarians can work with any interface. It is our end-users.

Don't know anything about Softline's user support services.

HELP screens are not written for the novice and are not context sensitive. I found no explanation of search syntax. For example, I am still not sure how to specify proximity, or even if it is possible.

I do not know if the vendor provides training. The Softline web site lists an 800 number, but I did not call it. I still give it a "3", however, because I think it can be used without extensive documentation or training.

Unsure about telephone help or training.

The Help screens emphasize using the Browse boxes and do not mention using your own terms on the search screen. Thus the searcher does not know or can assume that search strategies such as Boolean operators and truncation are not available?

The Help screens did tell how to search and print in a clear and concise manner.

ACCESSIBILITY OF SERVICE: (4,4,3,3,3,3,4,4,4,3)

At the time I used the database there was no delay in login, nor in the return in search results. Only once did I encounter a slow reponse time. I consider it to be very stable and reliable. Information was retrieved in an acceptable amount of time.

Other than a few JAVAscript errors, access seemed fairly stable. Response time could be increased.

I thought the system was a little slow in responding. Not slow enough to discourage use, but, nonetheless, rather slow.

Response time was very good, but I am not sure whether or not we were connecting to a demo site. I connected about 4 times over the period of a week and did not have any connection problems.

I did not have any trouble connecting or experience any delays while I was using the databases.

Access has generally been quick and stable. Response time seems acceptable.

OVERALL ASSESSMENT: (3,4,2,3,3,3,4,3,3)

Please relay my concerns about the printing. This issue has been ignored by several vendors to date and, as I said, it is probably the single most important characteristic of any public service database.

I believe that for the reasons mentioned above, these products would prove to be essential assets for the CCC Libraries.

I would consider this as an alternative source once I have a good, solid core collection of electronic resources. Since minority groups are now a majority at my college, I would like to see this resources added to broaden the perspectives of traditional resources

Redesign of the initial search screen. More precise search help screen. Continous browse screens. Title source list with beginning and ending coverage dates.

The search interface needs work. The help screens could be better.

I believe that for the reasons mentioned above, these products would prove to be essential assets for the CCC Libraries.

Although the search process is a bit cumbersome, for libraries looking for alternative sources of information or dedicated databases in these three areas this product is a good choice.

I think this should be available for selection by members of the consortium. I'm not sure my college would purchase this at this point. We would like to see some improvements, especially in languages available and in the ethnic and subject divisions to reflect the specific diversity of our student and faculty population.

Rating for home campus only: (3,4,2,2,2,3,3,4,3)

Again, I would have discussions with company reps about the printing.

Ethnic News Watch and Gender Watch 3: Alt Health Watch (Not a high priority--Would purchase only if we had the budget for it)

It is a database that would support a few programs on our campus. If the price is reasonable and our budget allows it, it is good resource to acquire.

We don't have a gender studies program, but I think for folks doing occasional research in this area, the product is very useful.

The highly diverse population of my institution would be well-served by the content of Ethnic NewsWatch. I can also see its value in teaching information competency because it offers an alternative to mainstream media.

While there are other more basic sources we need before we can purchase this database, it is very high on my list of priorities. Because of the population we serve, I might even argue that Ethnic NewsWatch should be part of our "core collection".

If we had the money, I might consider Ethnic News Watch, but I would want to have a trial that the students could use to see just how much use it would receive. I do not see much need for the other two databases on our campus.

Last Updated: February 26, 2002