

**Selected Members of the CCL-EAR Committee Review
Of ProQuest Historical Newspapers (PQ HNP)
January, 2002**

Selected members of the California Community College Libraries, Electronic Access to Information Resources Committee (CCL-EAR) undertook a "hands-on" study of ProQuest's Historical Newspapers.

The ProQuest Historical Newspapers (PQ HNP) is an enormous project in which major newspapers dating from the 19th century to the present are being digitized and reproduced from cover to cover. The inherent value of the historical information and added search capabilities in this database require librarians to give ProQuest Historical Newspapers very serious consideration for purchase. However, there are other issues to consider: redundancy of information already purchased, and an idiosyncratic interface.

Selected members of the CCL-EAR Committee, independently or in concert with other qualified professionals on their campus library staffs, reviewed and evaluated ProQuest's Historical Newspaper. 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(s) only and not transferred to others. 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 help line 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 California Community College libraries 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 California Community College campus libraries 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.

Overall rating:

The ProQuest Historical Newspapers (PQ HNP) is an enormous project in which major newspapers dating from the 19th century to the present are being digitized and reproduced from cover to cover. The inherent value of the historical information and added search capabilities in this database require librarians to give ProQuest Historical Newspapers very serious consideration for purchase. However, there are other issues to consider: redundancy of information already purchased, and an idiosyncratic interface.

The ProQuest Historical Newspapers (PQ HNP) is an enormous project in which newspapers dating from the 19th century to the present are being digitized and reproduced from cover to cover- not just the news stories and editorials, but the full page image which includes the photos, graphics, display and classified ads, obituaries, stock quotes and headlines and subheads. When it is complete the New York Times database will cover the years 1851 to 1998. The backfile of The Wall Street Journal is also part of the ProQuest Historical Newspapers project. The historical backfile database will initially cover the years 1889 to 1986. The advantage to digitizing the newspapers is great: issues are browseable and fully searchable.

The quality of some of the reproduction is poor, even after the vendor has worked to clean it up. I found numerous spelling errors in the Results lists ("Bahkers" for "Bankers" and "Edugator" for "Educator"), presumably due to OCR problems in the underlying ASCII text. I also encountered several examples of incorrect links from the page image as described in the pop-up description to a totally unrelated article.

Search Interface:2,2,2

In order to search just the historical newspapers the user must first go to the collections button at the top of the screen and make that choice. This will not be an obvious step for the new user. Once HNP is chosen the user can choose among the following types of searches: basic, advanced, guided, publisher and natural language. The basic search allows you to enter a word, words or a phrase and limit your search by date range (current, backfile and deep backfile), publication type, and whether you want to search within the full-text of the article or just in the citations and abstracts.

The database uses the same interface as other ProQuest products. Thus search functions that don't apply to all PQHNP show up. For example, PQ HNP allows the user to choose periodicals as a publication type limiter and/or peer reviewed articles, which of course gives a result list of zero every time. This could be very frustrating for the student who thinks making more choices is a good thing. Another oddity is that you have to click a box to be shown the number of hits on your result list. Thus, you do not know how successful your search terms are nor do you know many pages of results you have to go through. The most current articles are listed first, which is an advantage in a database covering current topics, but a disadvantage in a database covering historical data. There isn't a "jump to" function, rather the user has to move back page by page, in increments of ten citations to reach the earliest material. It would be nice if there was a way to choose how the search results dates were ordered.

The advanced search looks exactly like the basic search (with the same failings noted above) except that there is an area at the bottom of the screens with a mish-mash of expanders and limiters, and a thesaurus that serves as a kind of subject index. The thesaurus is not searchable, rather you have to take the "related" or "use instead" term and enter it into your advanced search.

The guided search is a fill-in the boxes search, that is, where you can search using Boolean logic in many different fields. I searched "Nixon" AND "Watergate" in "Newspapers" with the article type "letters" and had a search result of three hits. All three results accurately reflected the qualifications of my search, but I was surprised that there were only three hits. There is a date range limiter in the guided search but you cannot choose your own range (for example 1860 - 1870), instead you have to use a pull-down menu which currently only has three choices: 1970 and before, 1980, 1985. I assume ProQuest will make the date range choice flexible when the database is complete. The guided search also gives you the misleading option of being able to choose publication type (all, periodicals, newspapers) and peer-reviewed articles. As noted

above using the article type of "letter" brought up letters to the editor. But searching beef with the publication type "recipe" yielded no results in the guided search, but when I used the basic search method with "beef AND recipe" I got a large result list. Other problems related to article type lead me to believe that this particular aspect is not yet developed. For example, "Editorial cartoon" doesn't appear in the article type drop down list, but Help says it is a valid article type. Likewise, the citation information for several book reviews I looked at listed "article" as the article type (not Book Review!), but "Article" does not appear on the drop down list of article types on the search screen.

Publication search allows you to search by the date of the newspaper, but you cannot add search terms to your search. The user can view the daily editions of each paper alphabetically or in page number order. Natural language search allows the user to type in sentences, and then the results are ranked by relevancy. This type of search seems to work well. Right-handed truncation ("?") and wildcard ("*") functions are supported in any type of search.

One problem with searching a historical database is trying to find the right terms, and no amount of access points can fix a changing language or changing social mores. For example "southern rebellion" brought up a short and sweet list of articles from the 1860s. Two different search terms "venereal disease" and "prostitute" yielded no early results - is that because they were called something else, or perhaps, not even mentioned at all? A true subject index with cross-references built for this database is a necessary addition.

The articles are searched in ASCII text using OCR but the article display is in Adobe Reader. A user new to Reader may be dismayed at encountering a different software program within a database. I predict that librarians, instead of having to spend time answering questions on how to use microfilm, will spend an equal amount of time answering questions on Reader and how to move from viewing the article to viewing a whole page, etc. In addition, the reader may find the size of the Adobe screen discouraging; the actual image of the article constitutes a very small portion of the screen, and requires a great deal of scrolling to read. On my computer the Adobe screen partially obscured the mark article and article format functions. Using Reader you can adjust the size of the font to accommodate different viewing needs, but you can't maximize the article to occupy the full screen.

I spent quite a while puzzling over the page control button that appears to the left of the article. There was no explanation in the ProQuest's help, so wasn't it until I encountered a multiple page article that I began to understand that this button allows the user to display just one page of the article or all pages of the article.

Print options include printing from the Adobe toolbar, or emailing by using a very prominent button on the screen. One word of caution to the user: Emails arrive without citation information of any kind!

User Support 2,2,2

The help topics are brief. Searching the Help section for "historical newspapers" did provide a one-page help article for the Proquest Historical Newspapers. It did explain the unique PHN icons that users receive in their search results. The help screens ARE context sensitive at the screen level, but not within the screen.

Additional script errors occurred occasionally when entering PHD and also when opening some articles.

I got many run-time error messages in "help" and a few times I could not close the help screens. My computer froze and I lost my browser connection. I also encountered several help screens that loaded

without scroll bars, so that I could not navigate anywhere else.

"Support" is hidden within help under "Reference & Examples." It would be handier to have a small "contact us" on the bottom of the screens where the link to terms and conditions is located. The non-technical support hours are 8:00 – 6:00 EST, Monday to Friday. The technical support hours are fantastic – 8:00 – 12:00 EST, Monday to Sunday.

COST 2,2,2

Costs are on a sliding scale according to FTE, and subscriptions are priced for each newspaper, not as a package. The cost for each title seems reasonable when discounted for the first year, but the full price figure seems high when you consider that most libraries have already paid for the content at least once. My library is very reluctant to do away with the microfilm given the current uncertainties regarding long-term retention, so this material is in essence an added format for material already owned. Potential subscribers must decide if off-campus access and added searchability is worth the subscription price.

ACCESSIBILITY OF SERVICE 2,2,2

I did have problems connecting to the database during the day. I would receive some script errors that caused my connection to end. When I did connect response time was fast on campus and from home. I'm not sure about the stability of the connection to PHD.

I experienced several instances of getting kicked out. Numerous access violations occurred which kicked me out of Adobe, but not PHD; occasionally I was kicked out of my browser entirely.

Overall assessment 3,3,3

Proquest Historical Newspapers adds increased functionality and full-page images for the both the New York Times and Wall Street Journal. The ability to search bibliographic information and the full text of each article provides outstanding access to historical information. The inherent value of the information in this database requires that libraries give this database very serious consideration. However, the interface has some idiosyncrasies that will require study and practice on the part of the user. All reviewers were very concerned with the technical problems that occasionally occurred while searching, with the Adobe Reader screen display, with the price, and with the fact that many important functions were not designed for PQHN.

Home campus rating 3,3,2

The added functionality of searching and reading the New York Times back to 1851 would be valuable on my campus.

Our off-campus students need access to this resource, but my current budget makes it highly unlikely that I can add it this fiscal year.

Although no one can argue about the content and new searching capabilities, PQHN is too expensive for content already purchased and its interface is too quirky. It needs some refinement on the part of the vendor.

Last Updated: February 25, 2002