

NewsBank - Vendor's Response

INFORMATION DATABASE:

Question: I could find no indication of how long data stays in these databases. As new data ("more than 70,000 articles annually") are added, do previous years remain, making the database bigger and bigger? If years are removed as new ones are added, what years are included? Is there a backfile that can be searched?

NewsBank Response: There are two versions of this product offering, one with a backfile and another that has a two year "rolling file". The former continues to grow as each year is added and it starts with 1991 data. When the backfile is included, searching is "seamless"; that is one search includes both the current file and the backfile.

Question: I assume that items in these databases are *selected* for inclusion as opposed to the publications being indexed cover to cover. (The "NewsFile" description says "more than 70,000 articles selected annually.") Is this correct?

NewsBank Response: Yes. We review more than 500 newspapers, journals and newswires and select articles for their news value for inclusion in the product and in order to eliminate articles that are redundant (as much as 80% of a newspaper is composed of articles from newswires that appear in many papers in their original form) as well as to avoid articles of only very local interest (i.e. " Mayor congratulates local little league team on yesterday's win over the River City team"). With the readily expanded capacity of on line files (as opposed to CD ROMs) we select the articles that provide significant news value --currently more than 70,000 per year.

Question: Offers quick access to a couple of headline stories for today and for past month. Also offers access to a collection of simple maps. (Are these separate databases or are they a free feature of any NewsBank sub?)

NewsBank Response The maps and daily headline stories with their teaching activity sheets are features of the NewsFile family of products and are included in the subscription. Our customers have told us that the maps are significant aids to students when researching issues and events, especially when they encounter articles datelined in unfamiliar cities or countries. The student activity sheets are provided so that teachers have a lesson plan available to them at the start of each day that is based on current news stories.

Question/Comment: I don't really think that community college students' news needs are so sophisticated that they need two separate news databases, one for U.S. news, and one for global news. (As a matter of fact, the fewer databases and interfaces we offer them, the less confused and overwhelmed they are. They want one-stop shopping.) Seems to me our students need a combination of the two databases, perhaps with fewer titles from each to offset the cost of combining the two.

NewsBank Response . We developed NewsFile and Global NewsFile as separate products in order to give the customer more options in selecting databases that fit their needs. Our international customers as well as a number of domestic colleges and public libraries find that Global NewsBank fills a unique need for them. NewsBank is very interested in pursuing a merged product for the California Community College System that would provide "one stop shopping" for the students and faculty,. Such a merged product could contain some or all of the data that is encompassed in the trial products with a single user interface and without overlap in coverage.

Question/Comment: Our college is *VERY* interested in finding a general statistics database, but this one doesn't feel like it would be as helpful as we'd like--partly because of the lack of a search engine, but the content also feels thin. I couldn't find a database description other than the one you get on the main NewsBank page when your mouse passes over the StatBank title, and this one won't hold still long enough to read it. Source list seems to be composed entirely of U.S. publications. Where are World and country stats coming from? A number of the U.S. sources are available for free on the web, though it's nice to have everything brought into one database.

NewsBank Response StatBank has been recently offered on the Newsbank InfoWeb platform and the interface was designed after much consultation with customers and users on appropriate tools to provide access to this type of data. The vast majority of opinion was that they wanted a better way than key word searching since many words that appear in the text supporting the statistical data are not determinant of what the data represents. There are many sources of the data although much of it is reported through U.S. publications. For example, a database on worldwide oil production by country and region might come from a U. S. Department of Commerce publication or from a U.S. based Petroleum Industry Organization. The source list is "U.S." but the data comes from the reporting countries

Question/Comment: Although the coverage is not comprehensive for all the sources included in the database, it is still a valuable information resource. The regional coverage will be particularly useful for smaller libraries, which have no budget for items such as newspapers from other regions of the US. One thing that is lacking, however, is explanation of the indexing criteria and date coverage for each source.

NewsBank Response - It has proven difficult to provide a concise explanation of the indexing criteria that will satisfy most users and, at the same time, not clutter up the product descriptions on the screen. We'll be happy to provide a separate document that describes our controlled vocabulary and indexing process. With respect to showing the date coverage by source, we will investigate that for a future revision.

Question/Comment: The bibliographic format is fine. The "estimated pages when printed" is roughly accurate and will be appreciated by users who must pay for printouts. Coverage is weaker in the earlier years (1991-1992) of the database. Again, information on when indexing begins for each source would be very helpful. Unfortunately, the subject indexing is not strong. For instance, I found

only two articles under the heading "Los Angeles Riots (1992)" although, obviously, the database contains many more.

NewsBank Response - It is not clear to us if the above comments were related to NewsFile or to the WebNews versions of the complete newspapers (LA Times; San Diego Union etc.) In NewsFile, all of the selected articles have been indexed from the earliest entries. It is true that the dates shown are for the total product versus the individual sources shown in the source list. The reason is that we are continually adding new sources as we gain publishing rights to those publications and a great many have been added in the last four or five years. We do not index the full text complete newspapers such as the LATimes etc. and index terms that appear with articles from these products are those provided by the paper. As you likely know, there is no established standard for newspapers who index their material and some papers index only sections while others do not index at all.

SEARCH INTERFACE:

Question/Comment: The search interface is functional. There's not too much information on the screen to overwhelm the user. The ability to select a search by relevancy or by chronological order is a very useful feature. A brief mention of the use of and, or and not plus quotes for phrase searching are helpful starting points for more likely useful hits. Also, the link to more information regarding search operators is useful. The highlighting of search terms is helpful. And I like access to the two levels of searching, keyword and customized. On the negative side, Newsbank discourages the use of truncation. A search for child* will not necessarily result in hits on the word children. Also, if one is keyword searching more than one concept, I find clicking on "related topics" often brings up a lot of links to topics that are not useful. For single concept searching, this feature works quite well. I also would like to see a print button option next to the e-mail button option rather than rely on the print icon button on the Netscape menu.

NewsBank Response - We are working on enhancements to our search interface that will provide for truncation and pluralization as well as a "Print" button on the screen. Thank you for the suggestion of a "New Search button-- we will investigate means of providing this. We expect to have our planned enhancements available this summer.

Question/Comment: Overall the search interface is better than most. Moving around the search, list, and fulltext screens is not confusing. The "Related Topics" button next to the results list is an excellent feature! The simple search screen is clear and uncluttered. It would be nice, though, to have a couple more search examples and to make them a bit more prominent. I question the use of the term "customized search" when "advanced search" is commonly used in other databases, search engines, etc. The weakest feature is subject searching (by topic). The process for getting a list of the indexing terms is clumsy and not readily apparent, especially for users who are less familiar with the web environment.

NewsBank Response - Included in the enhancements under development is an improved way to

access index terms. It should prove to be easier to use and more apparent to the user. Thanks for the suggestion to change "customized" to "advanced" search. We will certainly consider this for our regular products.

Comment: The NewsBank interface is *very* aesthetically appealing. Layout is clean, simple, clear and well-organized. There are NO bouncing arrows, NO spinning or pulsating logos, NO unnecessary graphics and no advertisements cluttering up the screen or slowing down the loading of pages. It's easy to see what choices need to be made. Two modes of searching are offered, "Keyword" and "Customized;" "Keyword" is the default. The "Customized" search allows a combination of keyword searching and browsing a list of *preselected* items and fields. (This can sometimes get to be pretty confusing, as in Business NewsBank where if you search for a company or organization in the regular keyword fields (title, lead paragraph, etc.) you sometimes get different results than if you searched the company or organization in the "company name" field. There is apparently no true "authority" searching possible, though search results pages offer an option of displaying "related topics."

NewsBank response- Regarding the search process and return of results in Business NewsBank, we created the specialized search fields (Location, Company Name, Personal Name, Industry) as an optional search mechanism based on our experience that these constitute a high percentage of the search terms used in databases of this kind. They are controlled by an authority mechanism and utilize assigned indexing of articles. Making use of these fields should yield greater precision in the returned results.

Comment: Users can select to have results listed by relevancy or in reverse chronological order. This choice is very handy since for some topics currency is the higher priority and for others it's not as important. Instructions re. Boolean operators and phrase searching are right on the front search page which will save lots of trips to the "Help" pages. E-mail feature allows users to send as HTML (for POP mail users) or ASCII text (for text browser users). Very handy (assuming that a sender knows which type of mail system the receiver will be using). Problems and Suggestions: NEW SEARCHES There is no "New Search" button. In a Customized Search, you have to select "Edit Search," then click the "Clear" button to begin a new search in the same database. In a Keyword Search, the process is different--click "Edit Search" then manually delete the original search from the search box. A "New Search" button which automatically returned users to the original search page and cleared the previous search would be MUCH more intuitive and convenient. One that returned them to the database home page instead of the NewsBank home page would serve the same purpose. SEARCH TYPES Since the search type choices offered by many electronic databases are "keyword" or "browse," NewsBank's choice of "keyword" or the hybrid "customized" search can be confusing. I suspect that this would be problematic particularly for new users and ESL students. Furthermore, the opening screen doesn't *tell* users that to "browse," they have to do a "Customized Search." "RELATED TOPICS" FEATURE o Our students need LOTS of help focusing and refining their searches. They often start with extremely broad topics like "art." The "Related Topics" list offered on NewsBank's search results screens offers users *some* help in refining a topic, but the subject thesaurus used is not LCSH, and it is often sparse or misleading. For example, there were only four related topics offered for a search on "Northern Ireland:" Orangemen (Northern Ireland); Great

Britain; Northern Ireland (?); and Ulster Unionist Party. Nothing about the country's education, economy, history, etc. A similar search in IAC's Expanded Academic ASAP database offers *90* subtopics for Northern Ireland (e.g. --agriculture, --art, --business and industry, --education, --environmental aspects, --foreign relations, --history, --politics and government, and so forth) as well as 38 related topics (e.g. Belfast, Northern Ireland; Catholics in Northern Ireland; Northern Ireland Women's Coalition; Northern Ireland. Assembly, etc.) Our students would never stumble across most of these subtopics and related topics in a long list of results from a "keyword" search since they rarely look beyond the first 10 articles listed and NewsBank offered no related terms which would get them there. (As another indication of the inadequacies of keyword searching, a NewsBank search on "Environment" offered a long list of related topics, most of them quite useful but also included "working conditions," "prison conditions," and "workplace," obviously not the "environment" our student was looking for.) Unfortunately, the related topics feature apparently only goes one layer deep; under the "Environment" search above, a click on the related topic "pollution" does NOT lead to another choice of related topics which might have included "air pollution," "water pollution," "toxic waste disposal," etc. The "Related Topics" feature is useful, but it does not make up for the lack of true hierarchical subject authority searching.

NewsBank response-We appreciate your comments on the Related topics feature. One of our main goals is to improve our handling of assigned index terms.

Question/Comment: Every click on the "Related Topics" link brought a pop-up window warning that this was an insecure server and asking if I wanted to proceed. I know that this option can be turned off in my browser, but why on earth would a "Related Topics" search *need* a secure server when the original topic search does not?

Newsbank response- Regarding the pop up window that refers to an insecure server, this sounds like a bug and we will check it out immediately. Thanks for alerting us.

Question/Comment: A useful addition would be a "related works" type link from a specific article so that if you come across the perfect article, you can quickly select another one that has all the same indexing terms.

NewsBank response - This idea looks very interesting and we appreciate the input.

Question/Comment: Search screens are again visually attractive, clean and easy to follow, but there is no search engine. Users must search by selecting from menu categories and browse lists. Must start by selecting area of the world: U.S. National Topics, States of the U.S., World Topics or Countries of the World. Then must select from: Society, Economy, Government, Earth or Transportation. Then browse topics list and select topic. This is a pretty clunky way to search, and is a major drawback for this database. Some tables (e.g. States - California - Society - Crime on Campus - Santa Rosa Junior College) are very easy to read and interpret, while others (e.g. U.S. - Society - Teenage Pregnancy) are less intelligible . In general, the statistical displays themselves, which use a straight text format,

are not very attractively presented. In some, the columns are so far apart that it's difficult to see how the numbers line up with the text items. One nice feature of SB interface: Your search history is laid out at top of page in series of buttons. All you have to do to return to an earlier step is click on the corresponding button. Another is that you can return to the StatBank home page, not just the NewsBank home page as in other databases. Selection method (e.g. Countries - Europe - Ukraine - Society - Debt, Foreign) takes stats out of original source context and are often only one or two lines long. But World Totals for same categories (Society - Debt, Foreign) are for the whole world. There doesn't seem to be a place where you can view a chart showing the foreign debt for all the countries in the world (or in Europe, Africa, etc) in one list. BUSINESS NEWSBANK None of the truncation symbols I tried (*, ?, character string) seemed to work in Business NB. I'm not sure many community college students could make effective use of all the choices in Business NewsBank's "customized search," but the only other choice in--a simple keyword search--can often be useless. (For example, a simple keyword search for "hersheys chocolate sales" rates as 99% relevant an article about a cellular phone company in Scottsdale which dumped 10,000 Hershey's chocolate kisses into the sales office for a celebration. But if you do a customized search for "hersheys" in the company name field, combined with sales and chocolate in the regular keyword fields, you find more relevant information. Perhaps Business students are more sophisticated users than many of our others.

NewsBank Response -- Please see attached document which covers indexing, vocabulary and the NewsBank Thesaurus

USER SUPPORT SERVICES:

Question/Comment: Although they are not context sensitive, NewsBank's online "Help" instructions are *excellent,* and I'd recommend that any user read them before doing anything else. The instructions are simple, clear, concise and well organized; they answered every question I had about how to use NewsBank. "Help" offers a description of the database being searched; instructions on NewsBank's different features and navigation buttons and how they work; tips on search techniques; and tips for troubleshooting. Good examples are used to illustrate each concept, and screen shots are often included. In addition, "Help" provides a source list for the database; instructions on how to cite NewsBank database articles, a description of web browser requirements for use of NB (which versions are needed, etc.) and contact information for NB customer support. "Help" opens in a new browser window so that users can keep the "Help" window open while going back to their search and trying the techniques suggested in "Help." "Help" layout is clear, with "Help" topics in the left frame and instructions on the selected "Help" topic in the right frame. Aside from the fact that "Help" is not context sensitive, the only problem I found with it is that if users don't actually *close* the "Help" window when finished, it can be obscured by the main NewsBank window when they return to their search. Then when they try to open "Help" again, it appears that nothing happens (because the "Help" window is already open, *behind* the main window). Many of our students are not computer-savvy enough to understand what's happening here.

NewsBank Response - The Windows toolbar is helpful here to alert users to what is open and what screens may be hidden behind the active screen. We will look to see if there is a way to make it more

obvious to the student. Contact information for customer support is easy to locate from within the databases.

COST:

Question: I pay less now than the price currently on offer for schools 10K or larger. (At 12K I currently pay \$5390.) I wonder if this is lowest price they could offer us at all levels of FTE.

NewsBank Response - I wonder if we have the correct FTE for this school? Also, as stated above, NewsFile is a family of products with a range of prices. NewsFile Collection is an expanded version of NewsFile and NewsFile Collection with Periodicals is yet another product. The price also depends on whether the backfile is included. Clearly, the prices we quote are no higher than is currently being paid and, if the collective demand warrants it, the price for all users will be discounted further as stated in the trial offer.

ACCESSIBILITY OF SERVICE:

Question/Comment: Seems very reliable; the *only* time I lost connectivity was when I was timed out. (Given the vagaries of our campus network, this is close to miraculous!) (Well, there were also the times that Javascript crashed the browser or the computer I was using, but this has nothing to do with connectivity.) Top level page takes *FOREVER* to load over a modem, presumably due to large number of images. Response time for other pages and for searches can be slow over modem, but seems generally acceptable. Times out too soon (1 minute of inactivity). But user-friendly message asks if user wishes to continue or log out. Timeout should be at least 3 minutes. Students are often rummaging through a backpack, looking for a pencil or trying to find some part of their assignments while in mid-search. It takes a while. :-)

NewsBank Response - We assume that "top page" refers to the menu page which does indeed contain images . We are working on a new, single page menu and initial search screen which should greatly improve the time to load the "top page". The default time out is set at ten minutes.

OVERALL ASSESSMENT:

Question/Comment: StatBank glitch: A search for China - Society - Students Television Viewing Habits gets data from the U.S. Department of Education's "The Condition of Education, 1993." China - Society - Cancer Rates is taken from the American Cancer Society's "Cancer Facts & Figures." As far as I know, neither of these publications reports statistics outside the U.S.

NewsBank Response - We do not view this as a "glitch" since the U.S. Dept of Education reports comparative data for other countries on a variety of issues and measures. Similarly, the American Cancer Society provides data for 66 other countries which we include to provide users with comparative statistical data which is compiled on a consistent basis.

NewsBank Response -- While we are continually adding sources to the StatBank product we try to obtain those that are updated regularly and in reasonable time. Some of the overseas sources we have looked at do not meet these requirements at present. U.S. Government sources do provide a great deal of accurate, comprehensive and consistent data on a variety of topics both in the U.S. and overseas. With respect to the lack of a keyword search capability in StatBank, we are investigating adding that function in such a way that it will provide meaningful results. The current approach was adopted for several reasons as noted elsewhere but also because it assures the user of getting positive results.

Rating for home campus only:

Question/Comment: On database content: Rating would differ from one database to the next. NewsFile - 3; Global NewsBank - 1; StatBank - 2 But overall rating: 1 Our librarians are completely and unequivocally sold on the combination of hierarchical subject authority searching and keyword searching which is offered by our current IAC databases. We feel that this is essential for the level student we deal with, and it just makes searches a lot more effective for any of us. (IAC has recently added a "Natural Language" option as well.) IAC's "Subject Guide" (i.e. authority) searching gives our students (and everyone else including the librarians) a quick and visual way of grasping the scope of a topic and also a quick way to refine a topic. If a topic gets no results in an authority search, IAC automatically reverts to a keyword search, without the user ever having to understand that that's what is required. After spending hours fooling with keyword search engines on the web, students are *delighted* when we show them the subdivisions in the IAC databases. Although we wish that our IAC databases had more full text than they do, what they have is generally sufficient, and we continue to make the tradeoff of adequate full text availability and excellent indexing, excellent search engine and excellent online help instead of more full text and more sources, with an unhelpful interface. Our current full-text newspaper subscriptions seem to be sufficient, though the vendor's search interface is less than satisfactory. We've considered business databases a number of times before, but it was generally agreed that we don't get enough business questions to justify the cost of a business database, and there are other databases which have had a higher priority. We're VERY interested in finding a good statistics database; it's possible that we might consider StatBank at a later date, but only if we can't find one that offers a search engine.

NewsBank Response-After many years of providing electronic data we're convinced that there is no one search method that is right for all users. Experienced and the more sophisticated searchers will utilize the tools and functions more than novices but in some instances will rely only on key word queries. With NewsBank's standard products, we provide options that allow the customer and the end user a variety of approaches. Where we provide "customized" products, we work with the customer to establish defaults that more closely match their particular needs.

Comment: The interface relies too much on algorithmic searching. Boolean, field searching and limiting are not as functional as they could be. Printing is atrocious. The page is designed with an unnecessary frames format. This format has the upper frame selected so that nothing prints from the lower frame. This could be easily dealt with in the code of the page but until now the programmers

have not made the change. If I am looking at my article I should be able to hit the print button. I should not have to wait for it to pull up a second time in another format. Another issue is the splash screen. The students have consistently had problems figuring out what to click to actually get into the database. The "Newsbank" that lights up red on mouseover is not clear enough.

NewsBank Response - We do not understand the printing issue described. Using either Netscape or Explorer, the print command (file or tool bar button) should print the entire article including the citation. With respect to the "splash screen", it is set up for users who have multiple NewsBank products (such as this trial) so that they can determine which database they wish to access by reading a brief description before launching a search. A number of users have requested that they be able to enter a search on the initial screen and we have such a change in development with availability planned for this summer.

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