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ADVISOR REVIEWS—STANDARD REVIEW

Historical Abstracts on ABC-CLIO and EBSCO Platforms

Date of Review: June 9, 2008

Composite Score:

★★★ 3/4

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Pricing Options

Pricing is based on institution type (historical institute, high school, two- or four-year academic) and FTE. Pricing is also based on User Level: one to six users or unlimited. An institution can subscribe directly with ABC-CLIO or via a consortium. EBSCO retained the ABC-CLIO pricing when it purchased Historical Abstracts and America: History and Life.

Product Description

Historical Abstracts on the Web:

The October 2007 issue of *The Charleston Advisor* featured a review of Historical Abstracts via the ABC-CLIO interface. Soon after the publication of the review, EBSCO Publishing purchased both Historical Abstracts and America: History and Life from ABC-CLIO. Both databases will still be available on the ABC-CLIO interface through June of 2008, after which they will be available only via EBSCO.

The October 2007 review in *The Charleston Advisor* has this to say:

The Web site gives a good general description of the <ABC-CLIO> product: <<http://serials.abc-clio.com/active/resource/page/aboutHA.html>>.

Published since 1954, Historical Abstracts has long been recognized as the world's leading bibliographic database for historical study. Historical Abstracts currently covers over 1,700 journals published worldwide in over forty languages. The database comprises over 720,000 entries from periodicals, with full-text links to over 135,000 articles and dissertations and masters' theses.

Each year, the editors of Historical Abstracts add over 16,000 abstracts and citations, over 3,000 book citations, and over 1,200 citations of dissertations and masters' theses to the database from the current literature and publications. Additional bibliographical entries are also added to the database by editorial projects such as retrospective coverage of journal issues published prior to 1954.

Historical Abstracts is committed to covering every significant historical journal published anywhere in the world, as well as journals with historical content published in closely related social science fields. Most articles are abstracted by an experienced group of abstracters, many of whom are historians and librarians, are experts in the content of the journals they cover and who possess the necessary language skills. Other abstracts

are provided by the journals. In every case, abstracts are carefully edited for clarity and precision.

Historical Abstracts on the Web includes incomplete, in-process entries awaiting abstracts and, in some cases, title translations.

Historical Abstracts via EBSCO is available only on its own and not as part of other EBSCOhost databases. However, as is the case with all EBSCOhost databases, Historical Abstracts can be searched with other EBSCOhost databases using multidatabase searching.

Critical Evaluation and Comparison

Search Interface. The EBSCO search interface is a great improvement over the ABC-CLIO interface. Most of the searching possible via ABC-CLIO is also available via EBSCO, but EBSCO adds superior options and search capabilities (further details under "Searching"). In the ABC-CLIO interface, for example, the options for searching by field, such as author, title, language, and journal, are hidden by default. One must click on View to see the options; a user might not readily understand what he/she will get by clicking on View. EBSCO uses a more traditional searching format: clicking on an arrow reveals a drop-down menu of options—a familiar operation to most users. As a second example of how the two interfaces compare, ABC-CLIO groups databases together into broad categories ("World, including U.S. and Canada"; "United States and Canadian history"; and "World history excluding U.S. and Canada.") A user probably would not be familiar with the databases that are included in each of those groupings. EBSCO, on the other hand, indicates exactly which databases are being searched and gives an easy option to change the list. EBSCO also uses the more natural "Find" instead of ABC-CLIO's "Search."

SEARCHING

The ABC-CLIO interface shows only two search boxes on the main search screen: Keywords and Subject Terms. The user can add search fields by clicking on Add/Remove Search Fields near the middle of the screen. The terminology is not especially user-friendly; most of the users at my library would not know what Search Field means. EBSCO uses Find and gives a straightforward option to Add Rows for additional searching.

The use of Boolean searching is not obvious in the ABC-CLIO interface. The main search screen includes no mention of any Boolean op-



Historical Abstracts Review Scores Composite: ★★ ★ 3/4

The maximum number of stars in each category is 5.

Content: ★★

In my October 2007 article on the Historical Abstracts database on the ABC-CLIO platform, I mentioned that at least some of the content did not appear to be very current. Specifically, the database seemed to be slow to include book reviews. For that article, I spot-checked references from recent issues of *The American Historical Review*, *Choice*, and *Isis* and found that a low percentage of the book reviews in the print issues were included in the online database.

For this article, I checked with EBSCO about the currency of the content after their purchase of the Historical Abstracts database. The representative responded that EBSCO has maintained the ABC-CLIO editorial team and has asked the editors and indexers at ABC-CLIO to finish selecting and abstracting/indexing within four weeks instead of the previous eight weeks. However, my research does not appear to support the claim of the EBSCO representative. Even now, the content does not appear to be very current. I spot-checked 20 total references from each of the following issues (which I was told previously are among the sources from which book citations are taken):

The American Historical Review, February of 2008 and April of 2008: 7 (35 percent) of the 20 sources checked are included in HA.

Choice, March of 2008 and April of 2008: 1 (5 percent) of the 20 sources checked are included in HA.

Isis, December of 2007 and March of 2008: 7 (35 percent) of the 20 sources checked are included in HA.

The EBSCO representative told me that Historical Abstracts has selective coverage and that "...only the records deemed to have the greatest scholarly value are included." EBSCO should make it clear how it and/or the ABC-CLIO editorial board defines "greatest scholarly value."

Also, as mentioned in the comparison of searching both platforms, there was a discrepancy between the number of citations retrieved from ABC-CLIO and EBSCOhost for the same search. This was the case both in a keyword and in a subject search. EBSCO needs to make clearer why this is the case.

Searchability: ★★★★★

EBSCO's search interface is a great improvement over ABC-CLIO's, specifically:

User-friendly language, such as "Find" instead of "Search"

Obvious Boolean searching

Ability to limit by whether an article is peer-reviewed

Ability to limit by specific historical period

One recommendation—EBSCO should reevaluate the placement of the ? help icons on the searching screen. A user should be able to get context-specific help, which seems not to be the case currently.

Pricing Options: ★★★★★

Several options are available including FTE for site licenses and for simultaneous users.

Contract Options: ★★★★★

The license is standard.

tions. On the other hand, EBSCO shows a drop-down menu of Boolean search terms directly on the main search screen.

The ability to limit search results is not clear in the ABC-CLIO interface. EBSCO offers many limiting options at the bottom of the main search screen, including linked full-text and peer-reviewed. It does not appear to be possible to limit the search in the ABC-CLIO interface, or it is not obvious how to do it. The ability to limit to peer-reviewed journals is especially important for many academic libraries.

On the basic search screen of ABC-CLIO, there is no option to search by time period. I find this curious in a database covering historical topics, since the time period is vital in historical research. EBSCO offers “historical time period” as a limit option on the bottom of the main search screen. EBSCO searches the exact historical time frame; the ABC-CLIO interface searches only decades and centuries.

One feature available in the ABC-CLIO database but not in the EBSCO version is the CLIO notes or study guides. The CLIO notes allow a user to view a chronology of events for a time period and choose an essay on a specific topic within the time period. EBSCO’s literature states that its interface will not provide the CLIO notes; however, the EBSCO representative informed me the company does plan to provide the feature to users, possibly in the summer of 2008.

The ABC-CLIO version includes a detailed journal coverage list, including dates of coverage and links to the journal’s home page when applicable (but apparently only for current journals). The link to the journal list is prominent on the main searching screen. In the EBSCO version, however, one must click on Indexes on the main searching screen, then choose the index for journal name. The list that appears gives only the title of the journal with no details about coverage dates, etc. The ABC-CLIO version is superior in this regard. I don’t think most users would know to click on Indexes in order to see a list of journals included.

COMPARISON OF SEARCHING VIA BOTH PLATFORMS

I searched for “King Ferdinand” as a keyword in the ABC-CLIO platform and retrieved 365 hits. Using the same keyword, the “select a field (optional)” search in EBSCOhost retrieved 163 hits. I moused over the word “keywords” on the ABC-CLIO search screen, and a pop-up appeared with a brief explanation of what a keyword search is. However, I could only see the top portion of the explanation since it is not clear how to view the bottom part. In the EBSCO platform, the definition of a keyword search, as well as other searching information, is located by clicking on the ? icon next to the database name.

Contact Information

EBSCO Publishing

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The ? icon next to the searching boxes leads to an “Advanced Search-Guided” screen, which does not give definitions of the various fields. Clicking on the Help icon at the top of the screen reveals general information about the EBSCOhost research databases. I find this placement of the Help screens to be confusing in EBSCOhost. Why not allow users to get help information about searching in the various fields from the Help icon located next to the searching boxes?

I spot-checked the two sets of results for the King Ferdinand search and found only three to be the same, out of approximately 30 records that I checked. I’m not sure why this is the case since I was told that EBSCO had retained all of the content that had been in the ABC-CLIO platform. Perhaps the two systems are searching different fields within the keyword search, or maybe EBSCO is using an understood Boolean AND (since the EBSCO search retrieves fewer citations than the ABC-CLIO one). My EBSCO representative was very helpful, but she was not able to answer these questions. The EBSCO staff member who could answer them was not available before my deadline.

I searched for “apartheid” as a subject in both platforms. ABC-CLIO retrieved 830 items and EBSCOhost retrieved 701. Again, ABC-CLIO provides a brief definition of Subject Terms by mousing over the words, but there was no comparable mouseover feature in EBSCOhost. EBSCOhost includes information about searching in specific fields through the ? icon next to the name of the database. A spot-check of results from both platforms revealed more common hits than with the keyword search already described, but it is still unclear why there is such a discrepancy in the number of hits retrieved via both vendors.

Contract Provisions

The license agreement seems standard.

Authentication

IP or username/password authenticated.

Author’s Selected References

ABC-CLIO historical abstracts. ABC-Clio. Annual academic subscription starts at \$1,575.00. Internet Resource. Reviewed in 2006 September CHOICE.

About the Author

Janice G. Schuster is the coordinator of reference services and reference librarian, associate professor, at Providence College in Providence, Rhode Island, since 1991. Her primary responsibilities include reference, managing the library’s electronic resources, overseeing development of the reference collection, library instruction, and serving as library liaison to seven academic departments and/or programs. She previously served as reference librarian (head of reference) at Stonehill College and as reference/circulation librarian at the University of South Carolina-Coastal Carolina College (currently Coastal Carolina University). She holds B.A. and M.L.S. degrees from Indiana University-Bloomington. ■