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Index to Legal Periodicals Retrospective: 1908-1981

Janice G. Schuster

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Contract Provisions

Institutional access on- or off-campus. No restrictions on concurrent user numbers.

Authentication

Available on- and off-campus; in the U. K. authentication can be arranged using ATHENS or ATHENS DA, alternatively by IP address range and/or username and password and referring URL.

About the Author

Martin Myhill is currently Acting University Librarian at the University of Exeter in the United Kingdom. A library science graduate, Martin is specifically charged with responsibilities for library staff, space utilization, systems, and special projects. His career to date has involved considerable international library and information systems activity, especially in Europe, and also countries that are part of the former Soviet Union and Mongolia. He has published regularly, particularly in studies relating to the procurement, use, and evaluation of library systems. See <http://www.ex.ac.uk/~MRMyhill/lib/mm.html> for a fuller description of his professional activities and recent publications and conference participation. ■



▼ ADVISOR REVIEWS—STANDARD REVIEW

Index to Legal Periodicals Retrospective: 1908–1981

Date of Review: February 20, 2006; revised March 9, 2006

Composite Score:

★★★★ 1/8

Reviewed by: **Janice G. Schuster**

Coordinator of Reference Services and Reference Librarian
Providence College
549 River Avenue
Providence, RI 02918
<jschustr@providence.edu>

Pricing Options

Index to Legal Periodicals Retrospective is available as a one-time purchase or as a 12-month subscription option. The one-time purchase requires a 5 percent annual access fee after year one. Purchases can be made on a simultaneous user basis or by unlimited access. One-time purchase pricing ranges from \$11,875 to \$31,580, depending on the size of the institution, existing WilsonWeb subscriptions, and the access level. The subscription pricing range is \$1,540 to \$4,620.

Product Description

This retrospective database indexes over 750 legal periodicals published in the United States, Canada, Great Britain, Ireland, Australia, and New Zealand. Annual surveys of the laws of a jurisdiction, annual surveys of the federal courts, yearbooks, annual institutes, and annual reviews of the work in a given field or on a given topic are also covered. The database provides citations and selected “contents notes” that are similar to abstracts but not as detailed.

Critical Evaluation

Search Interface The Wilson search interface is straightforward, user-friendly, and uses terms that patrons should understand (with the possible exception of “Thesaurus”). On the left of the screen are buttons for Advanced Search; Basic Search; Browse; Search History; Thesaurus; Print-Email-Save. Having all of those options in one place is much easier for users than spreading the options out across the search screen, as some vendors do. Our library’s tradition is to have all search interfaces default to the Advanced Search; for libraries that have chosen the Basic Search as the default, the fact that the Advanced Search

button appears first on the list of options might encourage users to take advantage of the advanced options.

The list of databases available to the library is shown prominently at the top of the search screen; it is also possible to hide the list. When the list is closed or hidden an indication at the top of the screen shows which database is selected.

The search screen prominently displays the limiting options, such as limit by date or by type of publication, near the top of the screen. This is another example of Wilson’s user-centered design; some vendors place those limiters on the bottom of the screen, making it necessary to scroll down to find them. Many, if not most, of the patrons in my library have a hard time finding anything that requires them to scroll to another screen.

The search screen uses the word “find” before the blank box where one enters the search term, instead of “search” or other such terms. “Find” is more likely to be understood by patrons than the other terms. Also, the button one clicks to perform the search is labeled “start” instead of “search.” (The user can also just press enter to start the search). Again, Wilson uses terms that are likely to be understood by typical users.

A button at the bottom of the search screen allows the user to customize the results display. Options include record display and sort options; select fields to include in article and book records; and apply these custom settings to (i. e., displayed records, printed records, etc.)

Searching The basic search screen is very Google-esque; there is one blank box for entering the search strategy. I performed a basic search for “presidential powers” (without quotation marks) and retrieved 74 citations. As in Google, when I added quotation marks to the presidential powers search, there were fewer results: 3 citations



Index to Legal Periodicals Retrospective: 1908–1981

Review Scores Composite: ★★★★★ 1/8

The maximum number of stars in each category is 5.

Content: ★★★★★

This database fills a huge gap in online legal research. Previously, there was no easy online access to legal content prior to 1980. Wilson contributes to filling that gap with this very important database.

Searchability: ★★★ 1/2

The search interface is easy to use and incorporates terminology that users are likely to understand. Areas that need improvement include: the message that is displayed when no results are retrieved from a search strategy; the primitive thesaurus that actually acts more like a list of subjects; and the Help screens, which are for the most part unhelpful.

Pricing Options: ★★★★★

Pricing is reasonable, and flexible options are possible.

Contract Options: ★★★★★

The license agreement is standard for the most part. The specific definition of authorized users, both on-campus and remote, is a very good feature. It would be better if the agreement did not include an indemnification clause, since those clauses are not to the benefit of the library (typical of those clauses).

were retrieved. The basic search therefore uses the Google search mechanism: understood Boolean OR if the words are entered with no punctuation; phrase searching if parentheses are used. This emulation of Google searching is good for patrons who are interested only in the most basic search.

Advanced searching provides many options. Fields available for searching include keyword, subject, title, author, personal, court cases, document type, historical subject, ISSN, journal issue, and journal name. Boolean operators AND, OR, and NOT are available. I used the Boolean AND to add “Roosevelt” to my “presidential powers” search. The results went from 74 citations to 1. A good feature of the Advanced Search is that search terms are maintained as the searcher goes back and forth among various screens. After searching for presidential powers, I clicked on the Advanced search from the results screen on the left of the interface. When it took me back to the Advanced screen, it had maintained presidential powers in the search box. Some databases do not have this feature and assume that when the searcher clicks on Basic or Advanced Search, he intends to begin a completely new search. I find this Wilson feature of maintaining the search terms to be very useful.

One area for potential improvement in searching is the message displayed when no hits are found for a search. For example, for the search “presidential powers and Eisenhower,” this message is displayed:

(presidential powers) <in> ALL AND Eisenhower <in> ALL... in these selected products... Legal Periodicals Retro...produced no hits. Please press Back, refine your query and try again. Or press Browse to search for records with listed values.

Which undergraduate student is going to know what “refine your query” and “search for records with listed values” mean? Few at my library, I’m sure.

Thesaurus A thesaurus is available. However, I could not locate any details about its source. I assume that, since *Index to Legal Periodicals Retrospective* in print is a Wilson product, the thesaurus is derived from the print product; it would be useful if source details were displayed. This is a very primitive thesaurus that works more like a list of subjects than like a thesaurus. For example, “right to die” retrieved that as a subject term, along with a link to 16 records in the database that matched. (I did like the feature that allows clicking directly on a link to go to the list of 16 records retrieved.) A minus sign appears to the left of the subject term. According to the legend at the top of the screen, clicking on the minus sign should collapse the thesaurus listing while clicking on the plus sign should expand it. However, neither of those clicks caused any change in the display; I was never able to get the full thesaurus entry to appear. I tried the terms “abortion,” “right to die,” and “estates” all with the same results. Nor is there a search box on the thesaurus screen; to enter a new term, the user must click Thesaurus on the left of the screen to reenter the thesaurus. This seems to be a waste of time. Why not have a blank search box on the thesaurus screen instead?

Help Screens Wilson’s Help function needs to be improved. In an attempt to determine the difference between “subject” and “historical subject,” I clicked on the Help button on the left of the search screen, then on Help topics, then on Fields. I thought this would provide a list of the available fields and their definitions. However, I could not find definitions of any of the fields; there was not even a full list of the available fields. There should be a complete list of the available fields and their definitions. I also looked for a definition of “smart search,” which is one of the field options on the drop-down menu. Again, the Help function was not very helpful at all. When I entered “smart search” in the Help search box, the definition retrieved was difficult even for me, as an experienced librarian, to understand. For example, the definition

refers to applying “verity search algorithms.” I have no idea what that means, and it is unlikely that students would be able to figure it out either. Also, the Help function would be much more useful if it were context-specific. When “historical subject” was highlighted and I clicked on the Help button, it should have taken me directly to the Help section on searching by specific fields, and, ideally, to a definition of that field. Given the overall user-friendliness of the Wilson search interface, searching, and display, it is unfortunate that the Help screens are so unhelpful.

Results Display The results display is clean and easy to read. The Article Linker OpenURL link appears consistently along the left of the screen—no need to find it in different spots with the citation. A percentage is given on the left near the Article Linker icon. The Help screens indicate that the display defaults to sorting the citations by relevance. It’s annoying that there is no definition of the percentages, though. For example, what is the difference between a 100 percent relevancy ranking and 80 percent? How does the system determine which percentage to assign? This is probably less important to an undergraduate student than to a researcher or a librarian, but I do think the criteria should be stated. The brief display of article author, title, and citation appears to be the default. The full record includes the language of the document, subject, document type, and persistent URL. Abstracts are not included, but “contents notes” are included for selected records.

Historic content Access to historic legal resources is vital. Current law builds on previous cases, reasoning, and arguments. Index to Legal Periodicals Retrospective includes historic content that previously was not readily searchable online. HeinOnline, a collaboration among William S. Hein and Co. Inc., Cornell Law Library and Cornell Information Technologies, <<http://heinonline.org/>>, has been available since 2000 and covers thousands of legal journals since their inception. However, HeinOnline does not have a sophisticated search engine like Wilson’s and relies on full-text searching. Thus, with this online version of the print index, Wilson has fulfilled the legal research community’s need for historic legal content.

The historic content includes citations to articles from a variety of sources. For example, a search for “Watergate” retrieved citations from *Christianity Today*, *Columbia Journalism Review*, *Advocate*, and *Harper’s*. Given the range of dates covered in the database (1908–1981), I expected good coverage of topics from the 1970s back to the beginning of the twentieth century. The coverage of older content seems to be inconsistent. Some topics were very well covered, such as *Roe v. Wade* (33 citations); John F. Kennedy (22 citations, mainly from the 1960s and 1970s) and Versailles (56 citations, mainly from the 1940s and 1950s). It was more difficult to retrieve very old content, i. e., prior to 1930. For example, a search for “stock market crash” retrieved only 1 citation. With all of the tax and other legal implications of the crash, I am surprised that it isn’t better covered in a legal database. A search for “prohibition” as a keyword retrieved over 1,600 citations, some as old as 1918. However, there’s no entry in the thesaurus for the alcohol-related Prohibition, only for “writ of prohibi-

Contact Information

H.W. Wilson Company

950 University Avenue
Bronx NY 10452
Phone: (800) 367-6770
Fax: (800) 590-1617
E-mail: <custserv@hwwilson.com>
URL: <www.hwwilson.com>

tion.” Most of the citations retrieved appeared to be for the latter rather than the former subject. I wonder why the alcohol-related Prohibition is not better covered.

Contract Provisions

The license agreement seems pretty standard. See the Web site <<http://www.hwwilson.com/abouthw/artretroWeblic.htm>>. One good feature is a specific definition of on-site and remote authorized users. I have never encountered the statement that “if the database includes abstracts, authorized users should consult the full text materials before reading or suggesting conclusions.” I’m not sure what that means. New York is the governing law state. It would be better if the license agreement did not include an indemnification clause; at my college, we always attempt to delete such clauses from license agreements we sign.

Authentication

Authentication is possible either via IP address or by user name and password.

Author’s Selected References

Leiter, Richard A. “Index to Legal Periodicals Retrospective.” *Legal Information Alert* (January 2005)

About the Author

Janice G. Schuster is the coordinator of reference services and reference librarian 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) <<http://www.providence.edu/Academics/Faculty/Humanities/Schuster.htm>>. ■