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Paper #1: Database Evaluation Letter

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ProQuest Headquarters

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Dear ProQuest Editors:

 Hello, I am an academic librarian at San José State University. I am in charge of acquiring one of the databases that you offer, Ethnic NewsWatch, for use by our diverse student population. I am writing to you today to comment on my experiences using this database in the areas of content, indexing, abstracting, search interface, navigability, and user support. Specifically, I would like to discuss not only the strengths of the database that I encountered during the time that I took to become familiar with it, but also specific suggestions for improvements that would make the database more useful for student users at my institution and elsewhere.

 Firstly, I would like to discuss the content of Ethnic NewsWatch. I am impressed that there are over 400 newspapers, journals, periodicals, and other source materials included within this database. Similarly, the subject coverage of these titles is vast, including not only information pertaining to ethnic and racial minorities in the United States but also globally. Another gem of this database is its coverage of smaller and independent presses, which often include materials that cannot be found in other resources. Because of this, access to full-text materials in the database is paramount. While you currently offer access to full-text of many of your titles, coverage isn’t always up to date or complete. For example, I found several instances where coverage was claimed to be through “present” day, but actually wasn’t up to date. In one instance, the journal *Chinese Literature Today* was stated to have coverage through present, but only issues through 2012 are available. A visit to the journal’s website shows that there have been subsequent publications in 2013, which are unavailable on the database. In another instance, the newspaper *Navajo Times* also lists availability through present, but the last materials listed on the database are from February 2013. Again, a visit to the newspaper’s website shows it is currently active. The use of the term “present” seems to be confusing and misleading to the user. If coverage ended two years ago, this should be reflected in the publication information listed on the database so that users do not waste their time thinking something is available, when it actually is not.

While the majority of your included titles are in English, I find it commendable that the number of Spanish language titles and materials have been steadily increasing over the years. I believe that Ethnic NewsWatch can be taken to the next level with a further expansion of titles in other languages. As Ethnic NewsWatch prides itself in providing access to often overlooked perspectives that are multi-ethnic and multi-cultural in nature, the next step in providing a truly well-rounded collection of titles to your users would be to include more titles in languages besides English.

Indexing of materials in the database seems sensible and straightforward. Subjects in the index are listed in a clear and organized way, which makes them easy to navigate. Additionally, these are marked as hyperlinks, which allows the user to find similarly indexed materials. Though Ethnic NewsWatch uses its own controlled vocabulary, the terms are not convoluted or unnecessarily complex. Access to a subject thesaurus allows users to find the best terms for searching, in addition to related terms, and suggestions of broader and narrower term. As ProQuest has created its own controlled vocabulary for this database, I recommend that it be more easily locatable. I was only able to find the thesaurus by going to the advanced search screen, which many novice users may miss completely. Another observation is that Spanish language titles and materials have subjects listed only in English. This means that users must be essentially bilingual to use the database, even if only searching for Spanish language works. Perhaps including subject terms in other languages would also be another consideration as more non-English materials are added to the database.

The greatest disappointment I encountered while using this database was the quality of abstracting. While there were abstracts listed for almost every type of material I looked it, whether it was an article from a scholarly journal or a newspaper, almost every abstract was borderline nonsensical in nature. I am unsure of how these abstracts are generated, but it does not appear that they are authored by an individual, or checked for clarity and usefulness. An abstract is a brief summary of a particular work, yet I never felt like I was provided with an understanding of the material through the provided abstracts. Rather, these seemed like randomly thrown together sentences from the work itself, which often left me confused. In one instance, the abstract given was three long paragraphs, which is by no means brief. Even more confusing was that some materials had abstracts included within the full-text body, yet a completely different and ineffective abstract was provided by the database. Abstracts are extremely useful to students who often must conduct research and have to sort through lots of material in a limited timeframe. While Ethnic NewsWatch has attempted to include summaries of their materials, the poor quality of these abstracts seem to be more of a hindrance to users rather than helpful. A serious undertaking of rewriting these abstracts is urged.

 The search interface of Ethnic NewsWatch provides lots of features and detail, yet is also simple enough for the novice user. Basic and advanced search options are given, in addition to easy to navigate menus. Similarly, search results can be displayed in brief or detailed views, allowing the user to select what they are comfortable with. A sidebar on the left-hand side allows the user to limit searches by full-text, source type, publication, subject, and date. There are many visual features, such as source type icons, which are nice breaks from the text heavy layout. One aspect of the search interface that can have a negative impact on users is the ignoring of diacritical marks, such as accent marks. This is done because often indexing and content are inconsistent, but as this database includes many Spanish materials, this may become problematic for users. In Spanish, words can have different meanings with or without an accent mark, for example, plato (plate) and plató (stage). As more non-English materials are added, how can ProQuest ensure that users are able to find exactly what they are looking for, without wading through irrelevant search results and materials?

The overall navigability and usability of the database is quite good. While there are lots of options provided on the screen, everything is presented in an aesthetically pleasing way. Using the database feels intuitive, and I did not feel lost while navigating through search results and materials. One useful feature is the ability to search for citations in other databases owned by the institution to locate the full-text. Users can also create an account on the site, which allows for searches to be saved, alerts and RSS feeds to be managed, and the creation of lists and tags. These are good features as searches are only saved for current “sessions”, which users are automatically logged out of after 30 minutes of inactivity. While this is an understandable feature for privacy, especially at on-campus facilities, it could be an annoyance to off-site users. References can be generated by the database into many different formats, but often these are incorrect. Users have to double-check and often rewrite them which negatively impacts the usefulness of this tool.

User support is available on the database through a help link provided at the top of the page. Though this link appears to be static, the help topic a user is brought to when this link is clicked changes depending on the page of database the user is on. For example, if you are on the publication search page and click on the help link, a new page will open with information pertaining to this specific area. This is a helpful feature, but it is not obvious to the user, and should be made clear. Search tips are also given to users on the basic and advanced search pages, which includes information about syntax, Boolean operators, and truncation. At the very bottom on the page there is also a “Contact Us” link, which brings up a form which users can fill out for further assistance. On this page there are also more links to support and training from ProQuest, including webinars which can be viewed directly from ProQuest or on its YouTube channel. Unfortunately, I was unable to find a specific video for this particular database. I suggest one be created by ProQuest to further assist users of this database of its various features, navigation, and searching.

Thank you for taking the time to hear some of my concerns and suggestions regarding your database, Ethnic NewsWatch. I hope that with these insights provided by a real user of your product it can be adjusted and improved upon accordingly. As Ethnic NewsWatch continues to evolve and grow in the future, I hope my recommendations are able to help you create a better and more useful product for your customers and users.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Archuleta