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Dissertations—An Online Dilemma

Donald K. Hartman and Manuel D. Lopez

There are few bibliographic aids available to the online searcher who has questions concerning dissertations and theses and the extent of their coverage by the various databases. A comparison of two databases concerned with this "format" material is not completely reassuring, while the survey of the individual databases cited did provide useful information for the online searcher and contributes to reducing the uncertainty of the situation.

THE PROBLEM

That uncomfortable feeling of uncertainty is back. As an academic librarian, information broker, or online searcher in a corporate structure you have just completed a computerized search. The citations are relevant but include several references to dissertations and/or theses.

Does that mean you don't have to search *Dissertation Abstracts Online*? Questions nag. When did the database just searched start to include dissertations/theses? Were citations to dissertations added retrospectively? What about foreign dissertations? Are they included? If so, which countries? Just what percentage of the database is dissertations? The directory *Computer-Readable Databases* does indicate percentages but only in combinations of formats. What were the criteria used for selection of dissertations? Who assigned the subject headings/descriptors? The author, database personnel, or others? Was a thesaurus used? If so, which one?

THE SEARCH FOR ANSWERS

A search by document type (dt = theses? or dt = dissertation? or dt = doctoral?) of

Donald K. Hartman and Manuel D. Lopez are reference librarians at the State University of New York, Buffalo, New York 14260.

the *Database of Databases* (file 230 on Dialog) indicated that over 300 databases included dissertations and/or theses. The search was refined to those vendors thought to be most heavily used by online searchers: BRS, Dialog and SDC (the search procedure is shown in figure 1). This reduced the number of databases listed as having dissertations or theses, by document type, to 153. Questionnaires were sent to 142 database producers. Because seventeen of the cited databases were subsets of larger ones (e.g., *Agricultural Abstracts*, which is a subset of *CAB Abstracts*), the questionnaires sent to the 142 producers actually involved a total of 159 databases. There were 106 returns: 66 respondents indicated that dissertations/theses were part of their databases, 40 database producers stated that dissertations and theses were not included in their services. The initial search strategy provided citations to a number of databases that in fact did not include dissertations/theses. This may have been the result of the use of a standardized phrase—''Monographs, proceedings,

theses''—in *Database of Databases* to describe the scope of a particular database when it did not include one or more of the formats covered by that phrase.

A search of *Knowledge Industry Publications Database* (file KIPD on BRS) produced 69 citations to databases having dissertations or theses as a document type (see figure 1). Fifty of these databases had been listed in the first search. Thirty-two of these had responded to the first questionnaire, and among these respondents, 26 included the required materials. Questionnaires were sent to the remaining 19 database producers; all 13 respondents did include dissertations/theses.

It is notable that the search of *Database of Databases* did not provide a reference to *Dissertation Abstracts Online*, which includes about 99 percent of American dissertations (more than 850,000 since 1862), thousands of Canadian dissertations, and those from about 200 foreign universities. While author and keyword in-title indexing in *Dissertation Abstracts Online* provides adequate access with some ''noise'' or unwanted citations, the practice of hav-
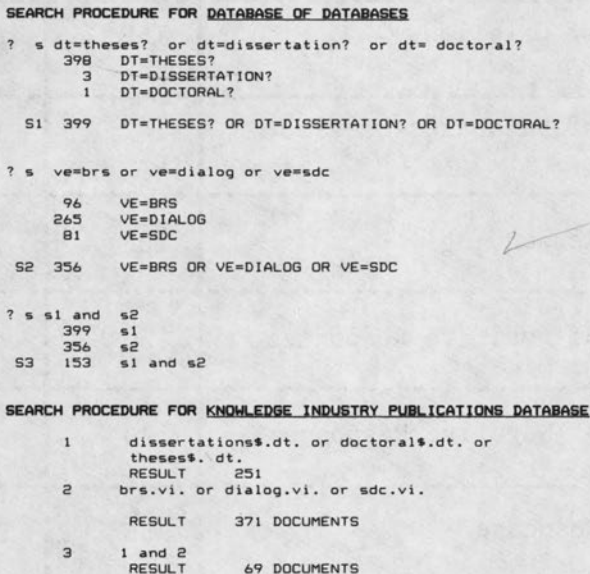
```
SEARCH PROCEDURE FOR DATABASE OF DATABASES

?  s dt=theses?  or dt=dissertation?  or dt= doctoral?
        398    DT=THESES?
          3    DT=DISSERTATION?
          1    DT=DOCTORAL?

   S1   399    DT=THESES? OR DT=DISSERTATION? OR DT=DOCTORAL?


?  s  ve=brs or ve=dialog or ve=sdc

         96    VE=BRS
        265    VE=DIALOG
         81    VE=SDC

   S2   356    VE=BRS OR VE=DIALOG OR VE=SDC


?  s s1 and  s2
        399    s1
        356    s2
   S3   153    s1 and s2


SEARCH PROCEDURE FOR KNOWLEDGE INDUSTRY PUBLICATIONS DATABASE

      1        dissertations$.dt. or doctoral$.dt. or
               theses$. dt.
               RESULT    251
      2        brs.vi. or dialog.vi. or sdc.vi.

               RESULT    371 DOCUMENTS

      3        1 and 2
               RESULT    69 DOCUMENTS
```

FIGURE 1

Search Procedure

ing authors assign subject headings can result in ''lost'' references. Considering the volume of research and information available in this ''format'' database and the scope and limitations of other databases containing dissertations and abstracts, the online searcher should not ignore this particular resource.

Other differences between the *Database of Databases* (list A) and *Knowledge Industry Publication Database* (list B) are indicated in table 1. While the B list was numerically smaller, 66 percent of its cited databases did, in fact, include dissertations/theses, while only 42 percent of the databases in list A made the same claim.

The file-by-file results of our survey may be useful in resolving some of the problems of the online searcher. These results are shown in table 2. In interpreting these

findings, the searcher should be wary of assuming that a database with a large percentage of dissertations is comprehensive. For example, dissertations in *The Middle East: Abstracts and Index* represent only about .025 percent of the database, but that percentage represents 300–400 dissertations about this very specific topic within an annual volume of some 16,000 citations and is quite comprehensive in this area. Also, the producers of this database manually review *Dissertation Abstracts International*, thus avoiding the vagaries of subject headings and keyword indexing. This approach has disadvantages as well. However, because the producers limit themselves to *DAI*, significant research may be overlooked, as not every university (e.g., Harvard and, until recently, University of Chicago) participates

TABLE 1

Database Profiles

Questionnaire Summaries	Database A	Database B
No. of Citations	159[1]	69
No. of Databases Queried	142	19[2]
No. Responding	106	13
No. of Positive Responses	66	45
No. of Negative Responses	40	--
No Response	36	24

1. Seventeen databases were subsets.
2. Fifty of the databases had been cited in the first search. Of that number, eighteen failed to respond. Of the thirty-two respondents, twenty-six indicated that they included dissertations/theses, and six said they did not.

in the program. The problem is compounded by the fact that many institutions that are project members do not submit all of their dissertations.

Survey results indicate that in the area of dissertations/theses, caution should be the prime guide of the online searcher.

TABLE 2
Summary of Questionnaire

	Included since	Retrospective inclusion	Foreign Schools	Search by document type	Percentage of Database	Descriptors by author	Descriptors by database personnel	Descriptors by others	Thesaurus
Abstract Bulletin of the Insitute of Paper Chemistry	1967	No	Yes	Yes	.06			X	Yes
Abstracts on Tropical Agriculture	RNA	RNA	Yes	Yes	1.77	X			Yes
Aerospace Database	1962	No	Yes	Yes	4	X			Yes
Ageline	1978	Yes	No	Yes	1	X			Yes
Agricola	1970	Yes	Yes	NR	NR	X			Yes
Agricultural Economics	RNA	Yes	Yes	No	1	X			Yes
America: History and Life	1973	No	Yes	Yes	1			X	No
Animal Breeding Abstracts	1972	No	Yes	Yes	1	X	X		Yes
Aquatic Sciences and Fisheries Abstracts	1975	No	Yes	Yes	1	X			Yes
Artbibliographies Modern	1975	No	Yes	Yes	5			X	No
BHRA Fluid Engineering Abstracts	1973	Yes	Yes	Yes	2	X			No
Biological Abstracts on Tape	68-71	No	Yes	No	1	X			No
BIOSIS PREVIEWS	68-71	No	Yes	No	1	X			No
CAB Abstracts	1973	Yes	Yes	Yes	1	X			Yes
Cancerlit	1976	No	RNA	Yes	0.4	X			Yes

RNA = Response Not Applicable
NR = No Response

TABLE 2 Continued

	Included since	Retrospective inclusion	Foreign Schools	Search by document type	Percentage of Database	Descriptors by author	Descriptors by data-base personnel	Descriptors by others	Thesaurus
CAS Online	1967	No	Yes	Yes	1			X	No
Catalyst Resources on the Work Force and Women	1975	RNA	No	Yes	.3		X		Yes
Chemical Abstracts Source Index	1967	RNA	Yes	Yes	2		X		No
Child Abuse and Neglect	1975	Yes	No	Yes	.005			X	Yes
Cold Regions Science and Technology Bibliography	1951	Yes	Yes	Yes	8			X	Yes
Dissertations Abstracts Online	1861	--	Yes	--	100	X			
Energy Bibliography	1978	Yes	Yes	No	1		X		Yes
Financial Industry Information Service	1982	No	No	Yes	1		X		Yes
Food Science and Technology Abstracts	1968	Yes	Yes	Yes	1		X		Yes
Foreign Trade and Economics Abstracts	1979	Yes	Yes	Yes	2		X		No
Geological Reference File	1965	No	Yes	Yes	2		X		Yes
Historical Abstracts	1973	No	Yes	Yes	1		X		No
Index to API Abstracts/Literature	1966	Yes	Yes	Yes			X		Yes
Index Veterinarius	RNA	Yes	Yes	Yes	5-10		X		Yes
Inis (International Nuclear Information Systems)	1976	No	Yes	Yes	0.8		X		Yes

TABLE 2 Continued

	Included since	Retrospective inclusion	Foreign Schools	Search by document type	Percentage of Database	Descriptors by author	Descriptors by data-base personnel	Descriptors by others	Thesaurus
International Labour Documentation	1964	No	Yes	Yes	.01		X		Yes
Library & Information Science Abstracts	81-84	No	Yes	No	1		X		No
Mental Health Abstracts	1969	Yes	No	Yes	6.75		X		No
Middle East: Abstracts and Index	1980	No	Yes	No	.025		X		No
MLA International Bibliography	RNA	No	Yes	Yes	12		X		Yes
National Environmental Data Referral Service	1970	Yes	Yes	Yes	35		X		Yes
National Rehabilitation Information Center Data Base	RNA	RNA	Yes	No	.003	RNA	RNA	RNA	Yes
Niosh Technical Information Center	RNA	RNA	Yes	No	1			X	No
Protozoological Abstracts	1977	Yes	Yes	Yes	1		X		Yes
Psychological Abstracts Information Service	1967	Yes	Yes	Yes	20		X		Yes
Religion Index Database	1981	Yes	No	Yes	1		X		Yes
Resources in Education	1966	No	Yes	Yes	1.9		X		Yes
Scientific and Technical Aerospace Reports	1962	No	Yes	No	--		X		Yes
Selected Water Resources Abstracts	1968	Yes	Yes	Yes	1.3	X	X	X	Yes
Social Planning/Policy and Development Abstracts	1986	Yes	Yes	Yes	1-2		X		Yes

TABLE 2 Continued

	Included since	Retrospective inclusion	Foreign Schools	Search by document type	Percentage of Database	Descriptors by author	Descriptors by data-base personnel	Descriptors by others	Theasurus
Social Works Abstracts	1977	No	No	Yes	8		X		No
Sociological Abstracts	1986	--	Yes	Yes	.001		X		Yes
Soils and Fertilizers	1972	No	Yes	Yes	1		X		Yes
Sport and Recreation Index	1949	Yes	Yes	Yes	2		X	X	Yes
Textile Technology Digest	1978	No	No	No	1		X		No
TRIS-ON-LINE	RNA	Yes	Yes	NO	2-3	RNA	RNA	RNA	Yes
TROPAG	1975	Yes	Yes	Yes	1.8		X		Yes
WATERLIT	RNA	RNA	Yes	Yes	0.1		X		Yes
Weldasearch	1968	NO	Yes	Yes	0.4		X		Yes
World Textiles	1970	Yes	yes	No	NR	NR	NR		Yes