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General Literature Online: *Magazine Index* & *Readers' Guide*

By Carol Tenopir

TWO ONLINE databases, *Magazine Index* and the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature*, are the primary sources for indexing of general interest magazines. (A third database called *Abstracts* was discontinued in February 1985, but is still available on *BRS* for retrospective searches. It will not be included in this comparison because it includes records only from December 1982–February 1985 and is of poor quality in terms of typographical errors and indexing consistency.)

Both *Magazine Index* and *Readers' Guide* index the same type of magazines. They differ, however, in such things as cost, indexing policies, dates of coverage, the number of magazines indexed, and the amount of information in each record. Some of these differences affect search results as well as the decision of which database to search. This column compares the two databases and reports the results of searching the same questions on each.

Magazine Index

From its entry into the database market in 1976, *Magazine Index* has dominated online access to indexing of general magazine articles. It consistently shows up in studies of database use as one of the ten most frequently used databases in libraries. From 1976 until late 1985 *Magazine Index* was available exclusively on *DIALOG*. The exclusive contract between *DIALOG* and *Magazine Index's* producer, Information Access Company (IAC), was terminated in 1985, so *Magazine Index* and other IAC databases are now available on *BRS*, *DIALOG*, and Mead Data Central's *REFSRV* (see my column of November 15, 1985). *Magazine Index* is also available on *BRS/After Dark*,



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and *BRS/BRKTHRU*, and *DIALOG's* end user search system, *Knowledge Index*.

Magazine Index indexes over 435 magazines from the United States, Canada, and England; it includes all magazines indexed by the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature*. The database includes over 2,200,000 articles as of early 1986, covering the period 1959–March 1970 and 1973 to the present. (A retrospective indexing project to fill in this two-year gap in coverage is now on hold, probably not to resume again. Spokespeople at IAC say there has been no great demand for the missing years.)

The records in *Magazine Index* include subject descriptors based on the Library of Congress Subject Headings, with additions and modifications made at the discretion of the IAC indexing department.

Subject retrieval is enhanced in some records by explanatory phrases added to the article title, geographic terms, geographic codes, a named people field, or the inclusion of the text from the captions of graphs, charts, or portraits. Only a very small number of records in the database have abstracts. Abstracts are no longer being added.

Full-text versions of articles from over 82 of the *Magazine Index* journals are searchable in another IAC database, *Magazine ASAP*. These full texts may also be viewed (but not searched) in the *Magazine Index* on *DIALOG*.

Though *MI* is updated monthly, current indexing is available daily in the *Newsearch* database. *Newsearch* includes up to 45 days worth of new records that are used for the monthly updates of several IAC databases.

Prices for *Magazine Index* are \$84 per connect hour on *DIALOG* and up to \$98 per hour on *BRS* depending on the subscription rate. There is a charge of 10¢ per record printed online and 20¢ per record printed offline on both systems. *Newsearch* is \$120 per hour.

Readers' Guide

The *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature* is the online equivalent of the H.W. Wilson Company's popular printed index. It indexes 186 U.S. and Canadian English-language popular magazines, recommended by the Committee on Wilson Indexes of the American Library Association's Reference and Adult Services Division.

The database includes only records from January 1983 to the present, with approximately 180,000 articles as of early 1986. *Readers' Guide* is updated twice a week with approximately 5200 articles added each month.

RG is available online only via *WILSONLINE*, Wilson's own online system. (*WILSONLINE* also includes all of the other Wilson indexes.) Notable features of the *WILSONLINE* software include the ability to search up to eight files at the same time and automatic switching to a correct controlled vocabulary term when a term is entered that is a "see" reference. The system is relatively easy for intermediaries.

The records in *RG* are brief, including from one to five subject headings from Wilson's own subject authority based on the Library of Congress Subject Headings. Article type codes and explanatory phrases for unclear titles enhance retrieval, but abstracts are not currently in the online file. The information in the database is the same as found in the printed *Readers' Guide*.

Rates for *RG* are based on a combination of hourly connect-time and offline print charges. Per-hour rates vary from a low of \$25 (for subscribers to both the printed index and a subscription of \$24 per year on *WILSONLINE*) to a high of \$45 (for those who subscribe to neither the printed nor online versions). Offline prints cost 20¢ per citation with a minimum of \$10 for offline printing per search session. There is no charge for online prints.

Comparison

To compare results of searching these similar databases, I searched the same six questions on each. After searching I went back to each to try to determine why some things were retrieved on one that were not retrieved on the other. The search questions were those asked at an undergraduate or public library reference desk.

A combination of free-text searching and controlled-vocabulary searching were used as appropriate, although controlled vocabulary was favored when available because most of the requestors wanted just a few highly relevant articles.

Search results

The first question was a call for information on AIDS in hemophiliacs. Specific relevant subject heading terms exist for both components of this topic in both *RG* and *MI*. There was no overlap in documents retrieved in the two databases, however. Two records were found in *RG*, both from *Science* issues from 1983 and both relevant. They were not retrieved in *MI* because the term "hemophilia" was not assigned.

MI retrieved six articles. Two were about the broader topic HTLV viruses, for which *MI* assigned the term "AIDS" and *RG* did not. The others were retrieved because hemophilia was only discussed as one of many topics in the article and *RG* indexed only the major topics.

Variations in indexing policies resulted in the variations in retrieval. *RG* often did not assign many subject headings, but seemed to index more consistently according to the level of specificity of the documents.

The second question asked was: How have microcomputers been used with preschool children? An obvious database to check here would be *ERIC*, but because many smaller libraries do not have *ERIC* materials in their collections, *MI* or *RG* might be used instead. *RG* retrieved three documents, all relevant, by free-text searching preschool terms and computer(s). (No documents were retrieved with the narrower term microcomputer.) Two of the three were also retrieved in *MI*; the third was not because *MI* did not assign it the term "preschool."

MI has a descriptor "microcomputers" which yielded one citation when linked with the free-text terms for preschool. By broadening the search to computer(s) and preschool(s) an additional six documents were retrieved, three of which were false drops from 1968. One of the relevant documents retrieved by *MI* that was not retrieved by *RG* was found in a journal that is not indexed by *RG*. Another was retrieved because *RG* assigned the narrower subject "video games" rather than "com-

puters." All of the relevant documents were from 1984 or 1985.

Question number three was: How do liquor laws affect the liquor industry? Both *RG* and *MI* had specific relevant subject headings for the two concepts. *RG* retrieved two relevant documents (*Forbes* 1985 and *MacLeans* 1983) and *MI* retrieved a different three relevant documents (*Prevention* 1984, *Boston Magazine* 1981, and *Business Week* 1964). The two documents retrieved by *RG* were not retrieved by *MI* because they were not assigned a subject heading for the liquor laws concept. Of the three retrieved by *MI*, one was too old for *RG*, one was in a journal not covered by *RG*, and one was inexplicably not in the *RG* database even though the magazine (*Prevention*) is indexed by *RG*.

In both databases, a broader search using synonyms for "liquor laws" and "liquor industry" might have been successful.

The next question was a request for information, "anything" on the street drug called Ecstasy (MDMA or MDA). This was the most successful search, retrieving nine documents (all relevant) on *RG*, 13 (12 relevant) on *MI*.

In both *RG* and *MI* there is a controlled term for the drug. If a searcher did not know the drug name before searching, however, by just entering "Ecstasy AND Drug" in each database the controlled term could be found.

Since this is a new topic, the retrospectivity of *MI* did not enter into the results. Seven of the nine hits in *RG* were also retrieved in *MI*. The other two were not in *MI* (*Rolling Stone* December 1985-January 1986 and *Time* June 1985), although they should have been. The same problem occurred in *RG*. A February 1986 article in *Science Digest*, an October 1985 article in *Seventeen*, and an August 1985 article in *Scientific American* were not in the *RG* database. Another two hits in *MI* were in journals not covered by *RG*.

The fifth question asked: What is the role of the Soviet Union in the Philippines? *RG* retrieved no documents with controlled or free-text searches. *MI* has two very specific relevant subject headings "Philippines—Relations with Soviet Union" and "Soviet Union—Relations with Philippines" which were "OR"ed together. One relevant document was retrieved. A broader free-text search retrieved nine documents, all of which were false drops. Most of the false drops occurred because of the *MI* policy to index all pertinent concepts in a document (*RG* limits subjects to five). The Soviet Union and Philippines were found in general foreign policy articles in which both countries were discussed and indexed but were not discussed together.

The sixth and final question was:

How does a person's attitude about death and dying differ by their religion? Free-text searches on this topic resulted in many false drops, but controlled terms yielded better results. *RG* had no term for the concept as a whole, providing a "see" reference to the term "death." A narrower term "Cancer Patients/Religious Life" yielded four relevant documents. (Three of these four documents were also retrieved in *RG* by searching death as a subject heading "AND" religion.)

MI had a very specific subject "Death—Moral and Religious Aspects" which was searched in an "OR" relationship with the terms "Death—Attitudes AND Religion?" Of the 34 documents retrieved, 30 were relevant. Eight of the 30 came from the journal *U.S. Catholic*, an additional 12 came from journals such as *Christian Century*, *Christianity Today*, *Christian Herald*, and *National Catholic Report*. The latter two are not indexed in *RG*.

Conclusions

Because there are no abstracts in either *Readers' Guide* or *Magazine Index* and titles of general articles are often short, controlled-vocabulary searching is the necessary alternative. It is easy and usually retrieved some relevant items. More false drops were retrieved on *MI*, but also frequently additional relevant hits. Sometimes this was because of the retrospective nature of *MI*, more often because of its broader journal coverage.

MI's indexing policy seemed less consistently applied than that of *RG*, making retrieval harder to predict. *RG*'s policy is restrictive, yielding low recall but high precision. In double checking why specific articles were not retrieved, I was surprised to find that both databases sometimes missed articles that should have been included. All of these missed articles were less than eight months old, so it might be explained by backlogs in indexing or indexing priorities. Both also contained many very current records.

It is difficult to choose between *RG* and *MI* for current searches. Both databases yielded unique relevant references, making them complementary rather than duplicative. Both have limited information in their records, and rely on controlled-vocabulary searching. The vocabulary switching feature of *RG* eases such searching in *WILSONLINE*. One deciding factor for many libraries must be cost. *Readers' Guide* is much less expensive. In search situations when a limited number of highly relevant current articles are sought, searching on *RG* can be done very quickly and economically. For retrospectivity, *MI* has no online competition. For comprehensiveness, however, neither is completely adequate.

