

Is Accuracy Everything?

A Study of Two Serials Directories

This study found that Ulrich's and Serials Directory offer a wide, and often disparate, amount of information about where serials are indexed or abstracted, with Ulrich's indexing more titles overall than Serials Directory, and more dead titles than the other directory. Serials Directory is the only provider that lists where EBSCO serials are indexed or abstracted. Both directories also provide different information on basic serial facts, such as price, address, and editor. Ultimately, the authors discovered that librarians should use whichever source is available, and realize that it may be lacking or inaccurate in its records.

All academic librarians, whether they work in public or technical areas, need to use sources that will provide accurate information to their patrons and to themselves. One source librarians use is a serials directory, either in book form or online. Reference, access services, collection development, serials, and other areas rely on serials directories to check journal names, confirm name changes, check circulation figures, and look for abbreviations. However, the most common reason to use a serials directory is to determine where a title is indexed or abstracted.

Two of the most popular titles to provide this information are *Ulrich's Periodicals Directory* (or *Ulrich's*), pub-

lished by Bowker, and *Serials Directory*, published by EBSCO Information Services. According to its Web site, *Ulrich's* contains information on more than 250,000 periodicals.¹ In *Reference and Information Services*, a popular reference services textbook, Bopp and Smith say *Ulrich's* is useful in many ways. It is arranged by broad subject areas, it provides information needed to order a title, it lists the indexes and online databases that cover the contents of the serial, and it provides a list of cessations from one edition to the next.² In his definitive book, *Introduction to Reference Work: Basic Information Services*, Katz says *Ulrich's* is easy to use: there are twenty-three points of entry, including editor information; it provides a ten- to twenty-word descriptive line for about twelve thousand titles; and it often gives circulation figures, which show the titles' popularity.³

The EBSCO Web site lists *Serials Directory* with more than 182,500 United States and international titles.⁴ Bopp and Smith describe *Serials Directory* as each entry having more than fifty elements of information, including publisher's name and address, telephone numbers, price, and more. It also designates whether a journal is peer-reviewed, accepts book reviews, or accepts advertising.⁵ Katz says *Serials Directory* was created using EBSCO's list

Marybeth Grimes and Sara E. Morris

Marybeth Grimes is Associate Professor and Reference Librarian at Mississippi State University Libraries.

Sara E. Morris, former Assistant Professor and Reference Librarian at Mississippi State University Libraries, is currently a doctoral student in history at Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana. The authors would like to thank Paul Grimes for his editorial assistance. Submitted for review April 28, 2005; accepted for publication July 28, 2005

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of periodicals, which, as a vendor, it sells to libraries, bookstores, and corporations.⁶ So what, if any, are the differences between the two titles? Katz says they are “quite small.” He continues:

Given two reference works that are almost identical in purpose and scope, a judgment has to be made about other elements. First and foremost is the matter of accuracy and complete coverage. Here *Ulrich's* is ahead, possibly for no other reason than that it has been around longer, and therefore has a considerably more experienced staff. At any rate, the detailed information in *Ulrich's* tends to be more current, more thorough, and more complete in details.⁷

How much of that statement is correct? Reference librarians tend to think that *Ulrich's* is the bible of serials directories, but is that a fair and true assessment? Is it better than *Serials Directory*? The purpose of this study is to determine if there are significant differences between the two titles and how accurate each is in providing information about serials.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Inaccuracies with serial information sources have been an occasional topic in library science literature for at least thirty years. Palais first questioned the inaccuracy of *Ulrich's* in a 1974 article. Using a core list of political science journals, Palais determined the completeness and correctness of *Ulrich's* listings of indexes. In this study he found that *Ulrich's* neglected 101 references the source covered and included 107 entries to indexes it did not cover. He asked the publishers of *Ulrich's* to improve their reliability and, until these corrections had been made, advised reference librarians when looking where a title is indexed to “rely on their imagination and their knowledge of indexing services.”⁸

In 1980, Wyndham, using *Ulrich's* 17th edition, replicated Palais' study. Exploring health sciences journals, Wyndham's conclusions mirrored the earlier findings from the fifteenth edition. *Ulrich's* accuracy and complete information concerning abstracting and indexing had not improved with the publication of two additional editions.⁹

Swenk and Robinson compared the accuracy of *Magazines for Libraries*, *Ulrich's*, and *Chicorel Index to Abstracting and Indexing Services* in the mid-1970s. Using a list of core sociology titles, they checked the indexing coverage of three subject-oriented bibliographic tools for complete-

ness. These results were then analyzed against the three serials tools. The authors found that the rate of correctness ranged from between 6 and 28 percent. In their opinion, the greatest problem came from the journals being reported as included in indexing sources when, in fact, they were not. Once again, the authors called for revisions from the publishers.¹⁰

Writing from a collection development perspective, Eldredge raised other questions. In his comparison of *Ulrich's*, *SERLINE*, and the *Serials Directory*, Eldredge concluded that all sources underreported indexing coverage. Accuracy rates for the three sources from 1981 and 1986 ranged from 92 to 97 percent.¹¹ In the past, indexing information was obtained from the editors of journals, who may or may not be aware of the indexes covering their journals. Acknowledging that indexing coverage by databases is by nature unstable, Eldredge suggested that the publishers of these publications create better means of communication with those producing indexes, which hopefully would increase accuracy.¹²

Besides indexing, the other question dealing with the accuracy of serials directories is in the category of peer-reviewed status. Librarians have used these sources to tell patrons about the editorial process of a particular journal or in collection development studies. Eldredge compared the *Serials Directory* and *Ulrich's*. Of the 784 titles examined, only 54 percent appeared in both directories as peer-reviewed.¹³ Bachand and Sawallis raised this issue again, as well as categorization of journal type (scholarly, trade, popular) in cross disciplines. The authors found that *Serials Directory* identified with accuracy the publication type only 33.8 percent of the time, while *Ulrich's* had an accuracy rate of 97.4 percent. Accuracy rates for identification of peer-reviewed journals were much higher, with 74.8 percent for *Serials Directory*, and 97.8 percent for *Ulrich's*.¹⁴

METHOD

To compare and contrast the entries in the two primary periodical directories used today, the authors selected five well-known serials titles found in most academic and many public libraries. With circulation rates of 23,000 to more than three million, the titles represent different types of serials: *American Economic Review* (academic title), *Library Journal* (trade publication), *Newsweek* (popular weekly publication), *New York Times* (newspaper), and *Science* (popular academic title). To ensure equal comparisons, records from *Serials Directory* and Ulrichsweb.com, the online version of *Ulrich's*

were downloaded on the same day. Once retrieved, the authors entered the information from the directory entries onto a data-collection sheet, one for each title. This sheet, which had two columns, one for each directory, allowed for easy comparison between *Ulrich's* and *Serials Directory*. The first area of the sheet covered such basic information as price, address, Web site, editor, circulation, and indication of refereed status. The other segment of the sheet covered the indexing and abstract coverage listed in each of the directories. Every index and abstracting service in both directories was listed, even if the title had ceased or no longer contained current information. The authors matched services that were listed under different titles so they would not be double counted. By using columns, the authors could easily determine unique titles or those that overlapped. A total of index and abstracting services was determined for each title as well as the unique index and abstracting services in each directory.

RESULTS

The results confirmed Katz's statement that the detailed information in *Ulrich's* is more thorough than *Serials Directory*. The data in table 1 show that *Ulrich's* indexes more records than *Serials Directory* in every 1 of the 5 periodicals used in the study. There are 18 more records for *Library Journal*, 14 more for *Newsweek*, 8 more for the *New York Times*, 36 more for *American Economic Review*, and 123 more for *Science*, for a total of 199 more records indexed in *Ulrich's* than in *Serials Directory* for the 5 titles.

The data in table 2 also show that *Ulrich's* and *Serials Directory* list many records in the index and abstract field that are unique to each directory. The percentage of unique titles in each directory is very high, more than 50 percent for all five periodicals. Of the total number of records listed in *Ulrich's* and *Serials Directory*, *Library Journal* has the lowest percentage of unique titles in one or the other directory at 53 percent. The percentage rises to 67 percent with *American Economic Review*; *Newsweek* and *Science* are tied at 71 percent; and the *New York Times* comes in with an incredibly high 80 percent of unique titles.

Conversely, the same is true with all five periodicals regarding the number of shared titles found in both directories. As shown in table 3, only 20 percent of the records for the *New York Times* are the same in *Ulrich's* and *Serials Directory*. They both do slightly better with *Newsweek* and *Science*, reporting 29 percent of the same titles; *American Economic Review* is next at 33 percent; and *Library Journal* is the highest at 47 percent.

The authors chose ten other fields to compare between the two directories, which included basic information about the titles: price; address; URL; subscription; editor; e-mail address; phone number; fax number; circulation; and if the title is refereed or not. The results were surprising. As shown in table 4, *Ulrich's* and *Serials Directory* agreed with the information found in only one field out of ten—the publisher's physical address—for all five titles. The two sources agreed on whether the title was refereed or not four out of five times, or 80 percent, while the phone number field agreed three out of five times, or 60 percent. The price, URL, and e-mail address fields only agreed two out of five times, or 40 percent; the editor and fax-number information agreed only one out of five times, or 20 percent. Two fields, subscription and circulation, did not match at all. *The total amount of information agreed upon by the two directories for the titles' ten fields is twenty out of fifty, or a low 40 percent.*

Table 1. Total Index/Abstract Titles

	Ulrich's	Serials Directory
<i>Library Journal</i>	49	31
<i>Newsweek</i>	48	34
<i>New York Times</i>	29	21
<i>American Economic Review</i>	67	31
<i>Science</i>	192	69

Table 2. Total Unique Titles in Index/Abstract Field

	Percentage of Unique Titles	Total Titles	Total Unique Titles
<i>Library Journal</i>	53	80	42
<i>Newsweek</i>	71	82	58
<i>New York Times</i>	80	50	40
<i>American Economic Review</i>	67	98	66
<i>Science</i>	71	261	185

Table 3. Shared Titles in Index/Abstract Field

	Percentage of Shared Titles	Total Titles	Total Shared Titles
<i>Library Journal</i>	47	80	38
<i>Newsweek</i>	29	82	24
<i>New York Times</i>	20	50	10
<i>American Economic Review</i>	33	98	32
<i>Science</i>	29	261	76

CONCLUSIONS

Ulrich's lists 385 (48 percent) more resources in the index and abstract field than does *Serials Directory* (186). First, *Ulrich's* lists more dead-index and abstract resources than does *Serials Directory*; however, *Serials Directory* exclusively indexes EBSCO products. If librarians are looking for historical information, they may want to look in *Ulrich's*, but if they want to know if *Academic Search Premier* indexes the *Wall Street Journal*, they will need to look in *Serials Directory*. Second, there is very little overlap between the titles within the index and abstract field, which is surprising since this is why many librarians use a serials directory. One would think that the two directories would share much more of this information than a mere overall 36 percent.

Third, it is hard to determine which directory, if either, is providing the most accurate basic data regarding periodical information. Take, for example, the editor field in the five titles used for this study. Because the authors downloaded the records from *Ulrich's* and *Serials Directory* in mid-February 2004, they looked up the editors in the February/March issues of the periodicals as well to compare names. *Ulrich's* and *Serials Directory* only agreed with one editor's name, for *Library Journal*. However, according to the March 1, 2004 issue, both directories listed the editor-in-chief, and not the editor, a small, yet telling, error worth noting. *Serials Directory* did not have an editor named in their online version for *American Economic Review*, and, according to the February 6, 2004, issue, listed someone other than the true editor for *Science*. *Ulrich's* had the right person for *Science*, but listed several people as editors for *Newsweek*; while *Serials Directory* had the same name as in the February 9, 2004, issue. In all fairness, both directories get their information directly from the serials, but it would seem prudent for the two companies to be more diligent in providing accurate and reliable data to their customers.

Fourth, librarians should check multiple sources, whenever possible. Relying solely on one directory to provide indexing and abstracting titles for periodicals, for example, means that often a librarian is only finding a *percentage* of, but not *all* of the sources. While librarians depend on these one-stop shopping resources for multiple types of information, such as where a journal is indexed, its editor, its circulation numbers, and more, it's a good idea to use primary sources as well. This may mean going to the latest journal issue to find its editor, going to its Web site to find how many institutions subscribe to it, and using a locally held

Table 4. 10 Field Comparisons

	Agree	Disagree
Price	2	3
Address	5	0
URL	2	3
Subscription Information	0	5
Editor	1	4
E-Mail Address	2	3
Phone Number	3	2
Fax Number	1	4
Circulation	0	5
Refereed	4	1

index to see if the journal is part of its collection. These steps may be unrealistic for some—the journal isn't held by your library, or is redundant—you have to use a search engine to find the Web site; or you're guessing a particular index will carry the journal, instead of relying on the directory to provide this information.

Fifth is a caveat—not everything you see in print is correct. This study of serials directories supports earlier research of *Ulrich's* inaccuracies and raises questions regarding *Serials Directory's* handling of this issue. While *Ulrich's* has more titles in the index and abstract field, *Serials Directory* is the only provider of titles to EBSCO products. Further research is needed to corroborate this study and to see what, if anything, these two directories are doing to provide more accurate and reliable information to their customers.

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