

World Wide Web Review:

Searching for the Difference: European Women's Studies Databases on the Internet (Lecture given at the Know How Conference, August 22-26, 1998 in Amsterdam, revised and updated)

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"Searching for the difference" - the title sounds somewhat paradoxical, because usually one looks for the unifying elements between different things. In our case, however (the evaluation of women-specific databases in Europe) we had to put the emphasis on the differences. Europe (the European Union) is a conglomerate of many political and cultural differences and - last but not least - language differences that have emerged throughout history. The primary instrument of librarians and archivists is language, and language is crucial when comparing different systems of information services in Europe. The United States has English as the common language (a big advantage, in our opinion) but this does not mean that we regret the linguistic diversity in Europe. This diversity may allow us to achieve a deeper understanding of differences. For our comparison we chose European databases from four different countries and three different languages, knowing well that this is only a selection. The main criterion was accessibility on the World Wide Web (see appendix). The databases we chose are: IIAV from the Netherlands, KVINNSAM from Sweden, GenderInn from Germany, and ARIADNE from Austria.

IIAV (International Informationcentre and Archives for the Women's Movement)

The IIAV is the national center of expertise on women in the Netherlands, providing information on the position of women and women's studies dating back to 1935. Its historic continuance is unique for Europe, as it preserves the cultural legacy of women in the past and the present. It is a source, an intermediary, and a supplier of information and documentation for all those who occupy themselves with the position of women, whether it concerns books, periodicals, data, addresses, archives, visual materials, current or historical, national or international. Their collection policy for the future focuses on the developments in, and contemporary theories of, women's studies, and on providing information about Black, migrant, and refugee women. The database contains 60,000 titles of books, reports, documents, papers, and reference works, plus over 20,000 titles of documented articles from Dutch and foreign magazines since 1988, as well as biographical clippings.

KVINNSAM (Kvinnohistoriska samlingarna - Center for Studies in Women's History)

The database KVINNSAM is produced by the Women's History Collections (since 1971 the Swedish National Documentation Centre on Literature on Women), a department at Gothenburg University Library. The main activities of the Women's History Collections are compiling bibliographies and collecting manuscripts and archives concerning the women's movement in Sweden. The database is interdisciplinary, containing titles in Swedish and foreign references on women's, men's, and gender studies. The references include books, journals, journal articles, book chapters, scholarly papers, booklets, and research reports. The database comprises titles registered from 1984 onwards; in addition, titles published 1958-1983 are retrospectively being added.

GenderInn (Women's and Gender Studies Database)

Since 1987, bibliographic records referring to secondary literature on feminist theory, feminist literary criticism, and gender studies have been systematically collected and recorded at the English Department at the University of Cologne in Germany. GenderInn is a searchable database providing access to over 6,000 records pertaining to feminist theory, feminist literary criticism, and gender studies focusing on British and American literature. All records are carefully indexed using a very specialized feminist thesaurus based on S. J. Schmidt's Empirical Theory of Literature (ETL).

ARIADNE (Cooperation Center for Women Specific Information and Documentation)

ARIADNE is a service center at the Austrian National Library offering collection and documentation of women's / feminist / gender studies, women-specific information retrieval, and a database (articles from journals, anthologies etc.). The Austrian National Library's women-specific holdings are cataloged with a focus on: *Austriaca* (literature by/about Austrians or Austria) and international feminist literature, particularly in the field of the humanities. The main strength of the database is articles about women's literature and women's history in the German-speaking countries. About 19,000 records are searchable from 1990 onwards.

Methodology and results

Our method of comparing these four different databases was the following: Besides WWW-access, the main criteria were the quality and quantity of the indexed records and their free access. We could only gather

information that was clearly expressed on the Web pages (introductions, help files, etc.). In this respect, we found it very important that our position in evaluating the databases was that of a "normal user" anywhere out in cyberspace. The next step was to develop an evaluation questionnaire that allowed us to compare the different characteristics and features of the databases. The main sections of this questionnaire were:

Publishing
Documents
Cataloguing
Search features
Bibliographic citations
Other services

We analyzed each of the four databases according to the different features, conducted several actual searches in order to ascertain the practical usefulness and the possibilities of each database, and drew some general conclusions. We put special emphasis on the search techniques and not on the resulting numbers of each of these important databases - because you cannot compare such heterogeneous databases with different time spans, thematic focuses, and number of records.

We arrived at the following conclusions:

Publishing

All four European databases are non-commercial, which means that WWW-access is free (in contrast to big American databases like "Women's Studies International" and "Contemporary Women's Issues"). They are all produced at educational institutions (libraries or universities). The software applications are different but all have - as said before - a gateway to the WWW and are therefore searchable via the Internet. In regard to database type, they all are catalogs, meaning that every bibliographic citation includes the location and the call number, so a researcher knows where to find the document in the institution maintaining the database. (Pure bibliographical databases do not include call numbers or locations.)

Documents

There is no way of comparing the time spans covered in the databases and the number of documents they include, as the different institutions have unique histories: IIAV indexes their whole catalog (books date back to the 1930s), KVINNSAM started in 1983, ARIADNE began its documentation project in 1992 (articles are documented back to the year 1990). Yet it is evident that the most important decades (the 80s and 90s, in which women's, feminist, and gender studies literature emerged) are covered. All databases - except GenderInn - include documents in more than two European languages. Concerning the document type, most databases index monographic publications; GenderInn and KVINNSAM also document articles from journals or anthologies; ARIADNE is the only database that exclusively indexes articles. The thematic scope of the databases is very large - one can find a wide range of interdisciplinary women's studies issues (GenderInn further specializes in feminist literary criticism).

Cataloging

In each of the four cases the quality of the records shows that professional librarians have developed the cataloging criteria. We refer essentially to the subject catalog (the cataloging of titles was of minor interest in this context). Subject cataloging that takes into account feminist indexing with its special vocabulary - a vocabulary that reflects and supports the feminist research literature - is a major matter of concern. All databases work with specially developed feminist thesauri or descriptor lists. All databases (except KVINNSAM) offer special features, like abstracts, tables of content, commentaries, classification numbers etc. In this respect we want to address one crucial point in the retrieval debate that we referred to at the beginning: All descriptors are primarily in the language of the native countries, which in these databases means Dutch, Swedish, and German, respectively, making it extremely difficult for non-native speakers to carry out a search. Major changes have occurred in recent months, however. KVINNSAM was the only database that always offered Swedish and English search-terms, but recently GenderInn offered a translation of their thesaurus into English, and ARIADNE is also starting an initiative in this direction. The language that could be understood by most Web users is most likely English. Offering parallel English versions of the descriptors is the only way databases can be made open and user-friendly to the worldwide public of interested women and men.

Search features

Concerning the search features, we found out that the standard is rather high: all databases allow simple and advanced searching techniques, some even offer full-text searching (KVINNSAM and GenderInn), all use Boolean operators, and KVINNSAM provides the possibility for adjacency searching. English versions of

the search interface and the help files are provided by IIAV, KVINNSAM, and GenderInn. Only ARIADNE offers a complete alphabetic list of the journals from which the articles are indexed.

Bibliographic citation

One can find short titles and full citations in every database. The presentation quality of the citations is generally clear and provides the most important elements that allow for easy identification of the document. Features such as sorting by author, title, year, etc., are rather neglected - only ARIADNE has this capability.

Other services

Services like search inquiries via email or online ordering and document delivery are rather underdeveloped in all cases. We could find some Internet links to other women-specific databases only in GenderInn, KVINNSAM, and ARIADNE.

In conclusion, we can say that all four databases help to close the long-lasting gap of electronic access to women's studies literature in Europe, each in a very individual but nevertheless satisfactory way. The four evaluated European databases will no longer be a Babel-like "confusion of tongues," because efforts are being made to establish feminist English descriptors as a first step. It would be very helpful if this is followed by a multilingual thesaurus in all official languages of the European Union. A move in this direction could break monolingual barriers.

One final remark: free access to the Internet and to women's databases leads one to assume that retrieving women's studies literature in a satisfactory manner is an easy task for everybody. The results of our evaluation show that this is an illusion. Hard work is still needed to make data-base retrieval more successful. The helping hands and experience of professional librarians and archivists will still be necessary to fulfill all expected goals. Here are some suggestions for improvements in these women-specific database designs and structures:

- * user-friendly formulation of introductory screens and help files (also in English)
- * advanced sorting techniques
- * full-text search
- * further integration of other related services like document delivery
- * English descriptors.

It is also possible that all the goals we imagine today will already be outmoded tomorrow by the rapid advances in new electronic technologies. It's high time to leave behind old-fashioned and conservative librarian habits and become more open to new challenges.

As a fulfillment of the Beijing-Declaration from 1995, which demands "Use women's information as an instrument for policy-making," and as pointed out in the "Declaration of the Know How Conference on the World of Women's Information in Amsterdam, August 22-26, 1998," we must make further efforts in the direction of "Using information communication technology as an instrument of storing and disseminating women's information." Women's studies databases on the WWW represent a big step forward toward this goal.

Appendix:

IIAV: <http://www.iiav.nl/eng/databases/index.html>

KVINNSAM: <http://www.libris.kb.se/kvinnsam.html>

GenderInn: <http://www.uni-koeln.de/phil-fak/englisch/datenbank/index.htm>

ARIADNE: <http://allegro.onb.ac.at/cgi-bin/allegro/maske.pl?db=ariadne>

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