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### ABSTRACT

This article surveys the coverage of major museological journals in three standard databases. It evaluates the quality and timeliness of the indexing in those databases. It concludes that bibliographic control of the journal literature in museum studies is inadequate and argues that this is a hindrance to the development of the profession.

### INTRODUCTION

It is now over a decade since Genoways controversially declared that museum professionals had "not created a body of scholarly knowledge sufficient to support a doctoral program" (1996). He urged his colleagues to "work for the establishment of more scholarly journal outlets concerning museums," and he optimistically suggested that by 2006, "the scholarly output concerning museums and the profession [will be] fivefold what it is in 1996."

Although the prediction of a fivefold increase in the volume of museum studies literature has not been fulfilled, there has certainly been a steady improvement over the last decade. In a recent article, Rounds (2007) welcomed the arrival of two new journals (Collections and Museums and Social Issues) and the upgrading of another (Visitor Studies). At the same time, he argued that the professional literature is being underutilized, and suggested that perhaps "about 80 percent of all of the reading of museum research literature is done by as few as 1,000 individuals." As Rounds explained:

Reading involves two types of costs. First, reading exacts opportunity costs. Since reading consumes attention, and the individual has a limited pool of attention to expend, time spent reading deprives one of opportunities to be doing something else that might have greater benefits. Second, the individual knows that some things that might be read will be of greater value than others that might be read in the same length of time, but he or she has only limited (and often flawed) knowledge of what is available to read, and of which readings will have greater value. Thus reading exacts search costs (2007, 143).

The issue of search costs (denined as the effort involved in locating relevant information) is the focus of the present paper. Simmons (2005) has spoken of the "fragmented knowledge base" of museum studies, which may be a result of the ill-defined boundaries of museum studies, a field that overlaps with several other disciplines. However, as in many other disciplines, the knowledge base is also fragmented because it appears in many formats: relevant literature is published in books, in journals, as conference papers, and in technical reports from a variety of government and non-government bodies.

Increasingly, this literature is distributed on the Web, where it may be freely accessible to all or available only on a subscription basis. The information environment has changed radically since Stansfield published his study of bibliographic access to the museum studies literature in 1996. The serially published printed bibliographies of museological literature that he discussed had all ceased publication by that time, or did so shortly after his article was written. He rightly observed that "on-line databases would appear to offer the greatest potential for the future." Has that potential been realized?

This article is concerned principally with the journal literature of museum studies. How well is the journal literature indexed in the databases that are available to the museum professional? How comprehensive is the coverage of those databases? How promptly is the literature indexed? In short, how high are the search costs in museum studies?

### THE MUSEUM STUDIES JOURNAL LITERATURE

No database could hope to index every journal article published in museum studies. The literature is dispersed across a variety of disciplines, and there are many museological periodicals and magazines of mainly local interest, often in languages other than English. So we must first establish which are the journals of international significance that we would expect to find indexed in any useful database in museum studies.

There is no simple answer to this question. The list of journals indexed in the Arts and Humanities Citation Index is often used as a benchmark in journal ranking. (FN1) Only five titles in museum studies occur in that list: Journal of Cultural Heritage; Museum International; Museum News; Studies in Conservation; and the Journal of the American

Institute for Conservation.

Rounds surveyed references in a sample of books and journals in museum studies and listed 39 heavily-cited publications (2001). Further analysis of his data reveals that there were only nine journal articles in that list, and that *Curator: The Museum Journal* (three articles) and *Museum News* (two articles) were the only journals represented more than once. Of course, these figures are too small to provide meaningful journal rankings, but they give us some pointers.

There is no definitive inventory of major journals in museum studies, so the author has compiled a list of 24 titles, based on his experience as a librarian providing support to postgraduate students and researchers in museum studies. That list is given in table 1. It includes a number of titles in the field of cultural heritage. (Some might argue that these titles cannot be strictly regarded as belonging to the discipline of museum studies.) The first column of table 1 also indicates the country of publication of each journal. The reader should bear in mind that, with today's increasingly globalized publishing industry, such distinctions are in many cases no longer very meaningful.

## **COVERAGE OF THE JOURNAL LITERATURE IN DATABASES**

There are three databases that index significant numbers of journals in museum studies. Two of these databases are free on the Web: BMUSE and Google Scholar. The third database, Art Abstracts, is available on the Web on a subscription basis from the H.W. Wilson Company, and is also available (with slightly different features) under the names Art Full Text or Art Index. In November 2007, those three databases were searched to establish if they were currently indexing the 24 major journals identified for this study. The results are given in Table 1.

To summarize, Google Scholar indexes 10 of the journals (42 percent), and BMUSE and Art Abstracts each index nine (38 percent). Only two of the journals (8 percent) are indexed in all three databases, and four journals (17 percent) are indexed in none of the databases.

Of the four journals not indexed, the most serious omission is *Collections*, a major new journal that commenced publication in August 2004. The omission of *Conservator* and the *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation* is not really a cause for concern, since these journals (and many others) are indexed in the specialist conservation database AATA Online, which is available free on the Web from the Getty Conservation Institute. (FN2) Specialists in museum conservation are fortunate to have such an excellent information resource at their disposal.

Their colleagues in other areas are not so fortunate. Table 1 suggests that the museum profession is poorly served by bibliographic services, since no single database provides anything approaching comprehensive coverage of the major journals in the field. In fact, the picture becomes somewhat gloomier when we examine the databases in detail.

BMUSE -- The Museology Bibliography (BMUSE) is available free online at the Web server of the Canadian Heritage Information Network. (FN3) The database contains a wide range of references dating back many years, and is not restricted to journal articles. It is produced cooperatively by the Canadian Conservation Institute Library, the Information Centre of the International Council of Museums, and the Library of the Direction des Musées de France.

The search interface is perhaps a little too cluttered for the general user. The absence of a "quick search" box for performing a simple keyword search is a drawback. It is necessary to select the search option Subject (all subjects) to conduct a keyword search of titles, subject descriptors, and abstracts (where present). The database compilers are to be commended for adopting a set of standard subject descriptors, but these are available in both English and French and there has been a lack of consistency in their application. Users are advised to search with both English and French subject terms!

There are serious delays in indexing. When this study was conducted in November 2007, the latest issue of *Curator: The Museum Journal* indexed in BMUSE was dated July 2006, at a time when the latest published issue was October 2007. The latest issue of *Museum News* indexed was dated July/August 2003, and only six articles from that issue were indexed. The latest indexed issue of *Museum International* was May 2005 (the latest published issue was September 2007), and none of the records for articles in that issue included an abstract.

Although there is much to praise in the BMUSE database -- not least its international perspective -- it seems to be a project that suffers from the problems inherent in international collaboration between publicly funded bodies.

Art Abstracts -- Also available in a slightly different format as Art Full Text and Art Index, Art Abstracts is available online from the H.W. Wilson Company on a subscription basis. (FN4) Researchers in museum studies at universities will probably have access to this database, but it is unlikely to be available to museum professionals in any but the larger museums and galleries.

This is unfortunate, since it is the most professionally produced of the databases under review here. The H.W. Wilson Company has decades of experience in indexing journals, and the quality of the database entries is very high. Only journal literature is represented, and all entries from 1994 onwards include an abstract of the article. The basic keyword search interrogates all fields in the database records, including the abstracts and the controlled subject vocabulary.

Indexing is very current. When this study was conducted in November 2007, the latest published issue of *Curator: The Museum Journal* was already indexed on the database. The November/December 2007 issue of *Museum News* had already been indexed, even though the September/October issue was still the latest issue checked in at libraries in the United States.

Indexing is also very thorough. While BMUSE only indexed six articles from the July/August 2003 issue of *Museum News*, Art Abstracts indexed 14 articles from the same issue.

Google Scholar -- An offshoot of the well-known Web search engine, Google Scholar (FN5) creates the bulk of its database by obtaining access to the large full-text journal collections that are now available via the Web on a subscription basis from major academic publishers. By "crawling" these sites, it creates a database not only of the articles represented in those collections, but also of the works cited by those articles. In addition, Google Scholar crawls freely available scholarly Web resources, such as e-print servers and university Web sites, thus enriching the

database with material that will not be found in either BMUSE or Art Abstracts. Because the database is generated by Web crawling, without human input, indexing is usually very up-to-date.

The journals shown in table 1 as being indexed in Google Scholar are thus the journals that are available in full-text on the publisher Web sites crawled by Google. The great advantage of Google Scholar is that it indexes every word in these articles, so every word can be searched (even though the full article can only be viewed by those who have a subscription). With traditional databases such as BMUSE or Art Abstracts, the user is only searching a brief description of the article, possibly enhanced by subject descriptors or an abstract.

In addition to indexing full-text resources, Google collects the references cited in those publications and adds them to the Google Scholar database. As a result of this, many articles from other journals (to say nothing of books) are included in the database, albeit in a very abbreviated format which is much less susceptible to effective retrieval by keyword searching.

The multidisciplinary scope of Google Scholar is another advantage. The museum professional is likely to find useful articles here from journals in disciplines outside museum studies that are not indexed in more narrowly focused databases such as BMUSE and Art Abstracts. The great weakness of Google Scholar is that it cannot index those journals (like Curator: The Museum Journal or Museum News or Collections) that are not included in the electronic journal collections of the large academic publishers.

## CONCLUSION

If we return to Rounds's concern about the "search costs" of locating relevant literature in museum studies, we can now see that those costs are quite high. To be effective, any search of the journal literature must employ all three of the databases examined in this study. Each of those databases has its own peculiarities, so further time must be invested in learning the most effective way of using each of those tools. And since the Art Abstracts database is only available by subscription, this involves monetary costs, which many smaller institutions will not be able to meet.

This is not just a problem for the established professional. The inadequate indexing of publications on museum studies quickly becomes obvious to those in graduate training programs who need to rapidly familiarize themselves with the literature of the discipline. Many of these students will have already completed degrees in other fields, where they have found the literature thoroughly indexed in well-established databases, in sad contrast to the situation in museum studies.

This article has focused on the core of the museum studies journal literature, but literature on museums is published in journals that cover a whole spectrum of disciplines. We need to know more about the disciplinary range of the literature, and this might help us to identify databases in other fields that would prove fruitful to the researcher. Searching more and more databases, while retrieving fewer and fewer useful references, is hardly a profitable exercise, however. At what point does the law of diminishing returns dictate that the searcher should cease searching?

In focusing on journal literature, this study has sidestepped the problems involved in searching the monographic (book) literature and the ever-growing report literature. A significant number of books in the field are now available online as e-books from companies such as EBook Library and NetLibrary. Much of the report literature is available free on the Web. How does the researcher navigate these resources?

One might ask why the indexing of museum studies literature is so poor. Does the culture of the discipline undervalue the documentation and use of its literature? So many museums are publicly funded -- has that fact starved the profession of the resources it needs to adequately record its own published output? Or does the reason simply lie in the comparative youth of the discipline?

If a profession advances by building upon the accumulated knowledge of its practitioners, effective indexing of the published literature of the discipline is an essential requirement. The deficiencies in the databases that give access to the literature of museum studies are surely a hindrance to the profession. This should be a matter of concern to all museum professionals.

### ADDED MATERIAL

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Table 1. Database coverage of major journals in museum studies.

Journal and Country of Publication	Indexed in BMUSE	Indexed in Art Abstracts	Indexed in Google Scholar
Collections (U.S.)			
Conservator (U.K.)			
CRM: The Journal of Heritage Stewardship (U.S.)		Yes	
Curator: The Museum Journal (U.S.)	Yes	Yes	
Exhibitionist (U.S.)	Yes		
International Journal of Cultural Property (U.K.)			Yes
International Journal of Heritage Studies (U.K.)	Yes		Yes
Journal of Cultural Heritage (France)			Yes
Journal of Education in Museums (U.K.)			
Journal of Heritage Tourism (U.K.)			Yes
Journal of Museum Education (U.S.)			Yes
Journal of the American Institute for Conservation (U.S.)			
Journal of the History of Collections (U.K.)		Yes	Yes

Muse (Canada)	Yes		
Museum Anthropology (U.S.)	Yes		
Museum International (France)	Yes	Yes	Yes
Museum and Society (U.K.)	Yes	Yes	
Museum Management and Curatorship (U.K.)	Yes	Yes	Yes
Museum News (U.S.)	Yes	Yes	
Museum Practice (U.K.)	Yes		
Museums and Social Issues (U.S.)			Yes
Museums Journal (U.K.)	Yes	Yes	
Studies in Conservation (U.K.)		Yes	
Visitor Studies (U.S.)			Yes

## FOOTNOTES

1. Titles indexed in the Arts and Humanities Citation Index are included in the Thomson Master Journal List, accessed at <http://scientific.thomson.com/mjl/>.
2. AATA Online is accessed at <http://www.aata.getty.edu/NPS/>.
3. BMUSE is accessed at <http://www.chin.gc.ca/Bmuse/bmuse.cgi?Language=English>.
4. Information on Art Abstracts is available from H.W.Wilson at <http://www.hwwilson.com/databases/artindex.htm>.
5. Google Scholar is accessed at <http://scholar.google.com/>.

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