Finding bibliographic information about books on the WWW: an evaluation of available sources

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Introduction

For years, the market of bibliographic information on books was limited to the services and databases of subscription-based bibliographic providers. Clearly, Global Books in Print in its many versions is considered an authority on the topic. However, the World Wide Web has become a new source of bibliographic information. Nowadays we can find information about books by searching fee-based databases, online bookstores and online catalogues of libraries.

Many articles have been published about bibliographic information and online bookstores (for example Pack, 1997, 1999; Nicholas et al., 2001; Coffman, 1999; Jacsó, 1999a, b). Some general background information could be found, but, surprisingly, quantitative information about the subject did not seem to be available. So the value of these different online databases as sources for book information seemed to deserve an evaluation.

Definition of the problem

Considering various evaluation criteria, different types of providers of bibliographic information were selected and examined. Two points of view were taken into consideration: a non-professional one and a librarian one.

Two major aspects were:
(1) Quantitative. What is available in the various bibliographic databases?
(2) Qualitative. Which services do these different databases offer (search features, alerting . . .)?

Keywords
Books, Online databases, Monographs, Bibliographies, Internet, Worldwide web

Abstract

The World Wide Web offers different systems to retrieve information about published books in the form of online catalogues of libraries and popular online bookstores, and subscription-based bibliographic databases. The paper determines the usefulness of bibliographic information offered by such systems. For the quantitative evaluation, random tests with titles of known books were executed. The quality of the resulting output was evaluated on the basis of a set of criteria.

Electronic access

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The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available at www.emeraldinsight.com/1468-4527.htm
This evaluation can then serve to formulate recommendations concerning bibliographic searching and verification.

Database selection

Three different kinds of bibliographic databases were examined: the online catalogues of some libraries, a fee-based online book database and the databases offered by some Internet-based bookshops.

The catalogues of some national libraries were used:

1. Belgium: www.kbr.be
3. Germany: www.ddb.be
4. Great Britain: www.bl.uk
5. USA: http://lcweb.loc.gov

As a fee-based online bibliographic database, Global Books in Print (www.globalbooksinprint.com) was chosen. Although this database contains mainly English-language books, it was selected because many university libraries offer access to this database.

To select the online bookshops, we had to identify the major players in the market. In order to do so, an appeal was made to resources available on the Internet.

At Bookweb (www.bookweb.org), a site sponsored by the American Booksellers Association, one can find URLs and descriptions of more than 4,000 bookstores (mostly “located” in the USA). Another extensive bookstore directory is available from Yahoo (http://dir.yahoo.com/Business_and_Economy/Shopping_and_Services/Books/).


The first selection was based on country or region. The number of books offered by the different bookshops was the second criterion and after a small random test with ten book titles, eight online bookstores were selected:

1. Belgium: Proxis (www.proxis.be); and
4. Great Britain: Internet Bookshop (iBS) (www.bookshop.co.uk); and
5. USA: Amazon (www.amazon.com); and

Two antiquarian, used or rare book services were included in the survey:

1. Abebooks (www.abebooks.com); and

Furthermore two shop bots were investigated:

2. DealTime (www.dealtime.com) (The US DealTime was used. There is also a Dealtime for the UK and for Germany.)

Also a union catalogue was selected: Copac (www.copac.ac.uk).

Finally, two meta search services for parallel searching over numerous catalogues were chosen:

1. Infoball (www.infoball.de); and
2. Karlsruher Virtueller Katalog (www.ubka.uni-karlsruhe.de/kvk.html).

Evaluation criteria

Quantitative aspect

The databases were searched for a sample of miscellaneous titles. In order to make the sample as representative as possible, it was important that the titles covered a diversity of subjects, and that they were written by various authors.

For the selection of this sample, the following criteria were taken into consideration:

1. Languages: we searched for books in English, Dutch, French and German.
• Historical range: we searched for books published before the twentieth century (-1899), between 1900 and 1950, between 1951 and 2000, and books published in 2001.
• Conference proceedings were searched for as an example of relatively hard to find literature.

Qualitative aspects
After the quantitative evaluation, the resulting output was evaluated qualitatively, bearing in mind the following criteria:
(1) Search features:
• Does the system allow searching the abstracts, searching the titles of content, Boolean searches, proximity searches, truncation (at the end of the word), wildcards (within a word), spelling checks of search terms?
• Are subject terms or descriptors added? Are alternative or related subject terms suggested?
• Can the user browse in subject categories? In a subject thesaurus? In author names?
• Does the system provide a search history and can the user combine the results of different queries?
• Can the results be limited to a time period, to a publication year, language, or to a subject category?
• Can users search the content of specific fields, such as exact title, title words, the last and first name of the author, the author’s last name only, publisher, date of publication, ISBN, subject or topic?
• Is combined field searching possible?
(2) Post-processing of the search results:
• Can the results be ordered according to publication year, title, author, subject category (if used), or estimated relevance?
• Are the search results classified in categories?
• Is an abstract or table of contents available?
• Are MARC tags available?
• Can the user download or save the records? Is it possible to e-mail the results?

Results
The quantitative and qualitative criteria, as well as the investigated sources and the results, were incorporated in different tables.

Quantitative evaluation
Search for book titles in general
For each language and each time period, three book titles were examined. For each language, three conference proceedings were also selected. Between May and August 2001, each database was tested with a set of 72 titles.

According to the laws of probability, the size of the sample must not bear a direct relationship to the size of the investigated “population”. Of course, accuracy increases as the size of the sample increases, but only marginally.

As the aim of this research was mainly to reveal on the one hand weak points and on the other hand the potential of the investigated sources, the quantitative findings based on this sample can be considered at least as good indicators, in view of the present lack of quantitative data in this area.

Because Amazon has dedicated shops or databases for France (www.amazon.fr) and Germany (www.amazon.de), an extra search for the French and German titles was performed in these databases.

The book titles that were searched for can be obtained from the authors. The data in the tables indicate the number of titles that were found. Numbers between brackets indicate that a more recent edition was found of the searched titles.

The results of the search for titles can be found in Table I. Table II gives an overview of the total results. Table III shows the results of the German, French and English version of the Amazon database.
Recent book titles

To investigate which source offers the most up-to-date information, a random test was performed with titles written in English and in Dutch.

The databases of Amazon, Barnes & Noble, the British Library, the Library of Congress, Infoball, KVK and Copac were searched for 25 English titles, published in 2001. The results can be found in Table IV.

A set of 25 titles of books published in Belgium, or written by a Belgian (Flemish) author and also published in 2001, was formed.

The databases of Proxis, Bol and the Koninklijke Bibliothek were searched for this set of “Belgian-Dutch” titles. Table V shows the results.

Shop bots

Shop bots offer a search engine that allows users to search, view and compare the catalogues with book prices for several online bookshops at the same time.

The reliability of Bookfinder and DealTime was tested with a set of ten titles that could all be located in Amazon or Barnes & Noble in the random test as reported above.

We selected five titles in English, two in French, two in German and one in Dutch. The results can be found in Table VI.
Qualitative evaluation

Searching the different bibliographic databases bearing in mind the qualitative evaluation criteria, different levels or grades were taken into consideration:

- **++ very good**: possible or available without restrictions;
- **+ good**: possible or available, but with some restrictions;
- **+/- possible**: possible or available, but very limited;
- **- poor**: hardly possible or available;
- **- very poor**: not possible or available; and
- **NA not applicable**.

### Table II Overall results

| Total results per language (18 titles) | A | B | C | D | E | F | G | H | I | J | K | L | M | N | O | P | Q | R | S |
| English titles                       | 7 | 11| 4 | 4 | 4 | 6 | 5 | 0 | 8 | 4 | 8 | 14| 14| 2| 0| 0| 15| 16| 17|
| French titles                        | 2 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 11| 0 | 5 | 0 | 0 | 6 | 9 | 2 | 11| 0 | 11| 18| 13|
| German titles                        | 1 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 0 | 4 | 8 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 6 | 8 | 1 | 3 | 11| 11| 16| 16|
| Dutch titles                         | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 8 | 7 | 0 | 0 | 6 | 9 | 8 |

### Table III Amazon results (Amazon + French and German database)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Amazon results (Amazon + French and German database)</th>
<th>Amazon.fr</th>
<th>Amazon.de</th>
<th>Amazon complete</th>
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<tr>
<td>English titles</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>French titles</td>
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<tr>
<td>German titles</td>
<td>4</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dutch titles</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total of the three databases</td>
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<td>20</td>
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</table>

### Table IV Recent book titles in English

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recent book titles in English</th>
<th>Amazon</th>
<th>Barnes &amp; Noble</th>
<th>British Library</th>
<th>Library of Congress</th>
<th>COPAC</th>
<th>Katalog</th>
<th>Infoball</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Titles published in 2001 (25 titles)</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>22</td>
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</table>

### Table V Recent Dutch titles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recent Dutch titles</th>
<th>Proxis</th>
<th>Bol</th>
<th>Koninklijke Bibliotheek Brussel</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Titles published in 2001 (25 titles)</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>21</td>
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</table>

### Table VI Shop bots

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Shop bots</th>
<th>DealTime</th>
<th>Bookfinder</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Titles in English (five titles)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Titles in French (two titles)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Titles in German (two titles)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Titles in Dutch (one title)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: A = Amazon; B = Barnes & Noble; C = iBS; D = Blackwell; E = Bol; F = Proxis; G = Alapage; H = VLB; I = Abebooks; J = ABAA; K = Books In Print; L = British Library; M = Library of Congress; N = Koninklijke Bibliotheek België; O = Bibliothèque Nationale de France; P = Deutsche Bibliothek; Q = COPAC; R = Karlsruher Virtueller Katalog; S = Infoball
The results can be found in Table VII (search features), Table VIII (ordered results), Table IX (post-processing of the search results), and Table X (services).

### Table VII Search features

|                     | A | B | C | D | E | F | G | H | I | J | K | L | M | N | O | P | Q | R | S |
| Search the abstract |   |   |   |   | ++ |   |   |   | +  |   |   | +  |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| Search the tables of contents |   |   |   |   | ++ |   |   |   | +  |   |   | +  |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| Boolean search      | ++ |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | +/ |   |   | +/ |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| Proximity search    |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| Truncation          | ++ |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | +/ |   |   | +/ |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| Spelling check of search terms |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | +  |   |   | +  |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| Are subject terms or descriptors added | ++ | +  |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |

Notes: A = Amazon; B = Barnes & Noble; C = iBS; D = Blackwell; E = Bol; F = Proxis; G = Alapage; H = VLB; I = Abebooks; J = ... Bibliothe Á que Nationale de France; P = Deutsche Bibliothek; Q = COPAC; R = Karlsruher Virtueller Katalog; S = Infoball

### Table VIII Ordered results

|                     | A | B | C | D | E | F | G | H | I | J | K | L | M | N | O | P | Q | R | S |
| Publication year    | ++ | ++ | ++ | ++ | ++ | ++ |   |   | +  |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| Title               |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| Author              |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| Subject category    |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| Estimated relevance |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |

Notes: A = Amazon; B = Barnes & Noble; C = iBS; D = Blackwell; E = Bol; F = Proxis; G = Alapage; H = VLB; I = Abebooks; J = ABAA; K = Books In Print; L = British Library; M = Library of Congress; N = Koninklijke Bibliotheek België; O = Bibliothèque Nationale de France; P = Deutsche Bibliothek; Q = COPAC; R = Karlsruher Virtueller Katalog; S = Infoball

### Clarifications related to the evaluations

The main results of this research can be found in the tables. The following are only clarifications.
**Search for titles in general**

Barnes & Noble and Alapage offer a separate search engine or database to search for out-of-print, used or rare books. Amazon, Global Books in Print and Library of Congress allow the most detailed Boolean searches. In the British Library catalogue, this option is limited to six search terms. For the Karlsruher Virtueller Katalog and Infoball, Boolean operations are not possible.

**Truncation**

All the databases support truncation. Either you have to use symbols, or you choose between exact words or the start of words, or you just have to enter the first part of the word that you are looking for. The number of truncated terms allowed in the British Library catalogue is limited to two in one search.

**Are subject terms or descriptors added?**

This can be considered the Achilles heel of the online bookshops. Blackwell, Proxis, Internet Bookshop, ABAA and Alapage do not add subject terms at all to their records. The other ones offer records enriched with subject terms, but it is not clear whether uncontrolled subject terms are added, or if a list of uncontrolled subject terms is used or a full thesaurus with relations among terms. Rather than using controlled subject headings, it seems that topic or subject terms are added “on the spot”, i.e. uncontrolled. In Abebooks, the keywords or subject terms are generated by the individual booksellers and not by Abebooks itself. It is up to the bookseller to determine the keywords to be attached to the books. In Copac not all the records contain subject information. As the Karlsruher Virtueller Katalog and Infoball do not offer a separate search engine or database to search for out-of-print, used or rare books, this information is not available in these databases.

**Search the abstract**

In a few databases, if an abstract is added, they cannot be searched; this is the case for Barnes & Noble, Internet Bookshop and ABAA. None of the databases systematically add an abstract, description or synopsis to the records.

**Boolean search**

Amazon, Global Books in Print and Library of Congress allow the most detailed Boolean searches. In the British Library catalogue, this option is limited to six search terms. For the Karlsruher Virtueller Katalog and Infoball, Boolean operations are not possible.

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**Table IX** Post-processing of the search results

| A | B | C | D | E | F | G | H | I | J | K | L | M | N | O | P | Q | R | S |
| Classification of the results in categories | +/− | − | ++ | − | − | − | − | − | − | − | − | − | − | − | − | − | − | − | − |
| Abstract available | − | + | +/− | − | + | − | − | − | − | − | − | − | − | − | − | − | − | − | − |
| Table of content available | − | + | − | +/− | − | − | − | − | − | − | − | − | − | − | − | − | − | − | − |
| Download or save the records | − | − | − | − | − | − | − | − | ++ | − | ++ | − | − | ++ | − | − | ++ | − | − |
| MARC-tags available | − | − | − | − | − | − | − | − | − | − | − | − | − | − | − | − | − | − | − |
| E-mail the results | − | − | − | − | − | − | − | − | − | − | − | − | − | − | − | − | − | − | − |

Notes: A = Amazon; B = Barnes & Noble; C = iBS; D = Blackwell; E = Bol; F = Proxis; G = Alapage; H = VLB; I = Abebooks; J = ABAA; K = Books In Print; L = British Library; M = Library of Congress; N = Koninklijke Bibliotheek België; O = Bibliothèque Nationale de France; P = Deutsche Bibliothek; Q = COPAC; R = Karlsruher Virtueller Katalog; S = Infoball

**Table X** Services

| A | B | C | D | E | F | G | H | I | J | K | L | M | N | O | P | Q | R | S |
| Current awareness | ++ | + | ++ | ++ | ++ | ++ | − | ++ | − | − | − | − | − | − | − | − | − | − | − |
| Reviews of readers | + | + | +/− | − | + | +/− | − | − | − | + | − | − | − | − | − | − | − | − | − |
| Out-of-print search | ++ | ++ | ++ | ++ | ++ | − | ++ | − | NA | NA | ++ | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA | − | +/− |
| Other titles suggested | ++ | ++ | ++ | ++ | ++ | ++ | ++ | ++ | + | + | ± | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA | − | ++ |
| Price information | ++ | ++ | ++ | ++ | ++ | ++ | ++ | ++ | ++ | + | ± | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA | NA | − | ++ |

Notes: A = Amazon; B = Barnes & Noble; C = iBS; D = Blackwell; E = Bol; F = Proxis; G = Alapage; H = VLB; I = Abebooks; J = ABAA; K = Books In Print; L = British Library; M = Library of Congress; N = Koninklijke Bibliotheek België; O = Bibliothèque Nationale de France; P = Deutsche Bibliothek; Q = COPAC; R = Karlsruher Virtueller Katalog; S = Infoball
Katalog and Infoball do not have their own database, they can not give more functionality and information than the target systems.

Limit results to a time period
Blackwell, Global Books in Print, Library of Congress, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Bol, VLB, Alapage, Abebooks and Copac allow you to limit the results to a time period. In ABAA, the search results can only be limited to a certain century. In Amazon, this option is restricted to the choice between “all dates”, “during the year”, “before or after the year”.

Limit results to a language
Only Global Books in Print, Library of Congress, the Bibliothèque Nationale de France and Copac offer an extended language option. Proxis lets you choose between Dutch, French and English books, or books in other languages. At Amazon, this option is limited to English or Spanish.

Limit results to a subject category
Results can be limited to a subject category at Blackwell, Bol, Alapage, Abebooks and Infoball. At Barnes & Noble, this option is limited to broad categories. At Global Books in Print one can only make a distinction between fiction and non-fiction.

Search for exact title
Amazon, Blackwell, Global Books in Print, British Library, Library of Congress, Koninklijke Bibliotheek België, Deutsche Bibliothek, Bol, Abebooks and Infoball make a clear distinction between title words and exact title. At Barnes & Noble, Proxis, ABAA, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, and Alapage, one can specify that the results must contain all the words entered in the title field.

Date of publication
In ABAA you can define the century of publication, but not an exact year.

Subject or topic
Although Barnes & Noble and Bol enhance the records with subject terms, it is not possible to search a specific subject field. In Barnes & Noble a specific subject can only be searched in combination with other fields. At Abebooks, subject terms are not added systematically. It is up to the individual booksellers to decide whether keywords are added, and which keywords are attached. As mentioned earlier, not all the Copac records contain subject information. Therefore, a subject search looks at the subject terms, as well as at the title and content notes in a record.

Combined field searching
In ABAA, Global Books in Print, Library of Congress, VLB, Alapage, the Karlsruher Virtueller Katalog and Infoball this option is the most extensive and includes all the fields of the record. In Amazon and Barnes & Noble one can search in title, author and subject fields all at once. In Buchhandel/VLB, the title, author and publisher is searched for the entered search term. In Blackwell the fields of the table of contents, description and title is searched.

Abstract available
Barnes & Noble, Blackwell, ABAA, Global Books in Print, Library of Congress, Bol and Alapage enhance their records, though not all of them, with an abstract or synopsis.

Table of contents
Usually, a table of contents is added at Blackwell. At Barnes & Noble and Bol, this is uncommon.

Post-processing of the search results
In Copac, the results can be downloaded by e-mail, or can be saved to a file. Furthermore, one can choose the format and whether the records should be tagged or not.

Services
Of course, not all the books are commented on or reviewed by readers. At Proxis and the Internet Bookshop, reviews are unusual. Barnes & Noble and Alapage offer a separate search engine or database for out-of-print searches. In the other databases, there is a form that will be directed to a customer services department, who will undertake a search for the requested item. The online bookshops, as well as Global Books in Print, offer price information.
Discussion, recommendations and conclusions

This overview (Table XI) is not exhaustive and simplifies reality of course. The different tables can be used to choose other databases that correspond to other criteria. The tables of results indicate why these databases are suggested. The following are clarifications of the simple recommendations in the table.

Title search in general
The Library of Congress is an outstanding source of bibliographic information. The table with the total of the results (Table XI) shows that their database is large: 39 of the 72 test titles were retrieved. Also the search features of the Library of Congress catalogue are outstanding. The catalogue of the British Library also performs quite well.

Commercial title search in general
If one is looking for books to buy, the combination of Amazon with the German and French databases, offer the widest variety of titles.

Search for titles in a specific language
As mentioned earlier, in general, the different databases offer more titles in the language of the region where they are “located”. The table of results shows that neither the Koninklijke Bibliotheek Belgie nor Proxis nor Bol, offer an exhaustive database to search for Dutch titles in general. For recent “Belgian Dutch” titles though, the catalogue of the Koninklijke Bibliotheek Belgie is satisfactory. Whether one chooses a catalogue of a national library, rather than a database of an online bookshop, depends on the goal of the bibliographic searching. If the objective is professional, the libraries are valuable bibliographic resources; the databases of the bookshops are more useful when looking for additional information (abstracts, reviews …) rather than for the bibliographic information itself.

Quick search for an English title
The results make it clear that Bookfinder can be used to execute a quick search for an English title, for example to compare prices. Both examined shop bots were not reliable tools for searching for non-English titles.

Search for a specific subject
The Library of Congress and the British Library use a thesaurus. Of the commercial databases, Amazon is the only one that offers a Boolean search facility that can be used to include

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table XI</th>
<th>Recommended databases</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Aim</strong></td>
<td><strong>Recommended system</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book title search in general</td>
<td>Library of Congress, British Library, Infoball</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To search for titles if you want to buy books</td>
<td>Amazon together with the “French” and “German” Amazon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To search for English titles</td>
<td>Library of Congress, British Library, Amazon, Barnes &amp; Noble, Copac, Infoball</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To search for French titles</td>
<td>Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Alapage, French Amazon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To search for German titles</td>
<td>Deutsche Bibliothek, Buchhandel.de/VLB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To search for Dutch titles</td>
<td>Koninklijke Bibliotheek, Proxis, Bol</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To search for recent English titles</td>
<td>Amazon, Barnes &amp; Noble, Library of Congress, Karlsruher Virtueller Katalog, Copac</td>
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<td>To search for recent “Dutch-Belgian” titles</td>
<td>Koninklijke Bibliotheek</td>
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<tr>
<td>To search for book titles published before 1990</td>
<td>National libraries, Barnes &amp; Noble, Alapage, Abebooks, Infoball</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quick search for an English title (for instance to compare prices)</td>
<td>Bookfinder</td>
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<td>Library of Congress, British Library, Copac (Amazon)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Library of Congress, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Deutsche Bibliothek, Koninklijke Bibliotheek Belgie</td>
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<td>To be informed regularly about new books</td>
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subject terms, but it is not clear whether a controlled subject list is used or not.

About the individual sources of bibliographic information
On the basis of the different tables, conclusions could be drawn concerning the different types of investigated databases. An extensive catalogue is offered by the Library of Congress, followed by the British Library. Although their database includes mainly English titles, many titles in other languages can also be found. Also Copac, Infoball and the Karlsruher Virtueller Katalog offer access to a wide variety of titles, but their search options are rather limited. However, the examined databases are very region-based. The international complete bibliographic database does not exist, but the united forces of the different databases should be satisfactory.

National libraries
National libraries are first of all an outstanding source for local publications. Because of the use of a controlled thesaurus for subject terms, they can be considered the most reliable source for bibliographic searching.

Online bookshops
The enriched descriptions provided by the online bookshops offer more information than the records provided by the national libraries. Furthermore, the information provided about prices can be useful if a library or an individual user wants to buy a book. Unfortunately, the uncontrolled adding of subject terms can be considered a weak point of online bookshops.

Shop bots
Although the examined shop bots are not reliable for searching for books, especially not for non-English titles, they can for example be used to compare prices.

Subscription-based databases
The added price information can be useful for the acquisition and accounting department of a library or for the individual user. The CD-ROM version of subscription-based bibliographic databases is still useful if permanent or easy access to the Internet is not available, or if it needs to be implemented in a local network. However, if access to the Internet is available, it is hard to justify paying for the bibliographic information provided by these subscription-based databases, in this case Global Books in Print. A combination of the catalogue of a national library with the database of an online bookshop seems to offer the same services.

Simultaneous parallel searching
Meta search services allow simultaneous parallel searching over databases of libraries and bookdealers. Their coverage is very good. However, they depend on the functionality and availability of the target systems. Union catalogues, such as Copac, provide free access to merged online catalogues or databases of (university) libraries and contain records giving details about documents and their location.

References