

The Good, the Bad and the Glitchy: A Comparison of PubMed, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global, and WorldCat

Trying to conduct research on topics like medical issues in the Digital Age can feel like both blessing and curse. All the information anyone could want is just a few keystrokes and clicks away. At the same time, an equal amount of disinformation and half-truths are also available and often intermingled with the beneficial. Fortunately, specialized databases exist to help winnow out some of the less useful information. Three such are PubMed, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global, and WorldCat. Each site has its own focus and systems for searching and relaying information, which warrants evaluating to see how they fare on a routine search. To evaluate something is to make a “systematic determination of merit and significance...using criteria against a set of standards. Evaluation therefore requires some object that is evaluated and some goal that should be achieved or served” (Järvelin 113). This paper focuses on the user interface design, content coverage, and efficiency and precision of these three sites utilizing searches involving vaccines, which are as timely and contentious a topic as they have ever been.

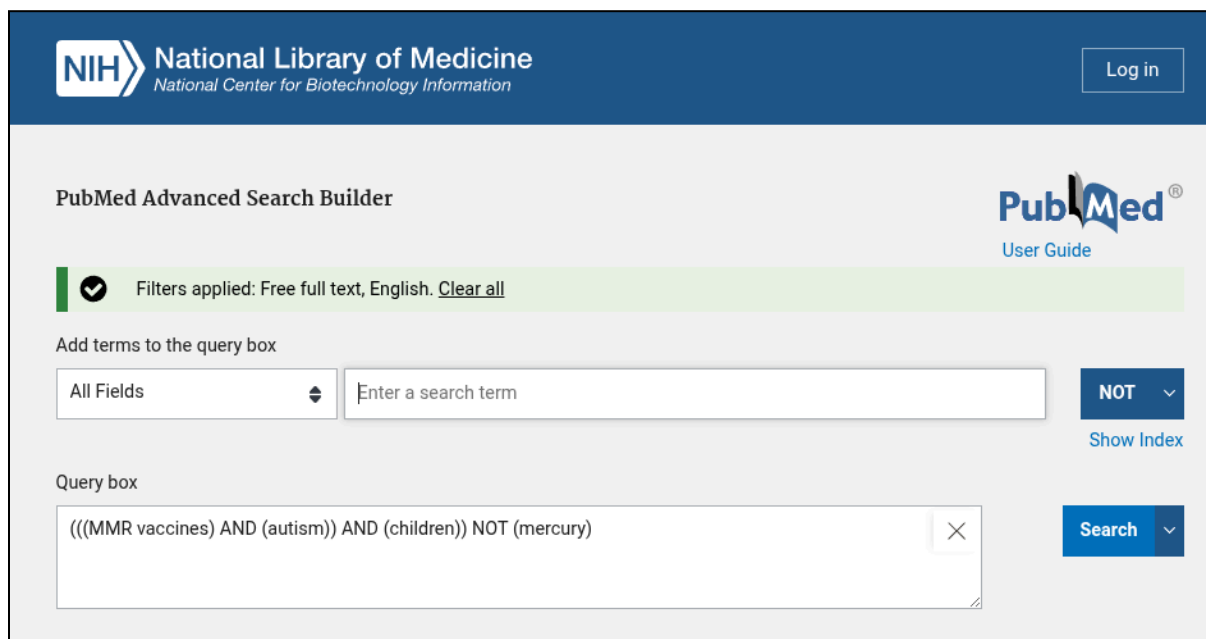
1. User Interface Design

In evaluating the design of its user interface, each site’s advanced search function is rated in terms of initial interface, organizing features of the results page, user-friendliness of reorganizing results, and user-friendliness in developing and updating the search queries. Each aspect is graded using a Likert scale of 1-5:

- 1 (not at all satisfied)
- 2 (slightly satisfied)
- 3 (moderately satisfied)
- 4 (very satisfied)
- 5 (completely satisfied)

To gauge each site’s results consistently, the same initial search terms are used for each. The search terms include "MMR vaccines," "autism," and "children" while excluding "mercury."

1.1 PubMed



The screenshot shows the PubMed Advanced Search Builder interface. At the top, the NIH logo and "National Library of Medicine" text are on the left, and a "Log in" button is on the right. Below this, the title "PubMed Advanced Search Builder" is on the left, and the PubMed logo with a "User Guide" link is on the right. A green bar indicates "Filters applied: Free full text, English. [Clear all](#)". Below this, there is a section "Add terms to the query box" with a dropdown menu set to "All Fields", a text input field with the placeholder "Enter a search term", a "NOT" button with a dropdown arrow, and a "Show Index" link. Below this is a "Query box" containing the search string "(((MMR vaccines) AND (autism)) AND (children)) NOT (mercury)" and a close button. To the right of the query box is a "Search" button with a dropdown arrow.

Figure 1.1. "PubMed Advanced Search Builder," *National Library of Medicine*, accessed 4 October 2025.

The search for information regarding the MMR vaccination and possible autism links on PubMed started on the advanced search page. The initial user interface (see Figure 1.1) warrants a rating of 3 (moderately satisfied) on the Likert scale. The page takes a minimalistic approach that is unusual for an advanced search. This helps keep the user from being overwhelmed with options. The page presents only five points of interaction: A text box for entering search terms, a dropdown menu to the left of that to select search fields, an "Add" button that allows users to select boolean operators (AND, OR, or NOT), an editable "Query box" that builds the search string as more search terms are added, and a "Search" button that executes the final search query. However, that slim functionality comes at a cost, namely a learning curve required to understand how it works. The PubMed search function is quite dissimilar from commercial search engines such as Google or even common academic databases like EBSCO. The purpose of each interactivity point and the ways in which they interact are not immediately apparent. PubMed offers a user guide, but the link is a small, understated line of text under the PubMed logo.

The results page has a myriad of features ranging from sharing the results to filtering them. If not for a clean, simple layout, the overall effect could be overwhelming. The PubMed

results page features specifically relating to organization earn a 5 (completely satisfied). The initial search yielded 92 results on a page automatically sorted by "Best Match." Options for display and sorting reside at the top of the page underneath a search bar containing the query from the previous page. Display options include the default "Summary," along with "Abstract," "PubMed," and "PMID." Users can select whether to display 10, 20, 50, 100, or 200 results on a page and whether to show or hide abstract snippets. The options are simple and straightforward in terms of presentation and functionality.

Oddly, the organization functions are not as user-friendly as their presentation would make them seem, garnering a 3 (moderately satisfied) on the Likert scale. The nature of each display option can be cryptic until one has experimented with each. "Summary" presents the most familiar and useful of the display options, offering information such as the title, author(s), publication, date, page numbers, DOI, and a few lines from the abstract. The "Abstract" view is almost overwhelming as it displays the same information as well as the entire abstract and a list of articles that mention it in terms of citations, retractions, or concerns. The "PubMed" display brings up a purely text-based listing of the current page of results with all the fields and related data similar to MARC tables. PMID is the most simplistic option as it brings up a text list of nothing but the identification numbers that PubMed uses to identify each article.

In terms of user-friendliness in developing and updating the query, PubMed gets a 4 (very satisfied). The site's initial advanced search interface allows for the construction of complex search strings by entering search terms along with the dropdown filter menu and boolean "Add" function. The query itself can also be edited directly in the "Query box." The system's quirks present some hurdles to users not already familiar with PubMed's search function, such as PubMed's use of "All Fields" for a search rather than the standard "keyword." Other options include author; date of publication; journal; specific first, last, or corporate author names; dates of creation, modification, completion, and entry; conflict of interest statements; grants and funding; and Medical Subject Headings (MeSH), a vocabulary system the National Library of Medicine uses to index PubMed articles ("PubMed User Guide"). Once the search has been executed, a user has several options for updating the query. Clicking on "Advanced" under the search box returns to the advanced search interface, where previous queries can be accessed under a table of "History and Search Details." The results page has common filter options to the left of the list: publication date, with options for one, five, or ten years or a custom date range;

text availability, which includes abstract, full free text, and full text; and article type, such as books, clinical trials, meta-analysis, randomized control trials, and reviews. An option to select other filters include language, species, age, and sex. There is also an option to import custom filters by logging in from sites such as eRA commons, ORCID, NIH, and Microsoft. While the results page options for updating queries are user-friendly, the learning curve for PubMed novices for developing the initial query does detract from the overall rating.

1.2 ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global

Figure 1.2. "ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global Advanced Search," *ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global*, accessed 4 October 2025.

The advanced search interface for ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global looks familiar to those accustomed to academic databases such as EBSCO (see Figure 1.2). Although it has a number of boxes and drop-down menus, the page remains simple and minimalistic, earning a score of 5 (completely satisfied). The default page has two text boxes to enter search strings, each one accompanied by a dropdown menu for the field to be searched and another with boolean operators. A number of simple checkboxes and a few dropdown menus offer quick methods for limiting the search prior to executing. A link at the top of the page offers a "Command Line" function that takes the user to a search page much like PubMed's advanced search. The advanced search also includes a couple of helpful links displayed prominently at the top of the: a list of field codes and how to use them directly without the dropdown menus, and search tips.

The results page also earns a 5 (completely satisfied) for its layout and presentation.

The search string appears in a search bar at the top of the results page. Underneath this are small checkboxes to limit the results to doctoral dissertations only or by citation connections and then a line of suggested additions to the search based on the initial query, which resulted in 1,062 results sorted by relevance as a default. An option to show 10, 20, 50, or 100 results per page appears at the bottom. The results themselves appear as a series of stacked items, each displaying the title, author, institution, database, an identification number, text excerpts with the relevant search terms highlighted, and buttons for viewing options available for each one, such as abstracts/details, a full PDF file, the number of references, and ordering a copy.

Despite its outstanding functionality, the results page earns 4 (very satisfied) for its user-friendly aspect. The page is easy to navigate and includes helpful touches like the inclusion of "keyword" as an alternate explanation to "index term" and a small "i" in a circle next to potentially unfamiliar terms, such as the "Citation Connections" filter. Clicking on this circle brings up a small pop-up window that explains that this filter restricts the search to "Dissertations with extracted references that return algorithm-based recommendations of Foundational Research and Similar Dissertations." The design does have some drawbacks, if relatively minor ones. The sort function is oddly limited with only relevance and ascending or descending dates available. Almost any search includes a greater variety of sorting options. Another unusual design choice is the location of the drop-down menu for the number of results per page at the bottom. The standard layout users have come to expect places this somewhere at the top of the page, usually near the sorting option.

ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global earns a 5 (completely satisfied) for its user-friendliness when it comes to developing and updating searches. The advanced search page includes a universal search function to query for a string in all fields, as well as the ability to search by them individually with possible fields including author, full text, subjects, index terms, ISBN, advisor, committee members, degree, university, and references cited. The ProQuest advanced search interface starts with two text boxes, each set up to search "Anywhere" and joined by an "AND" boolean operator. The search fields are drop-down menus to select other filters, and the operator can be changed to "OR" or "NOT." A link with a plus sign and "Add a row" allows users to add a virtually unlimited number of queries to the search. The page also includes a number of options to limit the searches. A drop-down menu allows for the last two, five, or ten years; works published within, before, or after a given year; and a specific date range.

Check boxes can restrict searches to those that have full text available, by specific languages, or by master's theses or doctoral dissertations. After executing the search, the results page offers a different view. A link to "Modify search" takes the user to the basic interface rather than advanced. "Recent searches" leads to a list of searches already executed. A series of stacked filters on the left side of the page allow for sort and filtering functions. The default sort is by relevance, with other options including by oldest or newest first. Filters include publication date, either by entering specific dates or using a graphic slider that appears as a histogram showing the relative number of results over time; by subject with suggestions based on the current search; by index term, also called keyword; by institution and institution location; and by language, which also displays the number of results available in each language.

1.3 WorldCat

Figure 1.3. "WorldCat Advanced Search," *WorldCat.org*, accessed 4 October 2025.

The WorldCat advanced search looks like a hybrid of the PubMed and ProQuest interfaces. It is relatively simple with few options but offers more than a single line for complex search options (see Figure 1.3). Overall, the interface warrants a rating of 3 (moderately satisfied) on the Likert scale. The default advanced search has three text boxes for search strings, each with a drop-down menu for search fields in front and another drop-down for boolean operators at the end. Other drop-down menus allow the user to search by item format and language, with a pair of text boxes for limiting searches by a range of years. A "Reset" link at the bottom left of the box allows a user to start the search over from scratch. A few drawbacks to the interface decrease its rating. The way the boolean operators are positioned is counterintuitive for

a search function, as each one applies to the *next* query line, not the one it sits next to. The default drop-down search fields are "Keyword," "Title," and "Author" despite the fact that most general searches are unlikely to make use of the latter two options. And third, there is no visible help or user manual link directly visible in the search area, although there are options presented further down on the page.

The WorldCat results page earns a 5 (completely satisfied) for its interface and layout. The initial search query resulted in 413 hits sorted by location as a default. The search string appears in a search box at the top of the page next to an icon that leads to the advanced search page. Just under this and to the left of the number of search results is an option that consists of a check box to retain filters and a link to clear them. The results themselves appear as a set of stacked boxes showing a cover thumbnail or a book icon next to information such as title, author, summary, format, edition, publisher, date, and links to other formats that may be available. Overall, the page presents an interface that is largely intuitive and obviously designed with users in mind.

The user-friendliness is less impressive, however, earning WorldCat a rating of 3 (moderately satisfied). In addition to location, results can be sorted by best match, most widely held, date, title, and author. The default of sorting by location may seem an odd choice at first given that most database searches default to relevance, but WorldCat is first and foremost a search of library holdings, so offering the items closest to the user first makes sense. This also explains the "most widely held" search option, which is unique to WorldCat of the three discussed here. Filters to the left include an ability to limit searches to open content; by format such as DVD, book, audiobook, or even computer file; by author or creator; by language; by content such as non-fiction, fiction, biography, or peer-reviewed; by year of publication, with options for a custom range, this year, or the past 5, 10, or 25 years; by audience, whether juvenile or non-juvenile; and by subject. Despite its functionality, the page has some issues. Selecting "location" and "best match" make no discernable difference in materials presented. Also, the results list shows a standard 10 items per page but oddly lacks an option to change the number displayed at a time. And while gatekeeping in any knowledge base is usually a dicey proposition at best, the results themselves do show some cause for concern. The very first name listed under "Author/Creator" is Andrew Wakefield, a former British doctor well-known to have drummed up

fraudulent evidence supporting a supposed link between the MMR vaccine and autism ("Vaccines Don't Cause Autism").

WorldCat also misses the mark in terms of user-friendliness in developing and updating the search queries, earning a 2 (slightly satisfied). The site offers decent functionality in many ways. The initial advanced search page with its slimmed-down design and three search boxes has its plusses and minuses, as noted above. But using the search function also requires a rather steep learning curve. A search involving multiple keywords would appear at first glance to necessitate a complex string to be entered into the keyword field. It is only under a closer examination that one can tell the fields listed as "keyword," "author," and "title" are actually adjustable. However, a user can only add up to five search fields altogether, which means that more complex queries will require more of each field. The ability to explicitly preserve search filters is useful, but it would make more sense to have that as the default. Exploring sorting options also reveals an issue in that WorldCat does not make any effort to weed out duplicates. Because the site searches holdings from multiple libraries, any given query is likely to result in a number of repeated matches

1.4 Comparative Evaluation

Although PubMed, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global, and WorldCat all provide access to knowledge bases, their usefulness widely varies from one to another. Each builds their search queries in different ways via the advanced search. Where PubMed builds the search query as search terms are added one at a time from the input text box to the query box, the ProQuest advanced search lets the user add lines of search boxes to search for specific text in specified fields by a boolean operator (AND, OR, NOT). The search query as a text string is displayed with the results. This format is more friendly for the average user than the PubMed approach. WorldCat follows a similar approach to ProQuest, but the initial search is limited to five lines.

Surprisingly, WorldCat is the most limited source despite – or perhaps because of – its broad knowledge base. Its library-centric database and search function favors books over articles and dissertations or theses in its results, which works well for someone seeking that format but limiting for someone seeking more recent articles. The academic ProQuest database has almost as broad a selection of topics as WorldCat, but its usefulness is hindered by its limitation to

theses and dissertations. Although PubMed is the most limited in scope, it does rise to the top of these three databases for those seeking articles on biomedical subjects.

A general lack of user-friendliness further hinders WorldCat's usefulness to the average browser. Unlike ProQuest and PubMed, WorldCat's search function is not forgiving of stray characters, such as parentheses and quotation marks or duplicated boolean operators. The other two ignore or provide a warning of these errors, but these strays "break" WorldCat's search, often with little to no indication as to the exact nature of the problem. Such issues likely result from WorldCat's outgrowth from an online catalog and internal legacy systems that have not been updated for some time.

2. Content Coverage

2.1 PubMed

PubMed is a free resource that has been online since 1996 "with the aim of improving health – both globally and personally" ("About PubMed"). The site is a product of the National Center for Biotechnology Information (NCBI) in the U.S. National Library of Medicine (NLM), which is located at the National Institutes of Health (NIH). PubMed itself does not actually store any articles, but it does search through more than 39 million citations and abstracts in biomedicine and health, as well as related disciplines such as behavioral sciences, bioengineering, chemical sciences, and life sciences ("About PubMed"). The site searches for material across three databases: MEDLINE, PubMed Central (PMC), and Bookshelf. MEDLINE includes literature published from 1966 to present ("About MEDLINE") with a subset called OLDMEDLINE that includes select works from 1946 to 1965. ("OLDMEDLINE Data"). PMC has some works dating as far back as the 1700s ("About PMC"), and Bookshelf has select works going back to 1094 ("Collection Overview"). All these materials cover a wide range of languages. The vast majority – about 87% – are in English, but other languages include German, French, Czech, Danish, Malay, Maori, Norwegian, Sanskrit, and Swedish (Hamad et al. 2). And while the databases are U.S.-centric, PubMed includes listings for more than 200 nations, including Afghanistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Gambia, Greenland, Iceland, India, Japan, Jordan, Sudan, Togo, Vatican City, and Zimbabwe. Historical locations are also included, such as the USSR, Confederate States of America, and the Holy Roman Empire ("Geographical Locations").

2.2 ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global

ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global offers a database of 6 million records of dissertations and theses from more than 4,100 schools in 100 countries, including "metadata from 1606-current and full text from 1997-current, with select older titles" on topics that fall under the categories of arts, behavioral sciences, business and economics, education, health and medical sciences, humanities, mathematics and physical sciences, natural sciences, and social sciences ("About ProQuest"). ProQuest also includes "citations connections," which uses the citations from millions of theses and dissertations published after 2008 "to generate connections across academic sources targeted to a specific topic, saving researchers hours of time" ("About ProQuest"). This amounts to a database that includes works from nearly 120 countries, such as the U.S., United Kingdom, Brazil, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, Mexico, Malta, Singapore, Turkey, and Zimbabwe ("Browse"). The works also incorporate more than 70 languages ranging from English (both modern and middle) to Greek to Marathi to Yiddish to Zulu ("ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global Advanced Search").

2.3 WorldCat

WorldCat is a database created by OCLC, formerly known as the Online Computer Library Center, from thousands of libraries that have included their collections in the system over the past 50 years. WorldCat allows users access to the resources and collections of more than 10,000 academic, public, and special libraries from more than 100 countries ("WorldCat.org Puts"), including the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Swaziland, Jamaica, Barbados, Singapore, Morocco, Iceland, and the United Kingdom ("Libraries Provide"). The database includes "physical items like books, audiobooks, maps, musical scores, and recordings, along with electronic items like ebooks, e-journals, articles, and digital images you can access online" ("About WorldCat.org"). In all, WorldCat includes 586.65 million bibliographic records and 3.52 billion holdings ("Inside WorldCat"). This includes 405 million books, 440 million articles, 25 million sound recordings, 10 million musical scores, 6 million maps, and 30 million theses and dissertations ("WorldCat.org"). Topics include every conceivable subject one might expect to find at a library, including women's history, books, genealogy, sustainability, cooking, civil rights, activists, automobiles, cycling, college resources, science, and news ("Topics"). All

this is available in a database that includes 488 languages, 61% are languages other than English, including German, Spanish, French, Chinese, Spanish, Italian, Latin, Slovak, Frisian, Tibetan, and Estonian ("Inside WorldCat").

3. System Efficiency and Precision

3.1 Efficiency

An evaluation of the three sites' search functions reveals some interesting insights. Utilizing the search string "COVID-19 and vaccine hesitancy" for each one over wifi using a residential fiber optic internet connection, the results were measured in terms of efficiency and precision. The most efficient overall is PubMed with no noticeable lag at all. The initial search yielded 6,887 results; limiting that to articles available with full free text in English narrowed that to 5,946. Results on PubMed are sorted by "Best Match" by default, although seven of the first 20 results were from countries outside the United States, which would be of limited use for an American looking for information. Adding "United States" to the search returned 1,457 results, and only two of the top 20 were from other countries. There was no need to limit the search for the most recent examples as the nature of the search itself limited results to the last five years. Overall, PubMed is an efficient system that returns articles related to the topic without need for much sorting or filtering.

ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global also offers a fast search, although it does have a noticeable, if slight, lag between search and results. The search yielded 2,826 results, which were automatically sorted by relevance. Limiting the search to works with full text available in English narrowed the list to 2,690 results. Four out of the first 20 results were from other countries, but adding "United States" did not change the number of results. The only thing it accomplished was a need to reapply the filters as ProQuest did not retain them between searches, which makes the overall search less efficient.

WorldCat proved the least efficient for the purposes of this study. It had a very slight lag, but the results came faster than ProQuest. The first search returned 22,985 results automatically sorted by location. Limiting the list to English and works with open access returned 5,391 hits. The search favors books, which is understandable for a library-centric database, although it does mean that an additional step is required to limit the search to articles, which would be more relevant to someone interested in the most recent research. This resulted in 4,659 hits. WorldCat

does not offer a geographic-specific filter, although “United States” appeared as an option under “creator” with only five results.

3.2 Precision

The sites were measured using precision @20 method, where a score is derived from dividing the number of relevant hits from the first 20 results by 20. For this search, to be considered topically relevant, an article had to be directly and solely related to COVID-19 as an illness and vaccine hesitancy. Articles outside this criteria, such as those more general in scope or discussing COVID-19 in conjunction with other illnesses, were deemed non-relevant. PubMed earned a score of 0.9, the highest of the three. Two of the top 20 were only tangentially related, with one article about a combination of COVID-19 and influenza vaccine hesitancy and the other a more general piece about misinformation spread online and its influence on vaccine hesitancy. WorldCat scored second, with a 0.75 based on the search sorted by location. Five of the first 20 results were off topic. Sorting by best match actually decreased precision to 0.7, with six articles that were off topic. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global scored the worst of the three, with a precision @20 score of 0.55. Nine of the first 20 results were broad works about vaccine hesitancy in general rather than tied specifically to COVID-19.

Conclusion

It should be noted that at the time of this paper’s writing, the United States federal government has been shut down for a few days, which means that work on PubMed and related sites has halted. However, there is no reason to expect that has had any impact on the results of this study. In terms of databases, one might be hard-pressed to find more different examples than PubMed, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global, and WorldCat, each of which has its own pluses and minuses. In terms of user interface, ProQuest has the most user-friendly, followed by PubMed, and WorldCat. On the other hand, WorldCat has the “prettiest” but least user-friendly results page, while ProQuest has the top rank in both, and PubMed ranks high on features but middling on user-friendliness. When it comes to building and modifying searches, ProQuest comes out on top, followed closely by PubMed and distantly by WorldCat. Despite its drawbacks, PubMed serves as the most useful for users interested in getting information related to vaccines and surrounding issues. WorldCat and ProQuest both offer a wider range of subjects,

but the difference in foci for these databases makes a large difference. PubMed is a medical database, while the ProQuest site focuses on master's theses and PhD dissertations and WorldCat is basically a database of library catalogs. The difference can be seen in the sites' efficiency and precision, where PubMed comes out on top in both, and the other two offer mixed results. Beauty, as the saying goes, is not everything. Sometimes it is the least thing.

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