



## ▼ ADVISOR REVIEWS—STANDARD REVIEW

# Black Studies Center

Date of Review: July 2006

Composite:

★★★ 3/8

Reviewed by: Norda Majekodunmi

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## Pricing

The cost of Black Studies Center is based on FTE. There is a one-time purchase cost and an annual fee to access the online database. Libraries with current subscriptions to the International Index to Black Periodicals Full Text and/or ProQuest's Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender will have their current subscription prorated and applied toward the annual access fee for Black Studies Center.

## Product Description

The Black Studies Center (BSC) is a collection of primary and secondary sources pertaining to Black Studies (African-American, Africa, and the African diaspora). This database is intended for undergraduate and graduate research in Black Studies and other disciplines that intersect Black Studies, including History, Women's Studies and Political Science. The ever-growing electronic database at the time of review consists of four parts: the Schomburg Studies of the Black Experience (SSBE), the International Index to Black Periodicals Full Text (IIBP), the Chicago Defender, and Black Literature Index. According to the About page, ProQuest Dissertations for Black Studies as well as other resources will be added in future releases. It is important to note that both the IIBP Full Text and the Chicago Defender (via ProQuest's Historical Newspapers) are available as separate electronic subscriptions. Black Literature Index is available separately on CD-ROM. For institutions that do not subscribe to these separate standalone databases, the BSC might be the ideal portal for academic research in Black Studies given that it makes available these four important resources in one place. With the purchase of BSC, users will have the advantage of two access points to both IIBP and the Chicago Defender: via the standalone database as well as within BSC. This also holds true for those institutions that already subscribe to the standalone databases.

The SSBE component currently includes 24 topical essays specially commissioned for this database, as well as video clips, images, and a chronology of events relevant to the essays. The IIBP Full Text component currently provides the full text to approximately 50 periodical titles in Black Studies. The historical backfile, from 1910 to 1975, of the *Chicago Defender*, a prominent black newspaper, is the third component. Black Literature Index is an index to the microfiche collection, Black Literature, 1827–1940, which contains over 70,000 bibliographic citations for fiction, poetry, and literary reviews published in black periodicals and newspapers from 1827–1940.

## Critical Evaluation

### CONTENT

The primary focus of the BSC is African-American studies, largely due to the *Chicago Defender* newspaper. However, the majority of periodical titles (41%) covered in the IIBP component are primarily African themed. Another 27% are internationally themed, 23% are African-

American themed, and 9% focus solely on the Caribbean. Of the 24 essays in SSBE, 13 focus on the African diaspora in general, 10 focus distinctly on African-Americans, and 1 on Africa. These proportional representations are likely to change as more essays, periodicals, and other resources are added to the database. Currently BSC consists of English language resources only, and there are no indications whether or not this will change in the future. BSC is appropriate for an international audience whose lingua franca is English. The database is updated regularly; the SSBE component is updated monthly, and the IIBP is updated daily.

The main strength of BSC is the SSBE component. The 24 in-depth essays are written by leading scholars in their fields with extensive bibliographies. The essays are a boon for undergraduate students needing an introduction to various topics in Black Studies. A glossary is provided not only at the end of each essay but is also embedded in the essay. While reading an essay, users can view a definition by pointing their mouse over a glossary term. The multimedia collection of images and video clips are also priceless. Images (black and white and color) and video clips may accompany the essays and are provided with a detailed description that makes them easily accessible by keyword search. Video clips can be viewed using QuickTime Player or Windows Media Player. Unfortunately, users can not search for video clips or images separately. Instead, a search can be limited to multimedia only; in which case, both video clips and images are searched.

The overall content of the database is not complete; new components and resources (such as ProQuest Dissertations for Black Studies) are expected to be added on a continuing basis. Alerting users when new resources or entirely new components are added to the database that matches their search criteria would be a useful feature for advanced researchers or graduate students.

### NAVIGATION

With a complex database such as the BSC, it might be assumed that the user would easily be lost or confused, but this is not necessarily the case. The BSC is easy to navigate. The default search page and the quick search box are prominently featured on the home page. A well-organized site map in which each Help topic is further subcategorized by component (e.g., under Help—Searching all 4 components are listed) is available, and the search history and marked list option are consistently available on every page. The Help screens were easy to understand with clear examples.

A caveat concerning the incompleteness of the database is that there might be inconsistencies related to accessing or navigating parts of the database. During the earlier part of BSC's review, only three components (SSBE, IIBP, and the Chicago Defender) were included. Black Literature Index was not searchable on its own, yet strangely there was a Help page provided for searching BLI. Eventually a BLI search page



## Black Studies Center Review Scores Composite: ★★★ 3/8

*The maximum number of stars in each category is 5.*

### Content: ★★★ 1/2

Depending on an institution's subscription, there might be duplication of resources since the International Index to Black Periodicals, the *Chicago Defender*, and Black Literature Index are available separately in electronic format. The content that is not duplicated, the Schomburg Studies on the Black Experience, remains Black Studies Center's most significant strength, containing 24 commissioned essays, and a collection of images and videos.

### Searchability: ★★★

Search features are straightforward and intuitive, although the five different search pages might be confusing to the novice searcher. The browsing feature is much more user friendly. The cross-searching feature is one of BSC's assets; however, the inconsistency regarding the need, or lack thereof, to input Boolean AND in a search string across the various search pages is confusing.

### Pricing Options: ★★★ 1/2

Pricing is based on FTE. An institution's current subscription to the individual databases (IIBP and *Chicago Defender*) will be taken into account for pricing of BSC.

### Contract Options: ★★★ 1/2

Unlimited number of simultaneous users. Institutions have the option to subscribe to BSC while continuing access to stand-alone databases (IIBP and *Chicago Defender*).

was added and ultimately access to BLI was provided, but BLI was not, and at the time of review still not, browseable via View Contents. It would be better not to add new components in pieces but only when a new resource or component and its parts are complete. Otherwise navigating the database might be frustrating and confusing to some users.

## SEARCHABILITY

At first glance it appears that there are only two search options: a Search button on the home page and the Quick Search box that appears at the top of every page. In reality the BSC contains five separate search pages: Search All, Search Schomburg Studies on the Black Experience, Search Journals, Search Newspapers, and Search Black Literature Index.

### *Search All*

The default Search page (labeled "Search All") allows users to cross search all the contents of BSC, but users may also limit the search by deselecting specific components from a series of check-marked boxes labeled Content Type (SSBE, Journals, Newspapers, or Black Literature Index). Users can search by Keyword(s), Title, Author, and Publication Year (this doesn't apply to the essays, timeline, and multimedia in the SSBE). Search All provides a more basic search. Automatic truncation (e.g., "slave" searched for "slaves," "slavery") and variant spelling (e.g., "woman" retrieved "woman," "women") is applied to all searches and no index is provided.

Several searches were conducted while reviewing this database using all five search pages. There is an understandable lack of consistency between the five search pages in terms of searchable fields and options.

However, the lack of consistency across all search pages regarding the Boolean operator AND was unfortunate in such a valuable resource. According to the Help screen for the default Search All page, all searches automatically have the Boolean operator AND applied to them, but different search results appeared when similar searches were conducted with and without AND. For example using the Search All page, "hip hop and sex and women" resulted in 100 journal articles compared to "hip hop sex women," which had no journal articles, and "hip and hop and sex and women," which resulted in 103 journal articles. There were more results for searches that included AND than without, at least for journal and newspaper articles. Users searching without AND will miss journal and newspaper articles completely if they rely on the information in the Help page. Further searches found that searching newspaper and journal articles without AND (e. g., "sex women") produced results in which the terms were automatically searched as if they were adjacent to each other (regardless of punctuation), but this is not mentioned in the Help Screen for either the Search All, Search Newspapers, or Search Journals search pages. This could explain the varied results encountered when searching the Search All page with the presence and absence of AND. It appears that only the SSBE component applies Boolean AND automatically to a search in actual practice .

From the Search All page users can also choose to change their search to one of the individual database components (SSBE, Journals, Newspapers, or Black Literature Index) by clicking on the appropriate link under "Choose Another Search." This leads to a specialized, more advanced search page tailored to the content of the individual database. It is assumed that as more content is added to BSC more search pages might be added. And accordingly the database will become much more complex to navigate. The cross-searching feature which allows pri-

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mary and secondary sources to be searched simultaneously, is one of BSC's assets. As the default search page, Search All must be easy and intuitive to use, and it is.

### Search Schomburg Studies on the Black Experience

Users can search the SSBE component by keyword, title, and author as well as limit searches by content type (Essays, Resources, Timeline, or Multimedia). The search capabilities for the SSBE component are far more advanced than the Search All page as evidenced from the detailed search tips provided on the Help page. Users can search using eight different wildcard operators, but related meanings and variant spellings are automatically applied if wildcards are not used. Another advanced search feature is the ability to weight search terms from 1-10. Searches revealed that the presence or absence of AND in a search string does not affect the search results in SSBE. The search results are organized by content type. Overall this search page is one of the most straightforward and easiest to use.

### Search Journals

The Search Journals page currently searches the IIBP. It is one of the more detailed search pages with 11 searchable fields; 9 of which have browseable indexes (including author, title, and subject terms). Users can also limit the search to peer-reviewed articles, full-text articles only, or exclude reviews. These search fields options are almost identical to the standalone IIBP. Boolean operators (AND, OR, NOT) must be entered to conduct an effective search. A "Search Tip" link is conveniently located under the Keyword(s) search field. It provides a Help page with links to search examples. Another helpful feature is the no results page, which provides several suggestions to improve the search.

### Search Newspapers

The Search Newspapers page searches the full-text backfile of the *Chicago Defender* from 1910 to 1975 (daily and Saturday editions). Users can search by keyword(s), title, author(s), and document type. Searches can be limited by the type of publication (Saturday versus daily editions), front page news only, keywords applied to the whole article or only to the first paragraph, and citation as well as date range. There are browseable indexes for title and document type. Sort options are also provided. As mentioned previously, Boolean operators (AND, OR, NOT) must be searched explicitly. If users fail to use Boolean AND in their search statement (resulting in zero hits), they are reminded to use them on the resulting No Results page. Unlike SSBE and Black Literature Index, the search capabilities are less sophisticated with only one wildcard option (an asterisk for truncation) for Search Newspapers. This is unfortunate, since search features such as proximity or

weighted searching would be ideal for more complex searching of newspaper articles that encompasses close to 20 years of a daily newspaper (1956–1975). Nonetheless this search page is user-friendly.

### Search Black Literature Index

The fourth component of BSC allows users to search by keyword(s), title, author, genre, publication year (1827–1940), publication, place of publication, and microfiche number. Unfortunately publication and place of publication are the only fields that have browseable indexes. It would be beneficial for the searcher to have browseable author and title fields as well to conduct more powerful and precise searches. Obviously this component is of particular use for institutions that already own the Black Literature, 1827–1940 full-text collection on microfiche. However the *Chicago Defender* is included among the 110 publications searchable in BLI, and as such links to the full-text PDF are provided in citations for the *Chicago Defender*.

### Quick Search

The Quick Search box automatically performs a keyword search (i.e., full-text search) across all the components of the database. A full-text search could be problematic in that the results can be too numerous for the average student to sieve through. Fortunately, search results are sorted by content type (Essays, Resources, Timeline, Journals, and Newspapers), which might make that task less arduous.

## SEARCH RESULTS

The retrieval options provided for newspaper articles are extremely valuable. Users have three options for accessing the full text of newspaper articles: article image (displays article only in BSC), article PDF (displays article only in PDF) or page PDF (displays the entire page on which the article appears). The page PDF option can prove a very useful feature for researchers, especially for contextual analysis. The reproduction of newspaper articles is of good quality and the PDF can be easily read to a point by zooming in. Unfortunately the zooming feature is not available for the imaged version of the original article in BSC itself but only for the PDF version of an article.

Users can access BSC using Firefox, but opening up a PDF document in that browser can be problematic. On several occasions the PDF document would not open, but this appears to be a problem on the browser's end. Users should be cautioned about this.

### Overall

BSC can be a complex database to search given its numerous search options and various search features per component. The lack of searching coherence and cohesiveness across all components is unfortunate because it can be confusing and frustrating to the user. Users can search the entire database (Search All) and the SSBE component without entering Boolean AND and get some results, but this feature is not available for the other search components. The SSBE and Black Literature Index offer more sophisticated search features such as using a number of wildcard operators and weighted searching; these more advanced search features are not available when searching the other resources. Greater consistency is needed across all the search components in BSC, but for the time being users are best served if they start their search off with the default search page (Search All).

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Black Studies Center is one of the few electronic databases that currently offers an accessibility statement. Various accessibility features

are available to users using assistive technologies, including access keys, hidden texts readable only by screen readers, and alternative text description to images. BSC has been tested for accessibility using JAWS 7.0 (a screen reader) and was created in compliance with various parts of the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines.

Citations in BSC can be exported directly to bibliographic citation management applications such as ProCite, EndNote, Reference Manager and RefWorks. A marked list can be e-mailed with a durable URL for each record. Users can also save their citations and searches in MyArchives for future retrieval using a username and password.

## OVERALL

BSC is a gateway to resources on the Black experience. The cross-searching feature is also one of BSC's assets; but as with all federated search engines, there will be issues concerning searches. BSC's main asset is the SSBE component. Unfortunately the SSBE is not available as an individual database. Instead institutions with current subscription(s) to the IIBP and/or the *Chicago Defender* (via ProQuest Historical Newspapers) will have their subscriptions taken into account for pricing. Such institutions must weigh in whether it is worth the additional cost to purchase BSC now solely for the SSBE component or to wait until future enhancements to BSC are complete before making a purchasing decision. If your institution does not currently subscribe to the IIBP and the *Chicago Defender* (via ProQuest Historical Newspapers) and can afford it, the BSC is worth purchasing. But for those institutions with budgetary constraints it might be best to revisit the issue

in a year or so. Although relatively new, BSC is an impressive and valuable database for institutions requiring a variety of resources pertaining to Black Studies, especially institutions with sizeable programs in African-American, African, or Ethnic Studies. It will be worthwhile to see what changes BSC has in store for the future.

## Contract Provisions

Contract provisions are standard. There is a one-time purchase fee with an annual fee. An unlimited number of simultaneous users may access the database.

## Authentication

IP authentication is available and remote access is available through proxy server.

## About the Author

**Norda Majekodunmi** is currently an adjunct Reference Librarian at the Scott Library at York University. She has collection development and liaison responsibilities in Africana, Social Sciences, and Social Work. She also serves as the Liaison to Accessibility Services and is particularly interested in the accessibility of new electronic resources. She received a B.A. in Linguistics from York University, a diploma in Library and Information Techniques and a MIST (Masters of Information Studies) from the University of Toronto. ■

## ▼ ADVISOR REVIEWS—STANDARD REVIEW Ebook Library (EBL)

*Date of Review: August 7, 2006*

Composite score: ★★ ★ 3/4

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## Pricing Options

Ebook Library package pricing consists of three main components, the platform fee (a one-off payment), the annual maintenance fee, and the cost of each e-book title. The platform fee is \$5,000 U.S. if paid in full, or \$6,000 U.S. if paid incrementally by adding 15 percent to the cost of each title. The annual maintenance fee is \$750 U.S. if paid in full, or \$1,000 U.S. if paid incrementally. The annual maintenance fee is due only the year after the platform fee is paid. The cost of each e-book title is set by the publisher and is similar to the list price. Libraries can sign up for a trial of EBL before deciding to purchase.

## Product Description

Ebook Library (EBL) is a web-based initiative of the Ebook Corporation and claims to deliver an expanding catalogue of e-books to academic and research libraries. The Ebook Library package includes an aggregated collection of e-books combined with a platform that supports two main portals, one for librarians and the other for patrons. EBL was set up in 2004 and at the end of July this year the EBL catalogue had 36,800 plus titles from approximately 110 publishers world-

wide. The catalogue consists of academic and scholarly titles covering all subject areas, but the more recent titles tend to be in the areas of science, technology, and medicine. About 80 percent of the titles have been published since 2000 and 42 percent since 2004. With the recent inclusion of titles from ABC-CLIO the selection of reference titles available for unlimited access has vastly increased. The growing list of publishers includes a host of major publishing houses as well as university presses.

Patrons can browse through a book online for 10 minutes each 24-hour period, checkout the book online for a day, or check out the book offline for a loan period set by the library. Users may also copy or print, and cut and paste specified amounts of text from the e-book. The EBL platform monitors these processes to ensure compliance. EBL books fall into three categories of lending—nonlinear lending (NL), textbook, and unlimited access. Over 95 percent of the titles fall under the nonlinear lending category and can be accessed simultaneously by multiple users. A small proportion of titles are considered teaching texts by the publishers and are coded as textbooks and can be accessed by three concurrent users only. Titles that are more in line with reference books allow unlimited access. Prices of the EBL e-books are set by the pub-