Recognizing Scholarly-Trade Genres in the Databases

Hi, this is Pam Sukalski, Librarian at SMSU’s McFarland Library. In this video clip we’ll identify ways to recognize periodical types within the databases.

While there are many visual clues in a printed periodical to help determine if it is a scholarly, trade, or popular publication, many times we lose those visuals in an online environment. As we search in the databases, we need to identify ways to determine the genre of the periodicals. While many of the databases do indicate if an article is from a scholarly source, a magazine, a news source, etc., part of your work as a researcher and critical thinker is to determine if the source types are accurately categorized in the database. In other words, just because the database says it is a scholarly article, it doesn’t mean it is. Let’s look at some ways we can evaluate genre in the databases.

Search results from an EBSCO database are displayed. The Source Type facet off to the left provides a breakdown by genre. Note how all results are displayed, but you could choose to only look at certain genres. For example, clicking on Academic Journals will display the 18 (out of 180) results that this database has determined fall into the Academic Journal genre. Clicking on Trade Publications would bring back 2 results for that genre, as determined by the database. Also, take note of the graphical indicators displayed in the results list.

Let’s look at another database and how the results are displayed. A Gale database, Expanded Academic ASAP, displays results by genre, so you need to pay attention to which genre is showing in your results list. In my example, Academic Journals are displayed. If I wanted to see Magazines, I’d need to select that from the facet on the left under Your Results. Take note that Trade Publications is not a subject within this database. That doesn’t mean there aren’t trade publications in here, but rather this database has not used that description. You’ll find trade publications in either the Academic Journals or Magazines subset. This is another reason why it is important for you to be able to look for clues and evaluate the type of source.

After you’ve selected or recognized the genre as identified by the database, you’ll want to also evaluate the source using criteria you’ve already learned (for example, frequency of publication, length of articles, audience). One place to start is by glancing through the citation information. You can generally get a sense of how often the periodical is published as well as the length of the article. You’ve learned that scholarly journals are generally published quarterly or monthly, while trade publications are more likely to be published weekly or monthly. You also get a sense of the length of the article. The Gale database shows what page the article begins on and then lists the word count. You can estimate by looking at the word count how long the article is. In Ebsco databases, the citation information generally shows the page range as well as an indication of how many pages the article; no math or estimating involved! So again, we use the frequency of publication and the article length as clues in determining genre.

You can go one step further in your review by examining the periodical titles. In the Gale databases, a link is provided in your results list. For example, I can click on The Chronicle of Higher Education to learn
more about that publication. The record confirms it is a weekly publication, will indicate the intended audience, may state if it is a peer-reviewed publication, and may include a brief description. As I review the information about the Chronicle, I would determine this is a trade publication instead of an academic journal, even though that is the genre the database has put it under. This clearly demonstrates that you cannot rely solely on the designation the database provides for your article; you must dig further and evaluate on your own what genre the periodical will fall under.

To find those clues in an Ebsco database, you’ll need to click on the title of the article. From that detailed record, you can see a link to the Source. Clicking on the periodical title will bring you to publication details providing clues about the type of publication: the frequency of publication, if it is peer-reviewed, a subject area, and may include a brief description.

It takes just a few clicks and a few seconds to read through this information to gather clues about the type of publication.

You’ll also gather clues from the article itself. If the article is available in a PDF format, you’ll be able to see the article just as it appeared in the printed version. However, some articles are only available in html format which means only the text of the article is available. That means you’ll lose some visual clues such as photographs, charts, or advertising that would appear in the PDFs. At the minimum you’ll want to look at the list of citations for the article, as well as take note of the technical (or lack of) language in the article. Pay attention to the author and whether or not background information about the author is included.

Using these tips can help you determine the type of periodicals and articles you find in the databases. Instead of assuming the database has correctly identified the periodical or article type, you’ll want to evaluate each source carefully. As always, contact a librarian if you have questions.