



Evidence Summary

ProQuest Ebook Platform Outperforms EBSCO Ebook Platform in Functionality and Usability Study

A Review of:

Calhoun, E., & Zhu, M. (2023). A comparison study and heuristic evaluation of two aggregator ebook platforms: ProQuest eBook Central and EBSCOhost eBooks. *Journal of Electronic Resources Librarianship*, 35(2), 132–138. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1941126X.2023.2197754>

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Abstract

Objective – To identify the strengths and limitations in functionality and usability of two electronic book (ebook) platforms.

Design – Comparison study and heuristic evaluation.

Setting – University of Toronto Libraries.

Subjects – The user interfaces and the library administration portals of the ProQuest and EBSCO ebook platforms. In ProQuest, the user interface is Ebook Central, and the administration portal is LibCentral. In EBSCO, the user interface is EBSCOhost eBooks, and the administration portal is EBSCO Collection Manager.

Methods – The evaluation was conducted in August 2022. The authors compared the user interfaces for ease of use, searching and reading functionality, additional features, and accessibility. To evaluate the usability of features, the authors performed a heuristic evaluation by evaluating common tasks that a user would perform against the set of heuristic principles developed by Jakob Nielsen. When usability issues were identified, they were given a severity rating of critical, moderate, or minor. The authors then compared the administration portals using a set of common tasks that a library administrator would perform when managing ebook collections. A heuristic evaluation of the administration portals was not performed.

Main Results – The ProQuest and EBSCO user interfaces have similar functionality. Users can search across the platform and within an ebook, view digital rights and bibliographic information, and access the full-text of a book. However, the heuristic evaluation revealed usability issues with both platforms. On the ProQuest platform, minor issues include misleading feature availability and non-descript link labelling. On the EBSCO platform, there are several issues with varying severity ratings. The most critical issue is that there is no warning that content saved to folders will be lost unless the user is signed into the platform. The moderate issues include a lack of autocorrection or spelling alternatives when searching, hyperlinks that blend into regular text, and a cluttered results page. Minor issues include inconsistent font hierarchies and different full-text access pathways depending on whether ebooks are available or unavailable to access. In the administration portal comparison, the two platforms are comparable for managing ebook download periods. When generating reports and configuring alerts, the ProQuest platform offers more customization options than the EBSCO platform.

Conclusion – This study describes the strengths and limitations of the ProQuest and EBSCO ebook platforms. Overall, the ProQuest platform outperformed the EBSCO platform. For users, the ProQuest interface has fewer and less significant issues than the EBSCO interface. For library administrators, ProQuest offers more options for customizing reports and alerts. The findings of this comparison study and heuristic evaluation may help librarians and library staff choose the most suitable ebook platform for library users and administrators.

Commentary

This study draws attention to design issues within ebook platforms. The authors (an electronic resources librarian and a student intern at the University of Toronto Libraries) were motivated to embark on this project when new customization options were added to the EBSCO administration portal. The new options enabled library administrators to customize ebook download duration, which had already been a feature in the ProQuest administration portal. The more comparable functionality presented the authors with an opportunity to methodically compare the EBSCO and ProQuest platforms.

The study was evaluated using the CAT generic critical appraisal tool (Perryman & Rathbun-Grubb, 2014), which includes questions about data collection, analysis methods, and the presentation of findings. Study strengths include a clearly articulated rationale and objective. The authors also considered platform functionality for library staff as well as users, whereas the studies cited in the discussion focused solely on student perspectives and ebook usage habits. Given that ebook platform design impacts collection management as well as user experience, the authors' decision to consider both library staff and users strengthens the utility of the findings.

The study findings have the potential to support librarians and library staff involved in ebook collection development decisions. However, the presentation and clarity of the results could have been improved. In the screenshots of the ProQuest and EBSCO user interfaces, it is not immediately obvious what aspect of each image is meant to support the authors' discussion. Annotations (e.g., arrows, labels) would have helped to make that clear for readers. The graphic summarizing the heuristic

evaluation is also quite small, and when zoomed in, the screenshots are blurry and the text is illegible. Another limitation is that the authors assessed the two user interfaces themselves. Involving novice users without specialized knowledge of or experience with managing library resources could have more effectively highlighted the user perspective and prevented any usability issues from being overlooked.

The authors rightly acknowledge that ebook platform design is constantly evolving. Clarivate, the parent company of ProQuest, announced in February that they are moving to a subscription-based content access strategy and phasing out one-time perpetual purchases (Clarivate, 2025). ProQuest also launched the Ebook Central Research Assistant, an AI-powered tool that is integrated into the ProQuest ebook platform to help users “. . . assess the relevance of each book, helping to review, analyze, and explore new ideas” (Clarivate, 2025, p. 8). These changes affect users as well as library administrators and underscore the importance of regularly evaluating and comparing platforms. Library researchers could update the study to include an evaluation of the AI Research Assistant, to identify potential benefits and concerns for post-secondary students using the tool.

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