

## Search Engines: A Growing Force in Books

By Bruce McKinney

The term book search engine would seem to be a generic term. To a layman this is a piece of software that searches your expressed criteria in the more than 25 book listing sites on the web, aggregates the results and reports them to you in a reasonable time and in a comprehensible order. In a perfect world this is true. Welcome to the real world. It isn't quite that easy. Have you ever wondered why a search engine does what it does without asking for even a penny from you? The three search engines we are looking at in this article: Bookfinder, AddAll and UsedBookSearch are free to use and at the same time make a living by directing would-be buyers to listing sites that pay commissions. These commissions are quite small so the process needs to be fully automated. The buyer searches. The search engine locates specific titles on the various sites they search and links would-be buyers to them. For this they get a few pennies. It's a tough business.

Each of these search engines has a specific group of sites they search. No, they don't search exactly the same sites though there are five listings sites they all search (in green). The listing sites that each search engine searches are listed in columns (see page two).

Bookfinder lists the most used-book sites as "partners": 40. UsedBookSearch of the UK lists 13 sites they search and AddAll lists 16 they search. Bookfinder mentions that it searches 50 million titles, UsedBookSearch 45 million, and AddAll simply describes their coverage as 40 bookstores, 20,000 book dealers and millions of books. They are all substantial but they are not the same. How they differ is important to understand and let's start with this. For the three titles we searched the total number of matches found by UsedBookSearch was 1,002, Bookfinder 89, and AddAll 335.

In searching the complex inventories of the listing sites each search engine takes a unique approach. UsedBookSearch makes a serious effort to show you every match available on the sites they search. It can be slow but if you wait you'll see a great deal of material. AddAll seems to be running against a clock. Their searches are quite fast but they accomplish this by limiting some of the matches if the total material they locate is substantial. For uncommon books this is rarely the case. Bookfinder creates files of matches rather than a single list, obscuring the fact that they aren't providing as many matches as the other search engines.

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### A Comparison of Sites Searched by Bookfinder, AddAll and UsedBookSearch

Bookfinder (40)	AddAll (16)	UsedBookSearch (13)
Alibris	Alibris	Alibris
A1 Books		
A1 Techbooks		
AbeBooks	AbeBooks	AbeBooks
Abooksearch		
Alapage.com		
Amazon.com.uk		
Amazon.com.de		
Amazon.com		Amazon.com
Antbo		
Antiqbook	Antiqbook	
Barnes & Noble		Barnes & Noble
Biblio	Biblio	Biblio
Bibliodirect		
Bibliology	Bibliology	
Biblion	Biblion	Biblion
	bibliophile	
		BiblioQuest-BibliOz
Bibliopoly	Bibliopoly	
Biggerbooks		
Bookavenue		
Bookbestbuy		
Bookcloseouts		
Books&Collectibles	Books&Collectibles	Books&Collectibles
Chapitre		
Chapters.Indigo		Chapters.Indigo
Choosebooks		Choosebooks
Dymocks		
Ecampus		
Elephantbooks	Elephantbooks	
Globalbookmart		
Halfpricecomputerbooks		
Half.com	Half.com	Half.com
		Gemm
ILAB	ILAB	
Maremagnum	Maremagnum	
Popula		

Powells	Powells	Powells
	Strandbookstore	
Textbookx.com		
Bookcellar.com		
Tomfolio.com		
Totalcampus.com		
Usedbookcentral		
	ZVAB	
40	16	13

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In UsedBookSearch the results are also reported as files from each site. Each file shows you total records found, an important piece of information. They don't merge the results so you have to search, compare and remember using your own methodology. It isn't very hard to do this but it's another step. AddAll sequences all material it provides into a single list – of potentially hundreds of matches – and they let you re-sequence the entire list in price order, by listing site, by author, title and dealer. It's extremely good if not as complete as UsedBookSearch when there is a large volume of results. Bookfinder gives you files – a lot of them, and they aren't as easy to use as the other tested search engines. They don't give you totals and I suspect it's because the folders don't contain as many matches. These search engines are surprisingly different.

If choosing a search engine to use you need to know which sites they search, how they search them and whether they search them completely. Using Bevier in the author field I ran a preliminary search and obtained 240 matches on UsedBookSearch, 117 matches on AddAll, and 52 on Bookfinder divided into 36 matches and 16 in the "Also See" category. ABE, the largest used book listing site on the web, had 55 in an identical search. When you then put Bevier into Abe's keyword field you find 87 matches, on AddAll 154 and on UsedBookSearch 173. These results are surprisingly different although the differences are less than they appear because there are so many duplicate entries. I then ran three additional identical searches on each search engine for Washington's Farewell Address (WFA), Life and Confessions of James Gilbert Jenkins...(JGJ); and Printers and Printing in New-York by C. R. Hildeburn (PAP). These titles show up in the 10-20, 15 to 25 and 55 to 1,000 quantity ranges.

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### A Comparison of Book Search Results On UsedBookSearch, Bookfinder and AddAll

Listing Site	UsedBookSearch			Bookfinder			AddAll		
	WFA	JGJ	PAP	WFA	JGJ	PAP	WFA	JGJ	PAP
Abbreviated Title									
<b>Alibris</b>	171	3	3	16	3	2	89	3	2
A1Books									
A1Techbooks									
<b>ABE</b>	262	6	7	15	6	6	100	6	7
Abooksearch				1	1	1			
Alapage									
Amazon	48	0	0						
Antbo									
Antiqbook							8	0	0
Barnes&Noble	114	0	0						
Biblio				5	0	0	24	0	0
Bibliodirect				0	1	0			
Bibliology				1	0	0	2	1	0
<b>Biblion</b>	6	1	1	6	1	1	6	1	1
Bibliophile							15	1	0
BiblioQuest/Oz	164	1(4)	1						
Bibliopoly				1	2	0	1	1	0
Biggerbooks									
Bookavenue				3	2	0			
Bookbestbuy									
Bookcloseouts									
Books&Collect	2	0	0				0	0	2
Chapitre									
Chapters.indigo	165	3	3						
Choosebooks	30	1	0	0	6	1			
Dymocks									
Ecampus.com									
Elephantbooks									
Globalbookmart									
Halfpricecomputer									
Half.com	5	0	0				5	0	0
Gemm	2	0	0						
ILAB				6	5	1	33	5	1
Maremagnum							6	1	0
Popula									
Powells							8	0	0
Strandbookstore									
Textbookx									
Bookcellar									

Tomfolio				0	1	1			
Totalcampus									
<b>Totals</b>	968	18	15	55	23	11	304	19	12

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Because these search engines don't search exactly the same sites it's important to compare the results when they do. This is a better way to understand their performance.

Listing Site	UsedBookSearch			Bookfinder			AddAll		
	WFA	JGJ	PAP	WFA	JGJ	PAP	WFA	JGJ	PAP
<u>Alibris</u>	171	3	3	16	3	2	89	3	2
<u>ABE</u>	262	6	7	15	6	6	100	6	7
<u>Biblion</u>	6	1	1	6	1	1	6	1	1
<u>Total</u>	439	10	11	37	10	9	195	10	10

If you are looking for an inexpensive book hundreds of matches may be irrelevant. On the other hand valuable books are rarely available in large quantities and each search engine does a similarly effective job when the book is rare. With rare books the principal difference is in the sites they search, not the completeness of the searches and no one searches every site.

Both AddAll and UsedBookSearch provide 3 fields to do general searches on their primary screen: Author, Title and Keyword while BookFinder provides the same choices in its advanced search. Bookfinder also provides a "Classic Search Screen" option in its advance search that is a single continuous presentation of search results – a better choice than opening many files. In every case with each search engine, if you find an interesting copy you can go into the listing site and conduct the same search again to confirm a copy's relative merit.

All the search engines are heavily dependent on ABE because they have something like 50% of all book listings in the world. All the other sites have an unduplicated additional 50%+ divided into a patchwork quilt of listings. Because many of the businesses and individuals who list do so on more than one site (some more than 5) the searches engines find a great many matches that are actually duplicates. To test this we evaluated all the results found when searching for "Life and Confessions of James Gilbert Jenkins: The Murderer of Eighteen Men (searched simply as "James Gilbert Jenkins"), Napa, 1864. Of the 7 copies found Abe had 6. Given that the total matches of the three search engines was 61, ABE look looks very concise and efficient. It is also the fastest.

The sites charge different fees and structure their sales in different ways and you can see this using search engines. Sites such as Alibris, Chapters.Indigo, and BiblioQuest sell the book themselves and pay the bookseller a percentage but most sites simply list the book, receive a listing fee and an occasional transaction fee. As well, sometimes the same book from the same dealer is offered for different prices on different sites. Without looking very hard you will see that there are price differences. With search engines we are still in the "wild west" stage.

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The starkest differences are actually in the elapsed time it takes to conduct searches. In an impatient world, with often slow internet connections, the ability to zoom through searches in a few seconds is very important. After all, most searches are speculative. What does one thing cost versus another? Is a book common? How many copies are listed? For this ABE is simply the outstanding choice. They are the book site on steroids. Among the search engines AddAll is reasonably quick and offers a variety of listings across the book selling universe. It's tough to find a niche for which Bookfinder is the clear winner. Other people are holding the high ground at the moment. UsedBookSearch finds the most matches but it takes more time.

In the electronic world of listing sites and search engines the only constant is change so if Bookfinder chooses to revamp their software they can certainly do it. And it is also possible that their search engine is achieving other less apparent objectives and so is successful for its owners.

One wildcard is Google that is messing around in the world of books. They recently created a search feature we have on this site – try it out on the main home page or, if you are a member, also on your personal home page. They now index all of AE's past articles and provide an instant sort for anyone looking to run keyword searches across our full editorial display going back to day one. If these folks decide to try to let casual searchers on the net directly search book seller inventories this might turn the entire present structure on its ear. But for that to happen thousands of sellers who list on the major listing sites would have to have their inventories up on their own servers and of course Google would have to want to do it. Alternatively, if Google searches begin to penetrate sites such as ABE there might be pandemonium in this as well.

So what we can say is that change, long the most distant cousin many times removed in the book business, is now sitting in the driver's seat and will be for many years to come. Efficiency, an absolute stranger in the world of books, daily now beats on the paper thin partitions that separate the book dealers of the old school from the wild electronic world and daily converts a few more dealers and a handful of collectors to its enticing potential. The specialized search engines seem to be on the rise but may yet prove to be a passing fancy as they themselves live in the shadow of Google that continues to bring remarkable innovation to searching and is quickly emerging as one of the most valuable companies in history. Google's ability to directly search book dealer inventories may yet undermine the appeal of both the aggregated listing sites and the specialized search engines. Logically the listing sites will develop proprietary features that may create competitive advantage and insulate them from duplication and competition.

There is a lot at stake but regardless of who prevails the book purchaser is the big winner for an efficient market will force material to be priced at increasingly visible market rates while transaction costs decline. We can all be grateful for the innovations the search engines have brought but, like sharks, to live they must continue to move. We are no where near optimum performance yet so we'll see many changes in the future. And of course we all need to remember: the future is now.

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