

Searching for Philosophy: A Review of Google Scholar and Google News

Though the Internet has been around since the Sixties, the world-wide web is now only ten years old. In that time, it has seen unprecedented growth. Currently, Google searches more than eight billion web pages globally. Of course, without such search tools, a user would have difficulty finding anything of value. But even with them, finding academic scholarship remains a problem.

In 1995, a search for “plato” on the popular search engine Alta Vista returned approximately 44,000 documents. In the top ten, there were pages referring to an ale in Ireland, the Spanish word for plate, and an obscure reference to something called the “Lizard of Oz.” Today, a standard Google search turns up 4,610,000 responses, but in the top ten only one is to a “Plato” other than the philosopher we know and love.

Progress has been made, but still there are frustrations. While the searcher for finds a reference to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy on the first page and a reference to the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy on the second, the first item even resembling a peer-reviewed journal article does not appear until page 7. The second appears on page 21. Between pages 1 and 21, the searcher finds links to some of Plato’s dialogues, lecture notes of mixed quality, material on the lost city of Atlantis, and so on. While those of us with advanced education in philosophy might be able to separate the wheat from the chaff, the uninitiated will have difficulty.

There are other concerns as well. The standard Google search covers web pages online. It does not track citations to articles and books not online, or those resources accessible by subscription only. In other words, it does not attempt an interface between online materials and the standard print world of academic scholarship within which most of us were trained. Search mechanisms without this cross-over are severely limited, and can, at best, offer a partial method for finding resources.

Google is working hard to remedy this situation. Among several of its new tools and services, including the excellent Google News search interface (discussed below) and personalized web portals, Google is now offering a tool for academics called Google Scholar, available at scholar.google.com. In its own words, “Google Scholar enables you to search specifically for scholarly literature, including peer-reviewed papers, theses, books, preprints, abstracts and technical reports from all broad areas of research.”¹ It even catalogues print materials that are not yet online.

The mechanism works a little differently than the standard Google search. The search box functions the same way, but the return set differs. It offers – along with the resource -- a variety of cross-referencing information, including a list of online resources that cite the item in the return set. If the item is a book that is not online, the return set

¹ scholar.google.com/scholar/about.html.

offers a link for a “Library Search” to locate the print text in a library near the user based on a user’s postal code.

To demonstrate, let us consider an example. Here we must set our familiar search for “plato” aside, for such a request returns entries by several authors named Plato. There are three on the first page: “CC Plato,” “R Plato,” and “CF Plato,” one being a mathematician and the other two being scientists. The Plato we philosophers want is not among them. But then again these other Platos did not even show up in the first twenty one pages of a standard Google search for Plato.

Instead, let’s try a search for “plato soul.” This search turns up approximately 6,970 replies. All of the entries on the first ten pages are to the dead, white Greek guy, though many of these on the first seven pages are “citation” and “book” replies that do not point to online resources. Still, they point to useful information. The first entry, for instance, is a “citation” entry to M. H. Miller’s book, *Plato’s Parmenides: The Conversion of the Soul*. The user is informed that the book was published in 1986 by Princeton University Press and that four online resources cite the book. Clicking on a tag, “Cited by 4,” brings up the list, three of which are to articles available by subscription only, and the fourth of which is to an online article in Texas A&M’s *Undergraduate Journal of Science*. The user is also given the opportunity to run a “Library Search” (discussed above) or a “Web Search” which passes the search request “Miller” “Plato’s Parmenides” to a regular Google search. This search returns ten replies, some of which are to online bookstores from which the user may purchase the book.

For professional academics, much of this information is useful. Google Scholar does provide the needed utility for locating resources ... eventually. For the student looking for resources for the paper due next week (or tomorrow) it’s hardly useful. Frustrated students, no doubt, will find themselves back at the standard Google search interface left to sort through four million references to Plato -- looking for something that might fit and that, hopefully, is reputable.

Between the standard Google and the monolithic attempt to unify scholarly resources with Google Scholar, other possibilities await. Philosophers and students of philosophy still need easy access to legitimate scholarship that is easy to locate and available online in real time. Such a tool is possible, as witnessed by the earlier unfunded Noesis search engine that emerged back in the days before granting agencies were willing to risk funding on Internet projects. No doubt, such discipline-specific projects will emerge again in time. Researchers at the University Library of Erlangen-Nuernberg in Germany, for instance, are currently proposing a three-pronged approach. This proposed project, currently with the working title ViFaPhil, will search library catalogues for books, article databases for journal resources, and the Internet for high quality resources. Of course, the target language is, first and foremost, German, with English and other languages to follow in time.

While Google Scholar might be limited at the moment, better progress is being made with Google’s recent news interface. This tool provides remarkable access to 4,500 news sources and, in so doing, it has immediate use for the philosophy classroom. I will continue here with a description of the service and then discuss its potential use as a teaching tool.

On this particular morning, the top headline (from the *San Francisco Chronicle*) reads, “British Troops Hunt for Explosives,” and concerns the recent terrorist attacks on

the London transit system. It was posted “1 hour ago.” The listing provides a brief summary followed by two related headlines and then a list of four other sources for the story: MTV.com, CNN, Hindustan Times.com and Reuters. Users can click on each name and get the story from that source. In addition, on this morning, this particular story allows users to click on a link, “all 247 related.” The return page lists coverage of the story from a vast array of sources. The first entry comes from Australia, the second from the United Kingdom, the third from China, the fourth from New York and the fifth from South Africa. Some of the sources are well known in the United States and include the Washington Post, Bloomberg, and the New York Times. There is also an entry from Aljazeera.net in Qatar.

When a user first accesses Google News (at news.google.com), the interface appears in the U.S. edition with these sections for news: Top Stories, World, U.S., Business, Sci/Tech, Sports, Entertainment and Health. But the interface offers the user the opportunity for richly customizing his or her own “newspaper.” Users may add or remove sections, and they may select sections from several editions represented by country or culture (including Spanish, German and French editions along with a variety of Asian ones). Each edition has its own set of sections, from which the user may choose after selecting the edition. Typically one of the sections is for “local” news. Additionally, users may configure a setting that represents the number of stories to show for each section, from 3 to 9.

Already these features should sound rather impressive, but the real power of personalized news comes with the power to create custom sections that group news items according to keyword search under an optional user defined label. As an example, a moment ago, I configured a custom section using the keyword “abortion.” Now, at the bottom of my personalized “newspaper,” there is a section titled “Abortion” showing the following news headlines: “Appeals Court Rules Federal Late-Term Abortion Ban Unconstitutional,” from *Medical News Today*, 9 hours ago; “Bush faces test on abortion,” from the *Boston Globe*, 10 hours ago; “Late abortion ‘a hard decision’,” from *BBC News*, 12 hours ago, along with six other stories.

As if this flexibility were not enough, Google News also allows users to “share [their] customized news with a friend” -- or a class. Clicking a link at the bottom of each customized “newspaper” shows a unique URL for that customization. This URL can be emailed to a classlist (or anywhere else for that matter), posted on a web page, and so on. Users who access Google News through this URL will then be directed to *your* customized “newspaper.” With this added benefit, teachers can configure a daily “newspaper” for each of their classes on any topic reflected in current events.

To supplement an applied ethics course, for example, a teacher can configure a class “newspaper” that tracks topics such as abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, and terrorism. Teachers of bioethics courses might opt to track particular events, such as the recent Schiavo case or a particular legislative initiative. Teachers of the philosophy of law can track the Supreme Court. I use the service for Cognitive Science to track recent research on the brain, neural implants, robots and virtual reality. Beyond this topical employment, teachers of critical thinking and logic can use a customized newspaper to frame assignments designed to make argumentative bias transparent to the students and help teach them to form opinions by considering several sources, some of which may conflict with each other.

Though Google Scholar is not yet situated to aid in the teaching of philosophy, Google News certainly is. It is truly a remarkable achievement that will, no doubt, have a dramatic impact on the way we get and use our news. Minimally, even without any direct classroom employment, the service can help teachers stay abreast of current events related to their classes. Indeed, my classes typically begin with a brief run down of relevant news from *my* morning “newspaper.”

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This review has served to highlight some of the features of Google Scholar and Google News, both of which are still in beta-test. Both services are user-friendly, and there is no genuine substitute to sitting down to play with each of them. The creative teacher will, no doubt, see ways to use both; but the pedagogical possibilities connected with the news interface will be immediately apparent. It is a fine example of the new possibilities for teaching that come with the developing Internet.

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