

Three Essential Resources for Philosophy: Stanford Encyclopedia, Google Scholar and PhilPapers

Wybo Wiersma

King's College London

mail@wybowiersma.net

1 Introduction

In this paper we look at three important resources for philosophy: the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, an online encyclopaedia of philosophy, *Google Scholar*, a search-engine for academic literature, and the *PhilPapers* project, a site that allows one to keep track of new publications. We will be examining why exactly they are so essential for academic philosophy, and what factors contributed to their success.

We begin by briefly explaining what made us choose these three resources, and by pointing out the limits of the approach taken in this paper. Then we will give a short introduction to each of the projects, in which we explain what they are. Following this we have a look at their common, and possible use by philosophers. Finally we will get to the gist of the matter and explain why these resources are, and have become, essential.

1.1 Choice of Resources

We limited our discussion to three resources in order to be able to devote enough attention to each. Resources were selected based on three general criteria: The first criterium was that the resources be broad. While there are good resources on specific philosophers or periods (such as *EarlyModernTexts.com* or *HyperNietzsche*), they are too narrow to have an appeal to the whole discipline of philosophy. Secondly, we only looked at resources that are currently important, and not at those that show most potential for the future. We thus interpreted significant in the present tense.

Thirdly we tried to choose resources that are representative for the discipline. Representative of the three stages of the academic

process: orientation, research, and publication. But also representative of the organisations that initiate projects: academic, commercial, and (initially) personal. In addition, as will become clearer, the resources we selected, have each also become significant in their own (but overlapping) ways: by being broad and traditional, by hooking into existing practices and making things easy, and by functioning as a platform and bandwagon for new researchers.

1.2 Constraints and Limits

The most important limitation of this paper is that it is mostly analytic in nature: E.g. concerned with resources, their properties, and reasons for them being significant. It does not have a strong empirical basis. While it is known of all discussed resources that they have at least tens of thousands of visitors a month, exact figures are lacking. It thus is perfectly possible that other resources are more significant in terms of their number of (academic) users and/or their integration in academic practice.

Related to this is that the observations made in this paper, and the described patterns of usage, are mostly based on your authors own experience. This entails that it is written from the perspective of a young scholar, who is new to the field and not yet established. Therefore this paper will be putting emphasis on aspects and situations which are likely to be of less concern to the erudite scholar with decades of experience in his field.

2 Description

We will now give a short description of each of the three resources.

2.1 *Stanford Encyclopedia*

The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* is an open-access encyclopaedia of philosophy. It was started in 1995 by John Perry and Edward N. Zalta with 2 entries. Then it was backed by Stanford University, and it currently contains more than 1150 articles, each counting more than 10.000 words on average. It is maintained by an editorial board of more than 100 distinguished academics across 45 subjects. It solicits articles from hundreds of experts (volunteers, mostly professors) from all over the world, who are not just expected to write an article, but who are also asked to update, and maintain it.

The projects aims are for it to be, and to remain, an up-to-date resource on all philosophical topics. And while it uses a traditional editorial approach, as opposed to for example Wikipedia, it has fully automated this process. Because of this streamlining it is capable of keeping its operating costs relatively low (\$200,000 per year). And this, as well as its endowment of around four million, allows it to operate independently, and remain freely available for end-users.

It offers search and advanced search (full text, title or author) across its articles. In addition it offers search through Google. It has an RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feed, and also offers an iPhone reader, and a search plugin for the browser. It also has a table of contents, a list of articles that are currently being written, and archives. The archives are quarterly snapshots meant for stable citation (quite a dated way of providing versioning). Besides this, it offers information about the editorial process of the *Stanford Encyclopedia*, and about how one can support the project.

2.2 *Google Scholar*

Google Scholar by Google Inc. is a search-engine for scholarly articles in any field, not just philosophy. It started in 2004, when Anurag Acharya and Alex Verstak took a sabbatical from working on the Google search-index. Their internally developed prototype of *Google Scholar* quickly became popular

within Google itself, and was subsequently released to the public as a beta. It indexes most peer reviewed journals, theses, books and conference-proceedings from Europe and the United States. The exact size and coverage of the index, however is not published (to the concern of critics).

As Acharya remarks the project aims to be the definite resource for finding ‘*all scholarly literature – across all areas, all languages, all the way back in time*’. It’s not there yet, and its coverage is even still not as extensive as that of subscription services such as Scopus or ScienceDirect. *Google Scholar* is, however, even if just a little bit, easier to use than those resources (even its advanced search). In addition, *Google Scholar*, using Googles expertise at ranking, tries to rank articles as an expert in the field would have.

Google Scholar often does not provide the whole article. In many cases articles are behind paywalls such as JStor or IngentaConnect. For those at institutions which have licenses to the content and support library links (XML mechanism for this), links to the full article are provided by *Google Scholar*. Articles on private (authors) websites are also indexed. In addition *Google Scholar* (similarly to CiteSeerX, Scirus and Scopus) allows one to see what papers are cited by, or citing a paper.

2.3 *PhilPapers*

PhilPapers is an interactive database of (references to) writings in philosophy supported by the Centre for Consciousness at the Australian National University and the Institute of Philosophy in the School of Advanced Study at the University of London. It includes journal-articles, books, and (unpublished) articles by students, amateurs and professional philosophers. *PhilPapers* was created in 2008 as a merger of the MindPapers (2007) project, by David Bourget and David Chalmers, and the ‘Online Papers in Philosophy’ tool, by Wolfgang Schwarz. These projects had already proven to be effective on the web before gaining substantial backing: making it more of

a grassroots project instead of traditional or commercial.

PhilPapers aims to ‘facilitate the exchange and development of philosophical research through the internet’. It gathers most of its data by crawling the sites of Academic journals. This is a process by which it automatically extracts the bibliographic information and abstracts from their websites. Besides these, it also visits the library of congress site, open access repositories, and various personal homepages. For categorizing articles and reviewing unpublished ones, it uses automatic means, as well as editors (volunteers).

The *PhilPapers* site allows users to see (new) issues of journals, and new unpublished articles. In addition it allows one to browse articles using a very detailed taxonomy of philosophical subdisciplines (hundreds of categories): down to topics so specific as ‘responsibility in applied ethics’. Besides this, it allows people to perform both simple and advanced searches. Searches can also be stored. And for searches, as well as for categories, alerts of new entries can be e-mailed, or shown in an RSS feed. In addition it provides web-forums, to-read lists, and a blog. Thus also offering things typical of the web.

3 Usage

The usage of the resources is the topic of this section. Examples of common uses are provided as well.

3.1 *Stanford Encyclopedia: Orientation*

The *Stanford Encyclopedia* is especially useful in the orientation stage of research: probing for, and exploring, interesting topics. Admittedly, this is an usage that is more common for graduate students and those just getting into the discipline, than it is for people who have been active in a sub-field for thirty years. But it nevertheless is an important use.

Another use case is that of, while reading, coming across a name or a philosophical issue that seems unfamiliar. Here the *Stanford Encyclopedia* can offer a relatively quick explanation of the issue. Though in many cases,

because the site only has about 1150 entries, other sites such as Wikipedia, have to be consulted. Comparatively, the English Wikipedia has more than 3.1 million articles, of which tens of thousands will likely relate to philosophy.

Both of these uses are those typical of an encyclopaedia or reference work. Such works are usually not read from cover to cover, which reduces the need for the easy readability that a printed encyclopaedia would provide. Getting to the required entries quickly, through search, or a cross-reference, are much more important. Hypertext shines under these circumstances, and that, as well as it being open access, is why the *Stanford Encyclopedia* has been so useful, and been able to achieve such a large user-base.

3.2 *Google Scholar: Research*

Once a topic has been set, the most relevant and interesting papers have to be found. A very helpful resource for this is *Google Scholar*. Using a search-engine to find important papers is an use that is common for those new to a field or topic. To them the literary landscape is less known. *Google Scholar* is not only about finding papers however, also about locating them: finding out what on-line storage system, such as JStor, IngentaConnect, and so on (or library if library links are supported), holds a paper or a book.

Google Scholar is also increasingly useful for obtaining articles, the files, themselves. This because many researchers post their articles on their homepages (or others post them online for various reasons, such as giving a class). Thus, often, paywalls and/or institutional logins can be evaded by getting such papers directly through *Google Scholar*, saving a lot of time (and money). An additional thing that *Google Scholar* may be used for by researchers, is getting bibliographic information to import into Endnote or Zotero (or to retrieve it for unclear references).

Most of these uses are replacing the indices of libraries and/or the help of librarians. And sometimes even (together with online collec-

tions such as JStor) the libraries themselves (when the .pdf can directly be obtained). Libraries often offer well-thought out, extensive indices to their own collections, and access to even more elaborate subscription services. But none of them, regardless of library-scientists, tries and (moderately) succeeds at ranking articles as an expert would. This, in addition to Google's way of presenting search as simple and fast, has quickly made it very popular among scholars at all levels of expertise.

3.3 *PhilPapers: Publication*

PhilPapers comes into view after an essay or paper has been completed. If an article is not published by other means, it can, first of all, be 'published' on *PhilPapers*. Here it will normally be briefly reviewed by a subsection expert. This usage is again most useful for beginning authors. A different use of *PhilPapers*, however, is useful for all philosophers: the tracking of new journal-papers. The RSS feeds and/or e-mail notification services make this task into a very easy process. And as noted, notifications can select both for categories and for customized search-terms.

In addition to this, the site offers other interactive possibilities. One can, for example, take part in the *PhilPapers* forums. These forums currently contain about three hundred discussion-threads (which is quite a lot as philosophy fora go). They are categorized according to the same taxonomy that is used for the papers. But in addition to this, and similarly to discussion-pages on Wikipedia, every paper has its own sub-forum as well (43 threads in total currently). This allows philosophy students, and other people who don't have the time, or the want, to write full-sized papers in response, to discuss the claims and arguments put forth in publications.

PhilPapers seems to be aiming for some of the roles that journals currently fulfil. The usages related to the publication of new material, and, to a lesser extent, with the categorization, contend with that of reviewing. And those related to tracking, and providing feeds

and alerts, are aspiring to the notification-role of journals. Similarly to the aims of the LiquidPub project, it does this in the quite radical way of providing every reader with a personalized journal: based on the categories and search-terms he is interested in. Thereby potentially beating journals at their own game.

4 Significance

Now we will discuss the significance of the resources. Not just their face-value relevance, but also the factors that played a role in their rise to importance.

4.1 *Stanford Encyclopedia: Broad and Traditional*

The *Stanford Encyclopedia* is significant for the discipline because it provides a broad reference-work in philosophy. That is, first of all, it addresses the whole audience. It does not divide it by being devoted to a specific theme or philosopher. Secondly it provides a reference-work, which is the kind of work that benefits most from hypertext and search. And thirdly, it is of a very high quality, and kept up to date, unlike most other encyclopaedias and resources.

An important factor for success related to that of its quality, is that, while being an online resource, it otherwise is totally traditional in its approach. The review and editing of articles is done by experts, and through a process that is similar to that of encyclopaedias of a hundred years ago, except for the fact that it happens on-line, and articles are thus edited, and passed back and forth, using computer-software. This makes that it can be deemed trustworthy by even the most conservative of researchers.

An additional advantage of having human editors is that they not just do the editing, but will also feel involved with the project. This makes them likely to act as its ambassadors, helping with publicity and the recruitment of authors and funds. And their task is made a lot easier by the *Stanford Encyclopedia* being backed by Stanford, a well-connected university with a very high status in the field. In

addition, its four million endowment allows it to operate independently and remain free, thus reaching the widest possible audience.

4.2 *Google Scholar: Hassle-less Carriage*

Google Scholar is an important resource for philosophers (and other academics) because it simply saves a lot of time. It is a lot easier to use for getting hold of an article, than undertaking a trip to the library, or even reaching for a journal while already in the library. But besides being easy to use, Google being good at web-search, and it being a Google project, also helped it to be trusted.

Another important reason for the success of *Google Scholar* is that it hooks into existing practices. Instead of changing them, it simply makes them a lot faster and/or easier. Changing peoples practices such as distributing journal-papers as .pdfs, or locking them behind paywalls, is extremely difficult. Arranging indexing-access to restricted materials, and making finding articles in unstructured formats possible, let alone much easier, might pose organizational, financial and technical challenges. But the hardest thing, the change of social practices, can be circumvented when existing practices are (mostly) left untouched.

The downside of the existing practices approach is that, apart from making things a lot faster, projects such as *Google Scholar* do not go beyond being an horseless carriage: not using a new medium to its fullest potential, because its use is being limited to the terms of the previous (such as for example only using film to record theatre-plays). Though *Google Scholar* might nevertheless become an implicit force of change. It, for example, likely will favour open access simply by making open-access articles easier to find and get (and to use and cite, and thus their authors more prominent). Finally the fact that *Google Scholar* is a commercial project, and Google Inc. had millions to spend on it (and its advertising on the Google main page) helped it to become a pragmatic, good, and widely-used product.

4.3 *PhilPapers: Bandwagon*

PhilPapers, though relatively small compared to the other projects, is relevant for philosophers because it allows them to stay abreast of new developments in their respective sub-fields. It aims for the notification-role of academic journals, and because of its fine-grained system of categories, and searches, is likely to be more effective at it. Especially as both the increasing number of journals, and the increasing specialization over the last few decades, have diminished the usefulness of journals as notifiers.

As a student and a new scholar in the field, I, for example, have never even held, or leafed through, an edition of a journal to look for new articles. The only journals I touched were those archived in the library. And I handled them because I needed to make a copy of a specific article not otherwise available. In addition *PhilPapers* is especially useful for young, upcoming philosophers, because it allows them to publish unpublished articles, and to participate in the forums. And as it happens to be, those philosophers are also most likely to be the more tech-savvy ones. Which makes them a suitable audience for any type of digital resource.

It is for these reasons that *PhilPapers* can be seen as an effective bandwagon resource. What I mean by this is that by hooking into existing practices (notifications of new journal-papers), and going beyond them at the same time (direct publishing, web-fora, and more), it can allow/lure philosophers to hop onto the bandwagon of the internet. It bridges the gap between journals and the internet, demonstrating its advantages to a large academic audience.

5 Conclusion

To conclude, the *Stanford Encyclopedia*, *Google Scholar*, and *PhilPapers* are each very different projects. The first is a reference work, backed by a high-status university, and most useful for the orientation phase of research. The second is a search-engine for aca-

demic papers founded by a corporation which makes getting hold of literature a lot easier. And the third is a tracker for new academic literature, which has its roots in small projects by individual researchers, and is indispensable for keeping up with an increasing amount of increasingly specialized publications.

They are all, nevertheless, important resources to philosophy. The *Stanford Encyclopedia* is because it is of high quality, useful to a broad audience, and trustworthy thanks to its traditional peer-review-procedures. The second, *Google Scholar*, is useful because it skilfully hooks into existing practices, and makes these a lot easier and faster. Finally, *PhilPapers*, uses all three strategies to some extent. By combining existing practices with new possibilities, and broad appeal to upcoming scholars, it can function as their bandwagon for the web. A bandwagon that may slowly, but steadily, be turning up the ramp of the information superhighway...

With digital resources there is often a dilemma between being successful, but changing not much, or innovating and being ignored. But these resources have shown that, by bringing a small change to a large number of philosophers, one may be bringing a significant change for the discipline of philosophy, and an important one for its view of digital resources.

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