



## ◆ *Lincoln Douglas Perspectives*

# Research on the Internet for LD Debate

## Specialized Search Engines

By Scott E. Robinson, Ph.D.

Access to the internet has fundamentally altered how students can and do research—for better and for worse. The internet provides a number of resources for debaters to which students even a decade ago had limited access. However, the internet also provides some dangers in the form of easy access to poor quality research and the potential for the large volume of low-quality material to distract students from investigating what high-quality work is available (though usually only available through greater effort). In this column, I will focus on the positive and discuss how an LD team can leverage the internet as a research resource. I will conclude with some warnings about the dangers of the sloppy use of the internet as a replacement for (rather than supplement to) quality traditional research.

The most useful material on the internet for LD debaters may be freely available texts of classic moral and political philosophy. I must admit, I wish I had access to this material when I was a student. High school libraries rarely have a strong selection of moral and political philosophy (though I strongly encourage all coaches to talk to their librarians about the possibility of ordering some key texts—I have been surprised at how often librarians have been eager to take book orders from teachers simply because they may lead to actual student use of the library). The internet provides access to some older, but still accessible, translations of classic works. A simple search will turn up useful texts from Plato, Aristotle, Locke, Rousseau, Madison, and Mill. The internet can be used to supplement a “team library” like that recommended

in last month’s column. If you use the internet versions of some texts, you can focus your resources on buying the more recent texts that are not available for free.

There are many websites that provide a series of links to useful original texts. While there are too many to list here, I will list some of those that I have found most useful: [www.gutenberg.org](http://www.gutenberg.org), [www.constitution.org](http://www.constitution.org), [www.utilitarianism.org](http://www.utilitarianism.org), [oll.libertyfund.org](http://oll.libertyfund.org) and [plato.stanford.edu](http://plato.stanford.edu). Many of these sites have their own biases, but they should provide a useful start to putting together a set of online classic texts.

There are also some search engines that one can use productively for specific topic research on LD resolutions. I discourage people from resorting too quickly to “Googling” words in the topic—but there are some search engines that do an admirable job of focusing research attention on what are likely the most useful resources. The key to researching on the internet is realizing that there is more information than is useful. The difficult is not in finding “something” but in finding “something useful.” A generic search engine has few filters (deliberately—they are designed for “something” searches) to help separate the useful for LD research from the useless. Specialized search engines provide a nice balance.

The first is [scholar.google.com](http://scholar.google.com). This is a specialized search engine that prioritizes the work of academic authors. It will produce information on key texts (not necessarily online—students may still have to go to a library to retrieve some of the texts) and recent working papers on issues (most of which are online). The prioritization of

academic work filters out most of the resources without credibility that one can turn up in a general Google search. Instead, students will find material from academic authors just like if they went to a brick-and-mortar library. I have found a distressing number of “stale links” (links to papers that are actually no longer available online), but it is well worth a few of those for the ability to ignore the sort of trash a general Google search tends to turn up.

The second online search engine is a costly but productive resource. I have found the best internet resource for LD topics to be Academic Universe available from Lexis-Nexis. This is a low(er) cost alternative to the expensive full Lexis-Nexis service designed for use by law firms. Academic Universe includes extensive coverage of legislative issues including full texts of legislation, reports, and speeches in the legislative process. On the current topic of immigration policy, for example, one could actually access the texts of major immigration legislation (useful in defining exactly what immigration policy is and what rights in that context are guaranteed for non-citizens) as well as the debate over these bills. Academic Universe also includes extensive collections (“unimaginably large” may be a more accurate descriptor in this case) of news articles and law review articles. Even as a devotee of traditional library research, I have found Academic Universe to be the single most efficient method for research on most (admittedly not all) LD topics over the past three years.

The problem with this resource is that few schools have access to it. Some high schools do. It is worth checking with your



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librarians to see if they have or can get this service. It is designed for academic pricing, but it is largely targeted at university libraries. If the high school library does not and cannot carry this resource, I encourage students to visit local university libraries—all of which are likely to subscribe to this service. Your students may be limited in having to travel to a college library to use it (is it really all that bad that they have to go to a large library?) but the resource will pay off. As a demonstration for students at debate camp, I showed them how one can get hundreds of pages of relevant material in an hour with Academic Universe (if there is some demand, I can write a column devoted to how to get the most out of this resource). There are some topics—like the current immigration topic—that I could not imagine researching without access to this resource. There are many other useful search engines online (e.g., JSTOR, EBSCO, FIRSTSEARCH, etc) but Academic Universe is the most useful for LD purposes.

Outside of these resources (and, to some extent, with these resources) one has to be careful in using anything from the internet. Students are likely to find themselves swamped with information—some

of it from questionable sources. Students using the internet for research need to develop the skills to separate credible sources from those lacking credibility. I will provide one example from last year. I heard what I took to be a pretty good definition of the strict separation of church and state. On investigating the source, I found out the definition came from a contest-winning essay by a graduate student. While the definition seemed good, it would hardly withstand scrutiny in a debate round if pressured. I think judges would reasonably be reluctant to accept the opinion of even an award-winning graduate student as authoritative on a complicated point of law. This illustrates the dangers of internet research. Students need to validate the credentials of anyone they cite—though this may be difficult in the case of many pages where no author is listed (clearly a danger sign).

Students also need to ensure the accessibility of any material they site. The reason people ask for full citations of research is so that other students can validate quotations and investigate the use of evidence. With instability in URLs and webpage addressing (not to mention server instability), this is a real challenge for any-

one relying on internet research. Sources like Academic Universe consist of material that has print versions—so full citations and access are easy. Material that exists only on the internet can be a challenge to replicate.

The age of the blogs is upon us if popular media are to be believed. The great opportunity of this age is that anyone can make his or her voice heard about an issue. The great challenge is that anyone can make his or her voice heard about an issue. Students have to be savvy in their consumption of material online. The internet provides some great opportunities for students researching LD resolutions, but great dangers as well. With careful guidance you can help students discover the potential of the internet as an information resource without falling prey to various dangers therein.

*(Scott E. Robinson holds a doctorate in political science from Texas A&M. He is assistant professor at UT-Dallas and has published voluminously on LD debate, currently with [www.dallasdebate.com](http://www.dallasdebate.com). In addition to assisting several prominent LD teams, Scott continues to teach at summer workshops, most recently at the University of North Texas.)*

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