



▼ ADVISOR REVIEWS—STANDARD REVIEW

Scitopia

Date of Review: August 16, 2007

Composite Score:

★★★ 1/4

Reviewed by: **Joseph Murphy**

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Pricing

Free access to all via the Web. Searched resources are available via subscription with partnered societies.

Product Description

Scitopia is a free, federated vertical search gateway for the digital content from many major scientific societies. Scitopia was collaboratively created and funded by the 15 participating scientific societies (up from the 13 present when launched in June 2007) including: Acoustical Society of America, American Geophysical Union, American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics, American Institute of Physics, American Physical Society, American Society of Civil Engineers, American Society of Mechanical Engineers, American Vacuum Society, The Electrochemical Society, The Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers, Institute of Physics Publishing, Optical Society of America, Society of Automotive Engineers, Society for Industrial and Applied Mathematics, SPIE. The chronological scope for materials searched extends from 1874 to the present.

Major societies omitted include the American Astronomical Society, the American Chemical Society, the American Mathematical Society, and the Royal Society of Chemistry.

The rest of the content includes patents from the U. S., Japan, and Europe Patent Offices. Some government documents are included through Information Bridge, such as documents from the U. S. Department of Energy.

Scitopia claims to search three million documents. However, this number or even this order of magnitude is not verifiable with the present search options.

Scitopia carries minimal technical requirements; it is compatible with Internet Explorer (IE) 6.0 and 7.0; Firefox 1.5.x (Mac/Win/Linux) and 2.0.x (Mac/Win/Linux) Safari 2.0.x for Mac.

Critical Evaluation

Scitopia's search interface is user friendly, especially considering its recent June 2007 release. The Simple Search interface provides a single basic search window with the simplicity and convenience that users have come to expect. The Advanced Search screen provides a choice of multiple search fields including Full Record (which searches every field), Title, Author, Abstract, and Affiliation. No options are provided for Boolean operators to connect search windows;

the default is AND. Searches can be limited by date range; the default is set to search all dates. The lack of further Advanced Search options, assumedly stemming from the complexities of federated searching, weakens my satisfaction with the search interface. Citations and abstracts are returned in a user friendly linear list of results when available. I have encountered empty results, sections of the results list with an identified publisher but no bibliographic information, several times.

The Search button on the Advanced Search page is hard to find. It is located too far below the primary search windows, and it is small enough to escape notice. Users might be easily confused about initiating searches because the Clear All button is nearest to the Search windows and is the most obvious button. An oversized link to the search technology company supporting Scitopia is distractingly close to and overshadows the Search button.

There appear to be some problems with Boolean searching in the search interface. Combining terms with OR in the full record field returned fewer results from patents and government documents than when the terms were combined with AND, although more results were returned from society documents when using OR than when using AND. It may be that the problem may be isolated to patents and government documents.

A helpful animated search progress bar alerts users that the search is being performed and keeps them from impatiently hitting the search button again or giving up. Users are presented with the option of viewing preliminary results immediately or waiting a few additional seconds to view all of the returned results. This feature helps balance the desires for speedy results and comprehensive results, and placing the choice in the user's hands gives the product a much appreciated bit of personalization. The attractiveness of this option diminishes, however, when users discover that the added waiting time does not result in stronger faceted results or other added value.

Results are ranked by relevance with a five-star rating system. Unfortunately this rating system is not explained anywhere on the site so we do not know how records are being ranked. A few simple tests have demonstrated the ranking to be inconsistent.

By default, results are returned sorted by relevance rank. Results can also be sorted by date. These limited sorting options may negate the need for a pull-down menu that requires one more step by searchers than necessary.

A Limit To pull-down menu allows searchers to narrow results to single publishers. It does not, however, provide the number of results returned from each publisher, so it cannot help users identify appro-



Scitopia Review Scores Composite: ★★ ★ 1/4

The maximum number of stars in each category is 5.

Content: ★★ ★ 1/2

Scitopia searches content from most of the major scientific societies. However, the few societies still absent represent a significant weakness. Lack of commercial publishers may further limit its appeal. The inclusion of patent and government documents sources is an important strength.

Searchability: ★★ ★

A great start, but much improvement is still needed. Significant weaknesses include limited options for managing, outputting, narrowing and browsing results. Most users will be pleased by the friendly and simple interface, but a lack of advanced search options may be a cause for dissatisfaction. It is obvious from simple testing that there remain a few imperfections in the searching mechanism that need to be worked out. However, the people with scitopia seem to be aware of and responsive to these problems. Scitopia is still under construction.

Pricing: N/A

This is a free search gateway.

Contract Options: N/A

appropriate publishers for further searching. Nor does it allow for limiting by multiple publishers or by any other facet (for example, publication or affiliation). Consequently, Limit To is not very useful for refining searches. The lack of any results summary feature is a major weakness. The user receives no sense of which societies, publications, or authors, etc., might give the most results. Clustering would be very helpful here.

The source society for each record is identified by a large icon next to the record. Unfortunately, when the user clicks on that icon, he is linked to that society's Web page and not to the record as would be intuitive. This problem is amplified by the fact that the icon is more prominent and certainly more attractive than the record link.

A few basic search tips next to the search fields are helpful. A simple but user-friendly Help file is available at the point of need one click away from the Advanced Search screen. Its overly simple format (text with zero interactivity) leaves much to be desired, and it is written in language appropriate for librarians, not end-users. There is no Help to be found on either the Simple Search page or the results page. A simple contact form failed when I tested it.

The only output options available for results are printing and e-mailing, both of which are conveniently found on the results page and easy to use. Printing is only "as is"; no text or other format is available. E-mailing is available in both basic HTML and text format.

Another option for outputting results, such as character-delineated files, is deeply needed. The appeal of returned results is also weakened by the lack of any output method to Endnote, RefWorks, or any reference management software. Results cannot be saved within Scitopia. Today's Clippings, a temporary list of marked records, cannot be saved beyond a session, and its unique name may be confusing to users. The Back to Results button is easily overlooked and may lead to potential confusion and failed navigation.

A possible concern is whether Scitopia is unique and valuable enough for libraries to risk pointing users to yet another resource. And yet, despite the weaknesses mentioned in this discussion, it is a tool many institutions will find useful if they do not desire comprehensive searching of the literature. The responsiveness of Scitopia's creators gives reason to believe that it will continue to be improved.

Contract Provisions

Provides citations and abstracts from included societies, but full text is contingent upon institutional/personal subscriptions with each society. See each partner society for specific contract provisions.

Authentication

N/A

About the Author

Joe Murphy is Physics/General Science Librarian and User Education Coordinator at Yale University's Kline Science Library. He recently graduated from the L. I. S. Program at the University of Hawaii. ■

Contact Information

Scitopia

URL: <http://www.scitopia.org>