

CCL-EAR Committee Preview

Current Issues: Reference Shelf Plus

February 2011

Database Overview:

Reference Shelf Plus (RSP) provides access to full-text articles selected for their relevance to a given topic. Modeled after the long established print series *The Reference Shelf*, RSP is a hot topics database that aims to provide a broad sampling of views on individual topics. While it does not have pro/con section or layout, each theme includes articles from multiple sources that theoretically represent differing viewpoints. As such, RSP is similar to pro/con databases like CQ Press' *CQ Researcher*, Gale's *Opposing Viewpoints* and Facts on File's *Issues and Controversies*. According to the vendor, RSP currently contains more than 145 issues organized into 875 topics.

Search Interface:

Reference Shelf Plus has the same look as the standard WilsonWeb interface, but instead of search boxes the home page is predominantly labeled icons for each of 14 subject areas. Users can drill down on a subject to see related topics. On the left side of the screen is a hierarchy that provides another way to browse available topics. Both functions are referred to as *Research Paths*.

REFERENCE SHELF PLUS

A CURRENT ISSUES DATABASE

The screenshot displays the Reference Shelf Plus database interface. At the top right, there is a search bar labeled "Find:" with a "Go" button. Below the search bar is a header "Research Paths". On the left side, there is a vertical list titled "Browse Research Paths" with 14 expandable categories: Arts and Recreation, Business, Industry, and the Economy, Careers, Countries and Regions, Education, Environmental Issues, Health, International Issues, Law, Media and Communications, Religion, Science, Social Issues, and U.S. Politics and Government. The main content area features a grid of 14 subject area icons, each with a title and a representative image: Arts and Recreation (a person performing a stunt), Business, Industry, and the Economy (a US dollar bill), Careers (two people in a laboratory), Countries and Regions (the Irish flag), Education (a group of graduates in caps and gowns), and Environmental Issues (a giant panda).

In addition to the two types of *Research Paths*, the homepage also includes a search box for finding topics. Searching for topics returns a set of results, each with an image and three labels: *Research Path*, *Issue* and *Topic*. The results page doesn't include dates, which makes it difficult to determine when the articles for a given topic were originally compiled or subsequently updated.

REFERENCE SHELF PLUS

A CURRENT ISSUES DATABASE




Back Find: Go

Browse Research Paths

- ⊕ Arts and Recreation
- ⊕ Business, Industry, and the Economy
- ⊕ Careers
- ⊕ Countries and Regions
- ⊕ Education
- ⊕ Environmental Issues
- ⊕ Health
- ⊕ International Issues
- ⊕ Law
- ⊕ Media and Communications
- ⊕ Religion
- ⊕ Science
- ⊕ Social Issues
- ⊕ U.S. Politics and Government

45 record(s) found. Last term searched: **Russia**.
Click on Topic or Issue below for results.

Click issue name below to expand and view related articles :

	<p>Research Path: Countries and Regions</p> <p>Issue: Africa</p> <p>Topic: Economics</p>
	<p>Research Path: Environmental Issues</p> <p>Issue: The Arctic in Transition</p> <p>Topic: The Evidence of Change: The Arctic Climate Impact Assessment and Beyond</p>
	<p>Research Path: Science</p> <p>Issue: Warfare in the 21st Century</p> <p>Topic: The Changing Face of Battle: Technology, Terrorism, and Asymmetric Warfare</p>
	<p>Research Path: International Issues</p> <p>Issue: Global War on Terrorism</p> <p>Topic: Counterterrorism Measures</p>

As the screenshot above illustrates, it's unclear what fields are being searched by the search feature or how the results list is sorted. For example, Russia (topic of a 2010 *Reference Shelf* print edition issue) returns 45 items, the first being related to Africa and economics. Clicking *Africa*, users are presented with a list of topics about South Africa. Clicking *economics*, users are taken to a list of ten full-text articles related to economics in Africa. None of the articles has Russia in the title, and while the term may be present within the text of one or more articles, it would hardly justify the record's top ranking in the original results list.

From the article-level results list, users with a WilsonWeb subscription can select the *More full text articles* to launch a separate search in that database to find additional articles. A *Search the Web* button launches a separate Google search related to the topic at hand. From an organizational standpoint, the available breadcrumbs make it easier for users to navigate through the various levels of the database. These would be made even more useful if the terminology was more intuitive. For example, the top level (i.e. the homepage) is referred to as *Research Paths* and *Super Topics*, while the second and third levels are both referred to as *Sub Topics*. *Issues* - the term used in the results list when searching the database and in the vendor's blurb about the database - appear to be the first of the two *Sub Topics* pages. Applying the term *Issues* and *Sub*

Topics consistently throughout the database would improve navigation within the database. [This reviewer's suggestion would be to stop using both definitions of *Sub Topics* and instead go with *Issues* for all higher order instances of the term and *Topics* for each group of articles.] Finally, the ability to browse or limit by date would be a valuable improvement to RSP.

Content:

Most of the nearly 900 topics in RSP include seven to nine articles, selected by H.W. Wilson editors to "give patrons of all ages a thorough and balanced overview"¹ of each topic. Most - but not all - of the articles appeared relatively timely (within a couple of years), both in general and with regards to the topic at hand. The screenshot below shows the eight articles selected for the Deficit Spending "topic". Note that in this case the publication dates range from 2003 to 2010. Three of the articles are from the same publication - *Newsweek*; three start with the word American - *American Prospect* (liberal), *American Spectator* (conservative) and *American Enterprise* (conservative); *US News and World Report*; and *US Catholic* (published by the Claretian religious order).

Deficit Spending

Editor's Selection More full text articlesMore citation

1 Kuttner, R. [Fiscal Folly](#). *American Prospect* v. 21 no. 2 (March 2010) p. 3

Full Text HTML Full Text PDF WilsonLink Save to My WilsonWeb

2 Samuelson, R. J. [Who'll Pay the Piper?](#). *Newsweek* v. 155 no. 7 (February 15 2010) p. 21

Full Text HTML WilsonLink Save to My WilsonWeb

3 Zuckerman, M. B. [Hypocrisy on Stilts](#) [Editorial]. *U.S. News & World Report* v. 140 no. 19 (May 22 2006) p. 60

WilsonLink Save to My WilsonWeb

4 Clarke, K. [Spending like there's no tomorrow](#). *U.S. Catholic* v. 71 no. 4 (April 2006) p. 42

Full Text HTML Full Text PDF WilsonLink Save to My WilsonWeb

5 Sloan, A. [No Money? No Problem!](#). *Newsweek* v. 146 no. 13 (September 26 2005) p. 32

Full Text HTML WilsonLink Save to My WilsonWeb

6 Sloan, A. [The President's Pile of Problems](#). *Newsweek* v. 144 no. 19 (November 8 2004) p. 47

Full Text HTML WilsonLink Save to My WilsonWeb

7 Wesbury, B. S. [Deficits Don't Matter](#). *The American Spectator* v. 37 no. 2 (March 2004) p. 32-3

Full Text HTML Full Text PDF WilsonLink Save to My WilsonWeb

8 Glassman, J. [What Really Matters: Spending, Not Deficits](#). *The American Enterprise* v. 14 no. 6 (September 2003) p. 14

Full Text HTML Full Text PDF WilsonLink Save to My WilsonWeb

¹ [See Product Description](#)

Recommendation:

Reference Shelf Plus is currently offered through the Consortium at a reasonable cost. Libraries without another pro/con database could consider subscribing, particularly if they don't have access to similar content elsewhere.

In reviewing Reference Shelf Plus this reviewer had a number of questions, some of which were answered by HW Wilson's FAQ on the product: http://www.hwwilson.com/bus/rs_ci.cfm Perhaps most importantly, is the content the same for both the print and online versions of Reference Shelf? From the FAQ:

Each year, five of the six volumes in The Reference Shelf series are devoted to topical issues, including one that covers the U.S. National Debate topic. These five topics *may* also appear in Current Issues with completely different articles selected for the database. The sixth book in the print series, *Representative American Speeches*, appears only in print.

Additional Comments:

1. It does not appear possible to browse the collection by date and/or by issue, which diminishes its searchability.
2. It is not clear where the images within the database originate from. If a user wanted to reproduce these images, it would be difficult for them to attribute the source.

Other Reviews:

Brisco, Shonda. "[Six Controversial Databases: Content on Current Events](#)." *School Library Journal* (2007). *School Library Journal*. 1 Sept. 2007. Web.

LaGuardia, Cheryl. "[E-Views and Reviews: The Best Your Money Can Buy](#)." *Library Journal* (2007). *Library Journal*. 15 Jan. 2007. Web.