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EconLit: Light on the Dismal Science?

Jim Millhorn

ABSTRACT. The article examines the weaknesses and strengths of the economics database, *EconLit*. Comparison is made with other social science databases with especial emphasis on the alphanumeric classification and indexing system unique to *EconLit*. The general conclusion is that, despite the high value of its information content, *EconLit* would benefit by adhering closer to the indexing practices of other mainline social science databases.

KEYWORDS. Economics, indexing, thesauri, social science databases

Introduction

There is a curious dearth of literature on *EconLit*. Although the field of economics has long held a prized position as the most rigorous of the social sciences, there is not a single citation listed in *Library Literature* under the search term “econlit.” The handful of articles that have treated *EconLit* have focused either on the history and evolution of the database, or on competing versions of the database as hawked by different vendors. (Ekwurzel 1995, Klein 1992, Tallent 1999) However, none of this literature addresses the fundamental question of what is the purpose and value of the database, and more specifically what does *EconLit* bring to the table that other social sciences databases do not. In the course of the article an attempt will be made to answer these questions and at the same time highlight several of the unique—one is tempted to say peculiar—features of *EconLit*.

EconLit is produced by the American Economic Association which touts the database as

the fundamental research tool in the field of economics. Coverage begins in 1969, and in effect the database represents an extension of the prestigious *Journal of Economic Literature*. In addition to indexing more than six hundred and fifty journal titles *EconLit* also incorporates citations from articles in books, book reviews, dissertations, and Cambridge University Press's *Working Papers in Economics*. At present the database includes approximately 450,000 citations. In terms of sheer bulk *EconLit* compares favorably with other social science databases, like *Sociological Abstracts*, which includes more than 520,000 citations. On the other hand, the same cannot be said for the range of journals covered by *EconLit* in that *Sociological Abstracts* indexes over four times as many titles. For total journal coverage the same can be said for other core social science databases like *PsycInfo* and *ERIC*. It is fair to say that *EconLit* is less catholic than other social science databases in the number and type of titles indexed. In this regard, economists appear to practice a somewhat more exclusive trade than their social science brethren.

EconLit—The Downside

The exclusivity of *EconLit* is a reflection of the discipline's own self image as being something above and beyond the other social sciences. Paul Krugman quotes the emblematic story of an Indian economist explaining his theory of reincarnation to a graduate seminar. "If you are a good economist, a virtuous economist, you are reborn as a physicist. But if you are an evil, wicked economist, you are reborn as a sociologist." (Krugman, 1994) Obviously, not all economists subscribe to such a rarefied view of their discipline, yet the anecdote contains a kernel of truth. In a more serious vein Michael J. Piore, in a searching review of the *Handbook of Economic Sociology* (Princeton University Press, 1994) makes much the same point when he

chides economic sociologists for being “simplistic,” “quarrelsome,” and their work being “largely derivative of economics.” In contrast he describes his own discipline, “Economics, whatever its other characteristics, has intellectual coherence. That is its great attraction compared with other social sciences...” (Piore, 1996) In other words, economists tend to rate the scientific credibility of their discipline higher than the other social sciences. This superiority complex leads to an odd situation wherein economists hold themselves as an exemplar for the other social sciences, yet at the same time keep the other social sciences at arm’s length.

EconLit manifests this superiority complex in the way the database is set up for searching and indexing. On the one hand, the editors of *EconLit* extol the broad relevance of the database as it covers a vast area of inquiry including health and education, technical change, government regulations, banking, natural resources, consumption, industry studies, and virtually any area dealing with policy studies. (<http://www.econlit.org>) No doubt there is much truth to these claims. On the other hand, unlike other major social science databases such as *Sociological Abstracts*, *Psychological Abstracts* and *ERIC*, there is not a well articulated thesaurus of descriptor terms to facilitate precise searching. Instead, *EconLit*’s search vocabulary is tied to an alphanumeric classification system that harks back to a pre-computer era of literature searching. In stark contrast to the *Thesaurus of ERIC Descriptors*’ (13th. ed.) 5,759 main entry descriptors or the *Thesaurus of Sociological Indexing Terms*’ (4th. ed.) 3,563 main entry descriptors, *EconLit* features a mere 600 or so categories in its classification system. (<http://www.econlit.org/econlit/elsub.html> and *Journal of Economic Literature*, 1991) Moreover, many of the categories are extremely broad in scope so that it is often difficult to narrow and refine searches. Further complicating the matter is that an older and even more restrictive

classification system utilized between 1969 and 1991 runs parallel to the existing system, which cannot help but confuse anyone other than the highly seasoned user. (*Journal of Economic Literature*, 1969) In other words, the *EconLit* alphanumeric classification system is not that friendly to work with, especially for those accustomed to the much more expansive descriptor vocabulary employed by other social sciences databases.

The framework of the *EconLit* classification is simple. There are nineteen broad headings starting with A - *General Economics and Teaching* and concluding with Z - *Other Special Topics*. (S, T, U, V, W, X and Y are excluded from the headings list.) Each of the nineteen headings in turn is divided into a varying number of subheadings, and then each of the subheadings is assigned an alphanumeric code. For instance, N comprehends the broad area of economic history. N000 stands for *Economic History: General* whereas N150 represents *Economic History: Macroeconomics; Growth and Fluctuations: Asia including Middle East*, and N330 represents *Economic History: Labor, Demography, Education, Income and Wealth: Europe: Pre-1913*. The sixty-sixth and final category is N870 - *Economic History: Micro-Business History: Africa; Oceania*.

The problem with these categories is not only that they are unwieldy and cumbersome but that they conflate too many diverse issues. For example, class N330 mingles together labor, demography, education, income and wealth. These are obviously very different things. The upshot is that an individual who dutifully employs subject descriptors, something librarians generally stress, has to plow through a lot of stuff that is of no interest to the problem being addressed. A more precise instance would involve an individual interested in the history of economics and education in Europe and their interaction. However, owing to the way the

descriptor is defined there is no means to parse out education as a separate entity. The consequence is that the searcher learns more about labor, demography and so forth than they bargained for. The other option is to do a keyword search on history of education, but that is a chancy operation also in that the precision of the search is sacrificed. In short, either alternative is not attractive.

In actual fact the category of economic history is better articulated than most, and the problem illustrated above is endemic to the database. The largest potential audience for *EconLit* is business students and business researchers, yet here again one encounters a raft of difficulties. For instance, the category *M* encompasses the four designated areas of Business Administration, *M100-M190*; Business Economics, *M200-M290*; Marketing and Advertising, *M300-M390*; and Accounting, *M400-490*. These four broad areas are divided into a mere seventeen subclasses, which certainly does not allow for much articulation. As a result a topic such as advertising is granted a single slot—*M370*—and at present retrieves only 536 citations. On the other hand, a keyword search of advertising retrieves 6,017 citations a quick perusal of which indicates a high percentage of items of potential interest to a business student. The problem here is the opposite of the earlier example drawn from economic history. The categories in this case are set too narrowly and fail to reflect the true richness of the database. However, the root of the problem remains the same in that the *EconLit* categories are not sufficiently articulated.

Comparison with the expansive treatment of advertising in *PsycInfo* and *Sociological Abstracts* is illuminating and clearly indicate the benefits of a thesaurus type set of references to indexing terms. For instance, the *Thesaurus of Psychological Indexing Terms* (8th edition) links the descriptor *Advertising* to *Television Advertising*; *Brand Names*; *Brand Preferences*;

Consumer Research; Marketing; Mass Media; Product Design; Public Relations; Quality of Services; and Retailing. Similarly, the *Thesaurus of Sociological Indexing Terms* (4th edition) relates the descriptor *Advertising* to *Brand Names; Commercialization; Discourse; Fashions; Marketing; Mass Media; Mass Media Effects; Public Relations; Publicity; Purchasing; Retail Industry; and Sales*. The point here is not only that these social science thesauri handle advertising in a much more expansive manner than *EconLit*, but that the care with which terms are applied and treated translates into tangible rewards for the user.

Another area of prime interest for business students and researchers deals with industry and company profiles. *EconLit*'s class *L - Industrial Organization* encompasses a broad array of subjects including market structure, firm objectives, nonprofit organizations, antitrust and monopolization, and regulation and industrial policy. However, the bulk of the category is grouped under the tag *Industry Studies*, and is comprised of thirty-four headings stretching from *L600* to *L990*. Although there is a fair degree of articulation among the headings, there remains ample room for confusion. Several examples will suffice. Class *L610* represents *Metals and Metal Products; Cement; Glass; Ceramics*. The category is excellent on steel and steel products, which owing to its position in the economic world, certainly warrants extensive coverage. On the other hand, if one is interested in cement, glass or ceramics, which are not insignificant areas of activity, then one has to dig through a lot of articles on steel. Another interesting class is *L660 - Food; Beverages; Cosmetics; Tobacco*. The heading contains some fascinating articles on the economics and consumption of cigarettes and alcohol—always a popular topic with students—yet, again, one must scan a great deal of material to locate articles specifically on cigarettes and alcohol. In the case of *L690 - Industry Studies: Manufacturing: Other* there is no real indication

what the heading covers. However, a quick browse of *L690* reveals that there is a concentration of articles on the formidable armaments, plastics and biotechnology industries. Clearly, these are areas of economic activity that deserve more explicit treatment. Another unwieldy catch-all category is *L840 - Personal and Professional Services (law, accounting, barbers, beauticians, consultants, opticians, etc.)*. One can also include here interesting research on scientists, engineers, day-care workers and undertakers. Granted all of these represent professional services of one stripe or another, yet to bundle them together under a single heading makes little sense. As for individual companies, *EconLit* does not make any special allowance for them nor possess a mechanism for identifying them. To be sure there are excellent articles on prominent corporations like General Motors, Exxon, Coca-Cola, Microsoft and the like, but the only way to retrieve them is through a completely open-ended keyword search. The point, again, is that the producers of *EconLit* need to think seriously about updating and improving subject access to the database.

EconLit—The Upside

Despite the difficulties of searching *EconLit*, the database still opens a valuable and unique window on the social sciences. As we have seen, economists' claims for superiority and exclusivity have given the discipline a reputation for being snooty and high falutin. Indeed, a good deal of the mathematical and advanced theoretical work in economics is intimidating and difficult, especially for the undergraduate. However, much the same could be said of other sophisticated work in the social sciences. On the other hand, a brief survey of *EconLit* also reveals a wealth of applied studies that are accessible and have a broad relevance. A good deal of this more readily approachable economic work is available through other indexes and databases

and thus the question becomes why continue to rely on and subscribe to *EconLit*.

First, economics as a discipline is firmly entrenched in academia. Most colleges of even moderate size have an independent economics department. Whatever the difficulties involved in searching *EconLit*, the database covers an important area of literature in great depth and thoroughness. Academic economists and their students would suffer a grievous loss without *EconLit*. For those institutions that have an active economics program this is more than ample justification to maintain ties with *EconLit*.

Naturally, economists and economics students are the prime beneficiaries of *EconLit*, but this is not to say they are the sole beneficiaries. The close juxtaposition between business fields and economics has already been mentioned. For instance, *ABI/INFORM* indexes a broad array of economics journals amounting to approximately 150 to 200 titles. However, the bulk of the citations in *ABI* are drawn from trade publications. Certainly, trade titles are worthwhile sources for students, yet papers and research projects need to be leavened with scholarly resources. The outstanding attribute of *EconLit*, and again this is a reflection of the discipline, is its scholarly and academic bent. In other words, business students who seek a higher tone and more conceptual depth for their research need tools like *EconLit*. For business students who have not been encouraged or steered toward *EconLit* they might well be impressed by the relevance and scope of the database. Moreover, unlike *ABI*, *EconLit* indexes edited volumes and chapters in books, which adds another dimension of valuable resources absent in many social science indexes.

Wilson Business Abstracts is in many ways comparable to *ABI*, although it does not cover near the number of trade titles. The peculiarity of the Wilson business database is that economic

journals are divided between itself and its sister index *Social Sciences Abstracts*. On the surface it appears that applied journals are included in the business index, and those with a more theoretical angle are included in the social sciences index. In practice, however, it does not make much sense that the *New England Journal of Economics* would appear exclusively in the business index, and that the *Journal of Economic History* would appear solely in the social sciences index. *EconLit* has the advantage over these two indexes of not imposing such an arbitrary division on the field of economics. In any case, *EconLit* covers a much broader range of economic resources than the two Wilson indexes put together.

There are certain common features and interests that mark all the social sciences including a keen interest in methodological questions. Economics has been and continues to be a pioneer in formulating and testing new methodologies. For instance, economists have been at the forefront of introducing concepts such as game theory, rational expectations and a broad array of modeling and statistical techniques. Sociologists who have had long, if often contentious, ties with economics have been among the first to seize upon theoretical insights derived from economic research. *Sociological Abstracts* is rife with references to game and rational choice theory, and economic models. Indeed, *Sociological Abstracts* has explicit descriptors for each of these concepts. Although sociologists may employ these concepts in different ways than economists, sociological research, especially at the advanced level, benefits from utilizing a tool like *EconLit* in opening a whole new arena of literature and broadening the methodological foundations of the discipline.

Traditionally economics and psychology have not had close ties. However, here too one can chart an increasing interest in not only economic theory and methodology but also in core

areas of applied economic research. Exploring *PsycInfo* indicates a growing pursuit of such issues as consumer behavior, marketing, decision making and a heightened interest in the general realm of economic behavior. *EconLit* affords a valuable supplement to this research. Much the same applies to the *Public Affairs Information Service* database. Although it is fair to say that the central focus of *P.A.I.S.* is politics and foreign relations, there is also a strong strain of economic information and research that courses throughout the database. One area in which *P.A.I.S.* and *EconLit* share a vital interest is the economies of developing countries. *P.A.I.S.* unquestionably covers a broader range of periodicals and materials on developing economies, yet *EconLit* is unmatched in the rigor and theoretical depth in which it addresses the field. Indeed, developing economies illustrates one of the outstanding traits of *EconLit* and that is the scope of its international coverage and the complexity of the problems posed by developing nations. Even research fields as distant as education can find rich nuggets of information in *EconLit*. The database is excellent on such diverse questions as educational finance, labor arbitration, the connection between educational attainment and income, and the evolution of modern educational systems.

Conclusion

An old adage of the savvy researcher is to cast a wide net, and it is hoped that the above remarks can spark interest in *EconLit* even when it is not the first social science database of choice. The correlative of this idea is that social science databases, including others than those singled out here, have much to offer to economists. Indeed, if economists took a closer look at databases such as *Sociological Abstracts*, *PsycInfo*, or *ERIC* they might appreciate the limitations and inadequacies of *EconLit*. From this same vantage point they might also understand why

EconLit has not been used more profitably by other social science disciplines. Again, the argument is not against the value of the research that comprises *EconLit*, but rather the antiquated and imprecise method of indexing the literature. Without a doubt scrapping the current alphanumeric classification system would be expensive. On the other hand, one has to consider the costs of maintaining the existing system which forces users to employ all kinds of contorted searches in order to probe the database. In this instance, economists should look outside their discipline for guidance. A touch of humility would not be out of order.

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