Editorial 31(1): Is Google search essential for IIER?

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The topic for IIER Editorial 30(1) was "Maintaining our Internet-based publishing infrastructure", discussing "... *absolutely essential infrastructure* components" for IIER [1]. It was not foreseen at the time of 30(1), only about 14 months ago, but an updating is now needed to add recognition of another *absolutely essential infrastructure* component, especially relevant in the case of IIER, namely *Google search*. The *absolutely essential* status is due to Google search being the predominant method which readers use to find IIER articles relevant for their interests, and because Google search has become a vital tool for supporting IIER editorial staff and reviewer activities, as outlined below.

In summary, the answer to our headline question is "Yes", though perhaps *absolutely* may be omitted, and a preamble will be a helpful for some perspectives on the origins of current concerns about Google search.

Origins of current concerns about Google search

This follow up upon IIER Editorial 30(1) has been prompted by the highly publicised dispute between the Australian Government and Google (the other "big tech" parties to the dispute with the Australian Government have less relevance for IIER). A brief diversion into contemporary commentary about this dispute may be helpful, because the concerns arising from the perspectives of small scale specialist publishers such as IIER are markedly divergent from the concerns of Government, "big media" and "big tech".

The dispute between the Australian Government and Google began to gain more widespread attention in late 2020. The Government's opening gambit, under the ponderous title *Treasury Laws Amendment (News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code) Bill 2020*, was referred to a Standing Committee of the Australian Senate on 10 December [2]. Notable, illustrative quotations (from both an IIER editorial and a personal perspective) from the 55 submissions to the Committee and other documents included these two references to a fundamental principle:

> Specifically, I am concerned that the Code risks breaching a fundamental principle of the web by requiring payment for linking between certain content online. ... On the web, the sharing of content rests on the ability of users to do two things: to create content, typically text but also other media; and to make links in that content to other parts of the web. This is consistent with human discourse in general, in which there is a right, and often a duty, to make references. An academic paper is required to list references to other papers which are related. [Tim Berners-Lee, 3]

> The principle of unrestricted linking between websites is fundamental to Search. Coupled with the unmanageable financial and operational risk if this version of the Code were to become law it would give us no real choice but to stop making Google Search available in Australia. [Google, 4]

What, "stop making Google Search available in Australia"? As outlined below, that threat was very alarming for IIER and many, many others. However, as events unfolded, the Google Search threat receded. As a number of commentators pointed out [5, 6], there was more involved than "the principle of unrestricted linking between websites", for example:

> Part of the issue here is Google and Facebook don't just collect a list of interesting links to news content. Rather the way they find, sort, curate and present news content adds value for their users. They don't just link to news content, they reframe it. It is often in that reframing that advertisements appear, and this is where these platforms make money. [Tama Leaver, 5]

In other forums, darker parallels and analogies emerged, with the ABC's *Q+A* program providing a notable example, as illustrated very briefly in this excerpt from the program's transcript [7]:

> *Question (in part):* Why is it that the Australian government is using a competition regulator, the ACCC, to essentially prop up an uncompetitive business model?
> *Host and panel responses (brief excerpt):* So, Google's done all these deals with Australian media companies, doing more of them this week - $30 million or so to Seven West Media...
> ... $30 million to your former Nine Entertainment group.
> It's a lot of money. What are they actually paying for?
> Google's paying to be left alone?
> In other words, it is protection money. [Q+A, 7]

There are sinister overtones in phrases such as "protection money" and "paying to be left alone", and ironies about the Australian Government's agency for regulating and promoting business competition [ACCC, 8] engaging in an activity that is arguably a protection from competition. Another line of thought, which is arguably almost heretical in the Australian context was offered by an academic economist:

> We have always put up with advertising in order to get the information produced by news organisations.
> Now the advertising revenue is flowing to Google and Facebook, and we have no model for funding news media in the future.
> We may need direct public funding, perhaps financed by a tax on advertising.
> In the meantime, forcing Google and Facebook to pay for links is not a particularly satisfactory solution, but it's the best we've got. [John Quiggin, 9]

The potentially heretical suggestion is in two parts, "direct public funding" and "financed by a tax on advertising". The current Australian Government's very negative attitude towards "direct public funding" is frequently illustrated in news headlines about our principal publically-funded agent, the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC), such as "Latest $84 million cuts rip the heart out of the ABC..." [10]. As to "a tax on advertising", implying payments to Australia's Tax Office, that is not a likely outcome: nothing for Government is indicated in Quiggan's [9] summarising of the financial outcomes which favour the "big tech" and "big media" players:

> The exposure draft, the introduction of the Bill, the Senate committee and Facebook's petulant actions: all have acted to identify a financial outcome for each of Google, Facebook and the Australian news publishers. [John Quiggin, 9]

However, though the origins of current concerns about Google search is certainly an intriguing topic, the threat to (or from) Google search seems to be receding, so attention has to be turned to the specific concerns that are the basis for a "Yes" to the headline question, "Is Google search essential for IIER?"

Google search enabling readers to find relevant articles in IIER

Though IIER commenced only 30 years ago, it has spanned the full range of ways for readers to find relevant articles, beginning with "print and post to subscribers", to our present day method "upload to a website for Internet search and download". The "print and post to subscribers" phase for IIER, approximately 1991 to 2007, cannot be remembered with affection, owing to the tedium, the expense, and the limited national, or sub-national reader reach. In very sharp contrast, our present day way of operating, "upload to a website for Internet search and download" is almost infinitely better in relation to the tedium, expense and reader reach aspects.

From an editorial staff perspective, ensuring that Google Scholar has found and read *all articles* in IIER is beautifully easy. Since IIER 20(3) in 2010 this has been a relatively fast, routine step in the "last month" activities preceding publication [11]. The routine is simple: a strict compliance with Google Scholar's excellent documentation on 'Indexing guidelines', especially concerning ways to 'export bibliographic data in HTML "<meta>" tags' [12]. Although iier.org.au is a relatively very small site with only four major updates (new issues) per year, Google indexes each new issue within a few days of publication. No payments to Google needed, easy to obtain indexing in Google Scholar, simple implementation of Google's guidelines, rapid indexing, full coverage from IIER 1(1) in 1990, no need for IIER to operate its own search facility (as is done by Taylor & Francis, Elsevier, Springer, SAGE, etc.), excellent documentation for readers as well as editorial staff, high speed searching with numerous ways to customise, and a suite of supporting services (some mentioned below).

Under the circumstances outlined above, views from small scale academic publishers such as IIER, will tend to be Google friendly. However, we need to be well aware that "findability" for IIER articles is not enough. The important or even *all important* bibliometric is citation count, which is one very valuable component in Google's suite of supporting services. Whilst we have good information on IIER citation counts by Google and others [13], we have little research on a suspected important factor: in the educational research literature, articles by non-Western, EFL authors researching in a non-Western context tend to obtain fewer citations than articles by Western, native English speaking authors researching in a Western context. Publishing in a "lower quartile" journal such as IIER which accords good representation to the non-Western category could exacerbate this suspected tendency, as "quartile" categorisations are based on citation counts [13]. For IIER, this suspected factor is unfavourable, but another suspected factor is favourable.

Citations made in IIER and similar open access journals by authors in the non-Western category seem to accord a better representation of research conducted in non-Western contexts by EFL authors.

Also, we have little research to date on the relative importance of the various search engines and data bases in enabling readers to find relevant articles in IIER, though there is anecdotal evidence to support an opinion from a source which stated that "Google Scholar is the clear number one when it comes to academic search engines" [14]. This is certainly the case from the perspective of IIER editorial activities, as outlined below, in relation to both Google search and Google Scholar search.

Google search supporting IIER editorial activities

Having no income from subscriptions or APCs (article processing charges), and only a relatively small number of volunteers undertaking the associate editor duties, IIER needs editorial routines that are ultra-economical with their time. Google search has become an essential time-saver in two vital areas. One is providing information that helps associate editors to make an initial assessment that leads to advice from IIER Editorial staff about reasons for not accepting, or advice about reserving for an external review [15]. Another is providing information that helps associate editors to give authors advice on how to improve their article for another journal, or for IIER publication, as the case may be.

Concerning IIER's initial assessment phase for a submission, the first explicit mention of Google and Google Scholar searches was in Editorial 26(2) [16], which reflected upon:

> ... why diversity should be valued for IIER. One outcome is that we consider whether the topic and context in a submission has been accorded good recognition in previous volumes of IIER. Data can be obtained in an objective manner from Google searches specifying domain 'iier.org.au', or Google Scholar searches specifying journal 'issues in educational research', using appropriate keywords. IIER's editorial staff may decline a submission if its topic, method of investigation, context, sector and perspectives have been well represented in recent volumes of IIER.

Since Editorial 26(2), now nearly five years ago, the criterion it outlined has been used many times. Given below is an illustrative example from an IIER "in house" library of templates, edited for an EFL case. It specifies a publication year range (2016 or later), keywords for topics (English+language+teaching+EFL), any one of a number keywords for countries (Iran+OR+Turkey+OR+UAE+OR+Egypt), and a source journal (issues+in+educational+research):

> From IIER's perspective, there is an important problem as the topic and context have been well-represented in recent volumes of IIER. To illustrate how well EFL research conducted in countries in the Middle East region of the world has been represented in IIER, see this or similar Google Scholar searches (copy and paste into web reader address box):

> https://scholar.google.com/scholar?as_ylo=2016&q=English+language+teaching+EFL
> +Iran+OR+Turkey+OR+UAE+OR+Egypt+source:%22issues+in+educational+resear
> ch%22&hl=en&as_sdt=0,5
> (About 44 results since 2016)

Having a customised search of IIER as illustrated in the above example can moderate the subjectivity inherent in a criterion concerning representation, with judgments such as "well represented", or "under represented" required. A "search string" such as the example above may look complicated, but it is not, because Google composes such search strings as instructions to itself, based upon the keywords, etc., entered by a reader using "Advanced search". The really important or even brilliant feature is that Google allows the user to *view and copy* such search strings, thereby giving editors an efficient way to communicate to authors an evidentiary basis for their assessment of whether "... topic, method of investigation, context, sector and perspectives have been well represented in recent volumes of IIER" [16].

Concerning the need for information that helps associate editors to give advice to authors, customised Google or Google Scholar searches similar to the example above can be used for diverse purposes, including advice on updating or extending their use of references, or for suggesting new or improved directions for the research. Here is an illustrative example (edited to maintain author anonymity):

> Of about [x] references, only about [a number much smaller than x] are dated post-2015, suggesting that a new search of the recent literature may be helpful for updating purposes. For example (copy and paste into web reader address box):
> https://scholar.google.com.au/scholar?as_q=schools+principals+gender+equity+[delet
> ed]+[deleted]&as_epq=&as_oq=&as_eq=&as_occt=any&as_sauthors=&as_publication
> =&as_ylo=2016&as_yhi=&hl=en&as_sdt=0%2C5
> (About 20,400 results since 2016)
> Perhaps you could note especially the following from the above search:
> [two specific, recent and important references deleted]

Using Google search is an efficient way for us as editors, because we do not face the time-consuming task of assembling a list of specific references. Google search assembles (often within 20-50 milliseconds) and transmits the list (add a few seconds). Then the real work is pushed onto authors who have to do their own reading and evaluating to find the most appropriate, valuable and accessible references for their research. Encouraging authors to *read more* in a structured and purposeful way is an important feature of the mentoring advice offered by editors and reviewers. Some authors may feel daunted when given "About 20,400 results...", but with practice and experience authors can judge for themselves the number of "results" to scan, first 50, first 100, first 150, etc.

IIER's editors sometimes use Google to search for details missing from a submission, or for instances of self-plagiarism. Google searches are used very frequently when copy editing references lists, especially for finding web addresses, even though authors are routinely advised:

> Of about [x] references, only about [number much smaller than x] have web addresses appended. IIER and many other journals prefer that web addresses be appended to references, wherever available.

Appending a web address to a reference facilitates our checking for errors and omissions, and also fulfills a duty towards cited authors, because web addresses for their works should guarantee inclusion in the computerised counting of citations done by Google and other search engines. Using Google to find a web address for a reference can be time-consuming, generally about two minutes per reference, but it some cases may be longer and more challenging. To illustrate, sometimes copy editing finds that a reference cited in an article's text is missing from the References list. Does one send a query to the authors, or use Google search to identify the missing reference? Try a Google search first, authors second!

IIER editorial staff changes

We acknowledge very gratefully the generous contributions made by retiring IIER Associate Editors, Dr Coral Pepper (2016 to January 2021) and Dr Siew Fong Yap (2020). We wish them all the best in their continuing teaching and research activities.

We also extend a warm welcome to a new Associate Editor who commenced November 2020, Dr Kwong Nui Sim, a senior learning consultant in AUT Learning Transformation LAB (altLab), Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand. Dr Sim is the first IIER Associate Editor who is concurrently affiliated with a university outside Australia.

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