Web Review

by Amy Limpitlaw

Counterbalance

http://www.counterbalance.org/

Counterbalance is a freely available web site devoted to exploring complex and often controversial issues that intersect the fields of science, ethics, philosophy, and religion. Some of the more prominent topics covered on the site include the stem cell issue debate, evolution versus creation, and the implications of genetic technologies. The name of the site—counterbalance—indicates its goal of presenting a balance of various perspectives. This is one of the strongest aspects of the site. The site attempts to present multiple perspectives on these complex issues, and it presents each perspective with respect. The perspectives presented also arise out of a variety of disciplines, both from the sciences and from the humanities.

The other strength of the site is simply the plethora of resources it provides, both in terms of variety and amount. The site claims to encompass approximately 2600 topics, 300,000 links, and 150 hours of video. Content on the site includes interviews (both written transcripts and video recordings), articles, documents, reports, surveys, conference presentations and proceedings, book excerpts, book reviews, video and audio clips, biographies, a glossary, bibliographies, and images. Nearly all the links go to content within the site itself, which is a refreshing change from so many web sites that tend to link largely to content outside of the site.

However, the vast amount and variety of resources available on the site is also problematic because it makes the site somewhat difficult to navigate. Although the interface is comparatively uncluttered, there is simply so much being offered that it is hard to know where to begin. A simple search engine is provided but the results often take you to pages for which the context is unclear.

The navigation on the homepage seems fairly clear, but it actually does not function so well. The homepage is divided into two columns. On the left are "Subjects," "Themes," and "Questions" and on the right is an extensive list of "Topic Sets Available." Right away this organizational scheme is problematic. What distinguishes "topic sets" from "subjects" or even from "themes"? Each topic set in turn is accompanied by a small icon, but there is no key explaining what these different icons indicate. Although it is fairly easy to determine that the icon that looks like a small video camera probably indicates some kind of video clip, other icons are not so self-evident. One is shaped like a small house, another like an arrow, and one appears to be a book. The ostensible purpose of these icons may be to help the user in navigating the site, but instead they simply raise more questions and create confusion.

At the top of the page there are two sets of navigation tabs, the first with links to "Home," "News," "Interviews," "Resources," and "About." These links are self-explanatory and are typical of what can be found on many websites. The second navigation bar, directly beneath the first and with tabs in a different color, provides links to "Subject," "Theme," "Question," "Term," "Person," and "Event." The first three of these replicate the three sections in the main part of the page on the left. The "Term" link takes the user to a glossary with mostly brief definitions. Throughout the site, specific terms used link back to this glossary.

The "Person" link takes the user to an interesting page. Like the homepage, this page is divided into two sections.

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On the left there is a list of links to featured contributors, most of which are accompanied by a photograph. On the right is a more extensive list of other significant names from a variety of fields. Featured contributors reflect the aim of "balance" in the site and range from Intelligent Design advocates Michael Behe and William Dembski to outspoken proponents of atheism such as Richard Dawkins. A wide range of disciplines and perspectives are represented among contributors to the site: theologians, ethicists, philosophers, historians, biologists, physicists, astronomers, and more. The representative thinkers are typically prominent leaders in their respective fields. Among the theologians contributing to the project are luminaries such as Wolfhart Pannenberg, Jaroslav Pelikan, and David Ray Griffin; the scientists are equally prominent, including thinkers such as noted biologist Francisco Ayala, astronomer Owen Gingerich, and physicist Neil Turok. Many of the contributors have long been involved in the science-religion dialogue, including a number of Templeton prizewinners such as Ian Barbour, Arthur Peacocke, and John Polkinghorne. Clicking on a contributor link brings the user to a page with a brief biographical profile as well as further links to articles, video and audio clips, conference presentations, interviews, and other items available on the site.

The "Event" link provides links to information on a variety of events, including video and audio clips, and transcripts of event presentations. Unfortunately, no events later than 2003 are included. This was a red flag that the site was perhaps no longer being updated and maintained. However, an email sent to the site elicited the response that although no conferences have been included since 2003, the site is still active and a major update is planned. Users who would go to the link for Events, however, will be disappointed to find that currently the link will not showcase upcoming events.

Sometimes providing more choices simply creates confusion, and that is indeed the case with this web site. The site appears to want to appeal to the user who is happy to simply meander and serendipitously make discoveries; however, it is quite unappealing for someone who is actually doing research. Sometimes links on a page to ostensibly related topics prove to be more of a hindrance to finding further information than a help. A search on the term "euthanasia" using the search engine brought up three pages where the term appeared, one of which was the glossary entry for the term. The glossary entry in turn suggested looking at the related topics of "Genetics" and "Ethics," with links to both these areas. However, following these links did not really lead to much that was obviously related to the topic of euthanasia, and it did lead to a number of links having nothing to do with that topic (both the "Genetics" and "Ethics" pages provided approximately 15-20 links from which to choose). Eventually, after having tried a number of the links from both the "Genetics" and "Ethics" pages that turned out to be completely unrelated to the topic of euthanasia, one link from the "Genetics" page entitled "Genetics and Suffering" did finally prove fruitful, as it led to a page with suggested related links on the topics of "Aging," "Health," and "Pain and Suffering." All of these topics are much more directly pertinent to the topic of euthanasia than the general topic of "Genetics." Why these were not the suggested links from the glossary entry on "Euthanasia" is unclear.

Another surprising finding is that certain topics one would expect to find on this site are barely treated, including global warming, globalization, and the current economic crisis. Although there is quite a bit dealing with the environment on the site, using the search box to search on "global warming" brought up just a single entry where the term was only briefly mentioned. The same result occurred when searching on "globalization." This absence again suggests that the site has not been recently updated.

However, despite the problems with navigation and the surprising lack of attention to certain important topics, this web site offers an incredible wealth of resources, many of which could be incorporated into faculty teaching. It

also provides a refreshing commitment to presenting a variety of perspectives. The site would be enhanced by more recent updates, by a site map to aid navigation, and by a key to the various symbols used throughout. Since the site's goal is to present a balance of various perspectives, it also might be improved by becoming more interactive, perhaps by incorporating discussion forums or some other means by which users could participate and contribute to the discussions presented on the site.