NewsBreak: **Thomson beta-testing WebPlus optimized Internet search engine**
By George H. Pike*

The Thomson Corporation is expanding the beta testing of its WebPlus Internet search engine. Initially released in very limited markets in August, WebPlus is now available to users of Thomson-West's Westlaw and Thomson-Scientific's Web of Science information services. Thomson expects to roll out WebPlus among all its product lines, Health, Financial, Science, and Legal, with "walk-up" editions available free on the Web through Thomson products like Findlaw.com.

WebPlus uses human editors at Thomson as well as proprietary search technology to create an Internet search engine that targets and prioritizes its results as an adjunct to Thomson's data products. The WebPlus Legal search engine, currently being beta tested in law schools and selected law firms, focuses the query results on government, educational, non-profit, and commercial legal information Websites which complement its Westlaw database. Thomson-Scientific WebPlus does the same, albeit with the focus on science Websites that complement Web of Science.

The goal of WebPlus, according to Barbara McGivern, Vice President of Product Management for Thomson Web, is a search product that provides results that are optimized for each particular user group. Customers from all of the Thomson product lines wanted to supplement the proprietary database results with relevant, professional Websites, she indicated, but were struggling to deal with Internet information overload. "Our customers wanted a better Web", she said.

WebPlus was developed in partnership with Microsoft and utilizes Microsoft Live Search technology to crawl and search the open Web. Thomson then adds additional technology and human levels to refine the results of the open search. On the technology level, Thomson added its own proprietary relevance algorithms to the search process to focus and prioritize the results. The additional human element is the thousands of editors that Thomson employs in all of its vertical product groupings. These editors provide a measure of classification and authority control to the results by identifying and vetting relevant legal, scientific, financial, and other Websites.

These two levels allow a WebPlus search to run through the entire Web, rather than a closed list or directory of specific Websites. WebPlus generally prioritizes the sites that have been selected and vetted by Thomson editors to rank at the top of the search results, but also provides other results that meet the its search algorithm's relevance standards. WebPlus results are not influenced by any paid placements and are reportedly less vulnerable to Websites that use search engine optimization techniques to manipulate search result rankings.

I had the opportunity to run sample searches on both the Westlaw WebPlus Legal and Thomson-Scientific WebPlus platforms. (Full disclosure: I utilized subscriber access available to me as a faculty member at the University of Pittsburgh, no special consideration or access was received from Thomson.)

Both WebPlus editions use a simple search box and keyword searching. Both searches default to a topical search, but allow the searcher to narrow the search by selecting limits. (WebPlus Legal limits include Person, Organization or News; WebPlus Science limits include Person or Author, Organism, or Drug.) The search syntax is closer to a "Google"-style keyword search than the more complex boolean search strategy used with Westlaw and other Thomson products. As you slowly type a search, WebPlus also offers suggested search terms. As I began to type "Fair Use Doctrine" as a sample search, WebPlus Legal offered options such as "fair market value" or "Fair Housing Act."

My search on WebPlus Legal for 'fair use doctrine' listed 244 results. By contrast, a Google search for 'fair use doctrine' (no quotes), resulted in 1.7 million hits. Among the first 30 WebPlus hits was the full-text of the fair use doctrine provided by an educational institution, several articles, tutorials and FAQs on fair use, and some news and a few blog entries. About 10 to 12 of the first 30 WebPlus results were also among the first 30 hits from the Google search, but on the whole the Google results had more repetition and less depth than the WebPlus results.

Similarly, my search on Thomson-Scientific WebPlus for 'rocket aerodynamics' generated 196 WebPlus results versus 403,000 Google results. WebPlus provide much more hard science among its results with links to NASA and other government agencies, educational institutions and professional organizations. Google's results included some hard science from NASA and other organizations, but also quite a bit of model rocketry and amateur information.

I did find the news results on WebPlus a bit weak. A 'fair use' search using Google News provided more relevant information than WebPlus. Nor were there any fair use court decisions or open source scholarly articles that might be located on a Google search (with some difficulty), but would be available on Westlaw. It made me wonder if Thomson is being careful to avoid competing with itself by focusing WebPlus search results on information not available through Westlaw. The Google searches also gave me more relevant blog results than did either WebPlus search. In that I often use blogs in my research to locate both current information and links to other sources, this was a bit limiting.

WebPlus is currently in beta testing by Westlaw and Web of Science subscribers. (It appears that WebPlus Legal was available outside the Westlaw paywall during the week of November 5 but may not be available as of this writing.) Thomson's Barbara McGivern indicated that the beta testing allows them to continue to refine the search algorithms and vetted sites to enhance the results and target them with greater precision. She noted that the WebPlus Legal product being tested in law schools (which is what I used), is different than the product currently be tested by some law firms and firm librarians, reflecting the different needs of the users. "We're looking at the subtleties of each user", she said, "allowing the user community to make the search better for itself."

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