

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: A Dynamic Reference Work

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The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy <<http://plato.stanford.edu/>> is a dynamic reference work that has been rapidly growing over the past 2 years. We have been working towards making it a self-sustaining project and recently did an extensive user survey of our readership towards that end. Our particular project is to produce an authoritative and comprehensive dynamic reference work devoted to the academic discipline of philosophy that will be kept up to date *dynamically* so as to remain useful to those in academia and the general public.

Our concept of a *dynamic reference work* is defined in a way which distinguishes it from other online publishing projects, namely: (1) it is published in a continuously revisable electronic medium, (2) it offers a comprehensive set of entries on topics in a target discipline, (3) it *provides the authors of the entries with electronic access* to the reference work's central web server, so that they can remotely edit and update private copies of their entries and submit them for publication according to a regular update schedule and at any other time it becomes necessary to revise, (4) it maintains quality by way of a distinguished Board of Editors, the members of which commission the entries and referee both the initial versions of the entries and subsequent substantive modifications, *prior to publication* on the web, and (5) it creates, and makes publicly available, archives of the entries on at least a quarterly basis (i.e., these contain fixed versions of the entries, which can be cited in scholarly publications). A dynamic reference work based on this model constantly evolves and becomes *responsive* to new research.

Thus, a dynamic reference work is not merely a revisable work or one that is published online. Successful implementation of the dynamic aspects of this definition depend upon the ease with which the authors, subject editors, and the principal editor have access to the tools and information that allow entries at all stages of the work flow to be managed asynchronously. In such an environment, each entry has its own deadlines and it is necessary to track electronically the location of every entry in the work flow and provide automated reminders to individuals with work pending.

Over the past two years, the encyclopedia has grown rapidly. We have been publishing new entries at an average rate of over 10 entries per month (having published just over 240 entries over that period). To maintain this growth we have been: (1) working to insure that the asynchronous publication schedule for the entries is met even though there is

no pre-determined publication date, (2) working to enable a small support staff on a small budget (compared to traditional reference work publishing) to manage the project in the face of rapid growth, and (3) working to help our users more quickly access and navigate the growing reference work as more entries become available.

As we have grown we have begun to examine ways in which our project can become self-sustaining. In that direction, we have done an extensive user survey to better understand our readers and how they are using the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. In our demonstration, we will have more detailed analysis of our survey results available.

We will also demonstrate how our password-protected web interfaces, back-end processing system, and new front-end features, work together to facilitate the collaborative effort of creating and managing the dynamic reference work. We will highlight the newest parts of the system, including: (1) our new dynamically generated citation and version history information available for each entry to all of our users, that is essential for scholarly purposes, (2) an integrated calendar reminder system that allows the principal editor to track and manage deadlines whether or not associated with any particular entry (such as deadlines for subject editors to suggest new entries in their field), and (3) our new systems supporting efficient delivery of feedback from subject editors to authors.

When compared to other online publishing efforts of similar scale, we face some unique technical challenges. For example, most serial publications do not require re-cross-referencing of their documents as new articles are published. People who want to navigate thematically do so through searches which can return irrelevant results that are easily ignored. Because our documents contain links to the related entries, we must maintain those links properly – lest the irrelevant links become part of the document itself.

A more in-depth discussion of the concept of a dynamic reference work, our implementation of it, and a discussion of the current state and future of our project is available in our recent paper ‘The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: A Developed Dynamic Reference Work’, by the present authors, *Metaphilosophy*, **33**/1-2 (January 2002): 210-228 — available at the URL <<http://plato.stanford.edu/sep.pdf>>.

Technical specifications are available at the URL: <<http://plato.stanford.edu/editors/NSF/project-description.pdf>>
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