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What's to Argue? A comparison of *Opposing Viewpoints in Context* to the updated *Points of View Reference Center*, with a nod to the original *Points of View Reference Center*

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Introduction

As one of the traditional rhetorical modes – along with narration, description, exposition, etc. – argument, or persuasion, has long been a staple in the curricula of speech and English at the secondary and higher education levels. Students are given an assignment in which they must select an issue or topic and argue in support of or opposition to it, marshaling evidence to support their position. While it has always been possible for students to locate evidence through standard searches in library catalogs for books and print periodical indexes for magazine and journal articles, such searches can be unwieldy. Some publishers saw this as an opportunity to serve what they perceived as a specific market demographic, and created book series designed to offer pro and con viewpoints on various social issues or “controversial” topics. Among these are H.W. Wilson’s *The Reference Shelf*, which dates as far back as 1924, and Greenhaven Press’s *Opposing Viewpoints* series. *Reference Shelf* titles select articles from respected publications while offering abstracts of twenty to thirty additional articles and a bibliography of other sources. *Opposing Viewpoints* follows the same pattern of offering articles culled from reputable sources which cover a topic from various points of view in a pro/con format.

Gale Group, not yet Gale/Cengage Learning, introduced *Opposing Viewpoints (OV)* in digital format as the *Opposing Viewpoints Resource Center (OVRC)* database, which in mid-2010 was “enhanced” and renamed *Opposing Viewpoints in Context*. Between Gale’s introduction of *Opposing Viewpoints Resource Center* and its repackaging as *Opposing Viewpoints in Context*, EBSCOhost rolled out its *Points of View Reference Center* database. While there is a common purpose shared by the two databases, because of their proprietary nature duplication of content is minimal, and each database possesses unique strengths and weaknesses.

Description

Opposing Viewpoints in Context

Opposing Viewpoints in Context (OVIC) traces its origins to Greenhaven Press’s *Opposing Viewpoints* book series, introduced some forty years ago as the press’s flagship series. In 2000, Gale Group purchased Greenhaven Press along with other publishing houses, and in 2002 announced their launch of *OVRC*. In 2010 *OVRC* became *OVIC*. *OVRC* retained the *Opposing Viewpoints* books’ pro/con format; *OVIC* keeps this format but adds additional resources.

According to its recently-revised “About” page, “*Opposing Viewpoints in Context* supports virtually any curricular need. Its informed, differing views present each side of an issue and help students develop critical thinking skills and draw their own conclusions” by offering:

Curriculum-Aligned Reference Content

- 19,000+ pro/con viewpoints
- 13,000+ topic overviews
- 1,000+ court case overviews
- 300+ profiles of federal agencies and special-interest groups

News and Multimedia

- Videos, podcasts and streaming audio
- Easy-to-search image galleries
- National and global news sources
- Full-text articles from authoritative sources
- Interactive maps
- More than 12,500 charts and graphs, along with other statistical information

This list is a departure from the previous *OVIC* “About” page, which specified

- Pro/con viewpoint essays
- Topic overviews
- More than 300 primary source documents
- Biographies of social activists and reformers
- Court-case overviews
- Periodical articles
- Statistical tables, charts and graphs
- Images and a link to Google Image Search
- Podcasts, including weekly presidential addresses and premier NPR programs
- A national and state curriculum standards search, correlated to the content that allows educators to quickly identify material by grade and discipline

Opposing Viewpoints in Context’s “About” page clearly delineates the database’s intention: to support virtually any curricular need [by offering] informed, differing views[which] present each side of an issue and help students develop critical thinking skills and draw their own conclusions.” *OVIC will do this* “by offering Curriculum-Aligned Reference Content” comprising upwards of 13,000 topic overviews anchored to more than 19,000 pro/con viewpoints as well as including numerous court case overviews and profiles of federal agencies and special interest groups. Further, there is a News and Multimedia component which includes videos, podcasts, streaming audio, searchable image galleries, interactive maps, charts, graphs, and statistical information. Additionally there is content from “[n]ational and global news sources [as well as] [f]ull-text articles from authoritative sources.”

This menu in the main carries over the same content from the “About” page of a previous iteration of the database. However, while the newer version is more specific with quantifying document types, what appears to have been dropped (or at least not identified as having been carried over , are such things as “primary source documents, [b]iographies of social activists and reformers,” and “[a] national and state curriculum standards search, correlated to the content that allows educators to quickly identify material by grade and discipline.” These things in fact may be included in *OViC*; but unlike in the earlier version, the new “About” page does not identify them specifically.

As the type choice on the *OViC* landing page’s title banner makes clear, the viewpoints receive the emphasis; the “in context” assumes a secondary role. In the home page center pane is a media box with a featured video and links to news stories from popular media which are not anchored to anything else on the page. The center pane’s main body houses, by category, the viewpoints component of the database. Beneath each category are listed three issues, with a “View All” button leading to a complete list of the issues for that category.

Clicking on “Browse Issues” beneath the home page banner directs one down a different path: a page which alphabetically lists all the issues (410 as of February 2015) without linking them to a category. The annual national debate topics are included as new additions. Above this master list is a Choose a Category box with a dropdown menu which reveals, along with the initial eight categories, a ninth category (Family Issues) not found on the Home page, as well as search options for viewing all the issues or just those new or updated.

On the Home page is a streaming slide show with a “View More” link. Clicking here will direct one to an Issue, but it is a blind search since the slideshow gives no indication as to which Issue one will be directed, and the destination arrived at may be quite different from that expected.

The landing page offers a search box for subjects not included in the database as a category or an issue. There is also an array of links and a drop-down menu which basically replicate options offered from the On This Page facet found on the landing screen for individual issues’ topic overview essays. A link to an advanced search is also included.

With regard to individual issues, clicking on an issue, [such as Green Cities](#), from the home screen takes one to the landing page for that issue, with a topic overview essay. These essays are a “lagniappe,” an extra indirect benefit, since they are available for people even if they have no immediate need for the database as a whole. Students and faculty seeking background for any subject represented by the issues can make use of these topic overviews even if they are not required for an argumentative or persuasive task. Immediately to the left of the topic overview is an image related to the issue the essay discusses, and to the right of the essay is a pane of facets with links to information source types, tools, and non-print media sources. The last facet in the right hand pane is for Related Topics. Clicking on one of these links will redirect one to the landing screen/topic overview for a different issue (not category) in the database.

The headings of the On This Page facet are replicated in the center pane of the issue’s landing page, with the viewpoints -- the principal reason for the database -- at the top of the two parallel columns of source types. There are a few “Featured Viewpoints” that represent both the *pro* and *con* sides of the issue, and a much larger selection of “Viewpoints” which does the same. Some pieces appear as both featured viewpoints and viewpoints, which raises the

question of whether a column of “pro” viewpoints and “con” viewpoints would not better serve database users. Many of these viewpoints have a list of Further Readings at the end.

The “in Context” portion of the database is represented by the supplemental, non-viewpoint sources accessible under the On This Page facet from the landing screen of each issue. The database identifies many of the featured viewpoints, viewpoints, and reference sources as derived from more than 700 titles published by Greenhaven Press (400+ titles), Gale, Macmillan Reference USA™, Charles Scribner’s Sons® and U·X·L titles. Full-text periodical and newspaper content is added daily, with adding reference content being an ongoing process.

New reference content is added on an ongoing basis, and new full-text periodical and newspaper articles are added every day. Included among the resources are more than 400 titles from Greenhaven Press Series, including *Opposing Viewpoints*, *Opposing Viewpoints Digests*, *At Issue*, *Contemporary Issues Companion*, *Current Controversies* and *Teen Decisions* as well as materials from fifteen proprietary Gale print sets, including *Activists, Rebels, and Reformers*; *Civil Rights in the United States*; *Drugs and Controlled Substances: Information for Students*; *Encyclopedia of American Foreign Policy*; *Environmental Encyclopedia*; *Great American Court Cases*; *Tsunamis*; *Encyclopedia of Sociology*; and *Macmillan Profiles: Humanitarians and Reformers*[.]

The viewpoints and the in context materials both indicate degree of reading difficulty through a hierarchy of colored geometric shapes, occasionally including Lexile numbers. In addition to a list of further readings, the source citation and permanent url are listed at the end of these documents.

The OViC Advanced Search has a landing screen similar to what one would encounter on the advanced search of many EBSCOhost and Gale/Cengage aggregator databases: a “Find” facet comprising two parallel columns three boxes deep -- search boxes on the left, field boxes on the right. This is familiar territory to frequent users of aggregator databases. What is not so familiar are the default settings of the field boxes. “Keyword” is a standard pre-set, but “Document Title” and “Publication Title” are not. This unfamiliarity notwithstanding, the field boxes do offer the flexibility of a fifteen item dropdown menu for customized field searches.

Beneath the Find facet are Limit To and Limit By facets. The former comprises checkboxes for full-text documents and peer-reviewed journals; the latter consists of combinations of checkboxes and dropdown menus for publication date, document type, content type, and other options. The content type options largely mirror those found in the On This Page facet of the landing screen for the topic overviews.

Points of View Reference Center

Between Gale’s launch of OVRC and OViC, EBSCOhost rolled out *Points of View Reference Center* (or *PoV*) as a database “intended for public, academic, and high school libraries.” *Points of View* is designed to assist researchers in understanding the full scope of controversial subjects. According to the *PoV* help screen, high school and undergraduate students can use *Points of View* as a guide for debating, developing arguments, writing position papers, and for development of critical thinking skills. Each *Points of View* essay includes a series of questions and additional material to generate further thought. Also included are thousands of supporting

articles from the world's top political and societal publications. Much of the content is supplied by Great Neck Publishing, a generator of electronic materials which falls under the EBSCO corporate umbrella.

PoV offers thirty-five "Categories," as compared to *OViC*'s eight; some bear a close correspondence to *OViC*'s category titles, while others do not. Instead of "Issues," *PoV* uses "Topics" as the subset of the Categories. *PoV*'s list of Topics is longer, and therefore more diverse, than *OViC*'s list of Issues (543 to 356). Some of the Topics carry parenthetical suffixes of "Reference Shelf," which suggests a connection with the old H. W. Wilson *Reference Shelf* series of debaters' books. The *PoV* landing page offers a single-box Basic Search and displays tabs for "Browse by Category" (default) and "View All Topics." The right pane on the Basic Search screen displays boxes containing links for Research Guides and In the Spotlight.

For its search results screen – "Green Consumerism," for example -- *PoV* uses as its organizing principle the tabbed display which EBSCOhost initially employed with its other proprietary databases, *Literary Reference Center* and *Literary Reference Center Plus*. Once a person selects a topic in *PoV*, s/he sees a display of eight tabs for various document types and formats (see Fig. 4). The default Points of View tab has a standard layout: a topic overview essay (like *OViC*) followed by one Point essay, one Counterpoint essay, and a Guide to Critical Analysis. Like *OViC*, *PoV* provides a list of additional readings at the end of its viewpoints; but unlike *OViC*, *PoV* also provides a list of four study questions under a "Ponder This" heading immediately preceding the bibliography of additional sources. Also like *OViC*, *PoV* provides the Lexile reading levels for the items under its Points of View tab and for some under other tabs as well.

The *PoV* Advanced Search screen is similar to the corresponding screen for EBSCO aggregator databases such as *Academic Search Premier*, with a similar selection of pre-search limiter checkboxes provided.

The "New" EBSCOhost Points of View upgrade

On 1 August 2013 EBSCOhost rolled out its new, upgraded *Points of View Reference Center*, which pre-release announcements by EBSCO credited with having the following features:

New Content

EBSCO has added 61 new topics to *Points of View Reference Center*, bringing the total number of topics in the product to [by their count] 343. All topics include four essays (an overview, point, counterpoint, and Guide to Critical Analysis) written by subject experts.

New Interface

EBSCO unveiled a new user interface for *Points of View Reference Center* featuring an updated landing page and improved navigation. Key updates include:

- Revised navigation with topic trees
- Topical landing page and detailed record format
- Access Curriculum Standards benchmarks

On 1 August 2013 EBSCOhost rolled out its new, upgraded *Points of View Reference Center*, which pre-release announcements by EBSCO described as having an additional 61 topics, bringing the total number of topics in the product to [by their count] 343. Generally, topics include four essays (an overview, point, counterpoint, and Guide to Critical Analysis) written by subject experts. (A few topics offer five, or even six, essays by bringing in material from a related topic.) In addition to the new content, the updated *PoV* also boasts a new interface comprising revised navigation with topic trees and a topical landing page, detailed record formats, and access to benchmarks for Curriculum Standards.

These were among the new features. What is old -- carried over from the original *PoV* launch -- is the right-hand pane on the "topical landing page" (topic overview), which still displays links for the point, counterpoint, and critical analysis. The single search box default on the database landing screen has been retained, with links for Advanced Search and Search History beneath. Beyond these things, however, what EBSCO offers with the new *PoV* is the Pythonesque world of the "completely different."

Gone is the compact home landing screen with its simple tabbed display. The new *PoV* landing screen is much larger than the original and now strongly resembles the corresponding screen of *OViC*. It displays 33 Categories -- down two from the original version -- presented in an alphabetic arrangement of columns. Like *OViC*, the new *PoV* displays three hyperlinked options beneath each category heading, followed by a "more" hyperlink to view all the selections. The categories themselves are not hyperlinked. Along with the single Basic search box default and links for Advanced Search and Search History, the right-hand pane from the old *PoV* has been kept, though there are changes. The old Research Guides box now carries the title of Reference Shelf, although the labels for its contents remain the same, and the Points of View Debate Blog has been removed from the In the Spotlight box.

A new addition is an "In the News" section, a horizontally-scrollable selection of featured items which appears above the "Browse by Category" box. Clicking on a thumbnail image takes one to the topic overview essay, with its bibliography of additional sources. The pane to the right of the overview essay has links for the Point and Counterpoint essays as well as a link to the Guide for Critical Analysis (see Fig. 7). These carryovers from the original *PoV* are supplemented by links to "What experts say," "Research Guides," and "Curriculum Standards for the United States and Canada."

The new "Browse by Category" box eliminates the Categories/Topics hierarchy present in the old *PoV*. As with the corresponding link in *OViC*, *PoV*'s "Show All" link at the far right of the Categories bar takes one to the full listing, but there is some confusion here. Unlike in the original *PoV*, where the All list was identified as topics, in the new *PoV* it is categories. Besides abandoning the notion of "topics" as used in the pre-release announcement, this leveling blurs the distinction between major and minor. "Categories" on the All page are sub-headed under the broader Categories (which do not themselves appear on the All page) displayed on the landing screen. Having two levels of "categories" obscures the hierarchy. Also, the number of "All" categories in the new *PoV*, by tally of columns, is 523, not the 343 specified in the pre-release announcement.

The topic overview landing screen of the new *PoV* has dispensed with the study questions which preceded the bibliography of additional sources for the topic overviews in the old *PoV*, although the bibliographies themselves have been retained. The essays occupy the center panes of their pages and are faceted sub-panes with hyperlinks for Related Items. Beyond this is a discrete, standalone right pane containing a Tools facet comprising the various text interaction options common to EBSCOhost databases: Add to folder, Print, E-mail, Save, Cite, etc. To the left of the center pane overview essay is a separate pane which contains hyperlinks for Detailed Record and Full text, followed by a box with links for what, in *Opposing Viewpoints in Context*, would be the “In-Context” portion of the database: those items linked to the tabbed display on the results page in the old *Points of View*, with Academic Journals taking the place of Images from the old interface (in the new interface the image has been migrated to the embedded right sub-pane of Related Items).

The Advanced Search landing screen of the new *PoV* follows the basic template of the advanced screen for EBSCO databases (with some database-driven minor variations), offering within a large center pane facet boxes containing a combination of radio buttons, checkboxes, textboxes, and drop-down menus. These offer users options such as Search Modes and Expanders, Limit your results, Document Type, Publication Type, and others. A significant departure from the norm is the top-of-page single search box of the Basic Search instead of the three-deep parallel columns of search boxes and field boxes commonly found in an EBSCOhost Advanced Search interface.

Analysis and Discussion

To analyze databases from different vendors whose content so easily lends itself to an apples-to-apples comparison is a relatively rare opportunity. Adding into the comparison a previous version of one of those databases provides an additional layer. The old *Points of View Reference Center* had features which neither of the current databases retains, but perhaps should have, and these features account for the original *PoV*'s presence in this discussion.

Credit is due to both EBSCOhost and Gale/Cengage for including the topic overviews as part of their database content. As stated earlier, these essays are useful not only for students trying to fulfill an assignment for an argumentative/persuasive paper, but also for anyone needing background information about the subjects these essays address. Previous generations commonly would have encountered such content in print reference books. As libraries -- particularly school libraries -- downsize their print collections, reference is often among the first casualties. Many students no longer have a concrete notion of what constitutes a reference work. Given reference's traditional importance in the background and topic narrowing stages of the research process, this is a serious loss. Webpages fill this void poorly, and even many aggregator databases do not appropriately address reference content. Praise is due to both EBSCO and Gale for keeping this window open.

Both vendors also deserve praise for expanding the content of their databases beyond simple point/counterpoint documents and including contextualizing materials from books, academic journals, magazines, newspapers, etc. For academic libraries with subscriptions to many databases this may not be of such great benefit, but for high school library/media centers this is a major win. Such media centers are almost universally underfunded, and these supplementary materials expand the databases' applicability beyond a solely argumentative/persuasive context

to a broader spectrum of curriculum support, thereby delivering greater value received for the media centers' subscription dollars.

Both databases attempt to keep pace with current events through regular content updates. While this article was being written, *Opposing Viewpoints in Context* and *Points of View Reference Center* both added to the number of issues/subjects/topics from which students may select. As of February 2015 the issues count for *OViC* stands at 410, while that for *PoV* is 523. Once a topic, such as fracking or the Keystone Pipeline, garners sustained media attention, it is added to the roster of issues in the databases. As they have with their more populous aggregator databases, EBSCO and Gale likely will continue this practice.

There are, however, areas in which these databases could have done better. In addition to *OViC*'s overlap between Featured Viewpoints and Viewpoints and *PoV*'s labeling two separate levels of content as "Categories" as referenced above, there exists some confusion among document types. Using their own labeling, *Opposing Viewpoints in Context* offers eleven content types (plus Related Topics), while *Points of View Reference Center* has eight. Content types held in common by *OViC/PoV* are Viewpoints or Featured Viewpoints/Points of View, Academic Journals, Images, Magazines, and News/Newspapers. Content types unique to *OViC* are Audio, Statistics, and Videos. *PoV* has as unique offerings Primary Source Documents and Radio & TV News Transcripts.

The status of books within the two databases can be cause for confusion, as *OViC* uses the heading Reference while *PoV* uses Books. The choice of these labels may be because books comprise such a large proportion of the proprietary vendor content in these databases, and the distinctions between them may be of little consequence in electronic format since physical location of the source is not a factor. But for libraries that also have the source titles in print format, the labels make a difference for researchers who wish to explore beyond the database to locate the print. What might pass as "reference" for an eighth-grader would not be appropriate for a college sophomore. Many libraries would place titles categorized by the databases as "reference" in their circulating collections.

The questions regarding document type labeling extend beyond books/reference books. In both databases, some titles grouped under the "academic journals" rubric would not be considered as such outside of the databases themselves, but rather as magazines or newsletters. Since collegiate assignments often specify a final source bibliography of X number of books and Y number of articles from scholarly, peer-reviewed journals, it is important to these students that source type designations accurately reflect the content.

Beyond classification and labeling of document types lie considerations of the interfaces themselves. EBSCOhost and Gale/Cengage are in the business of marketing educational and professional-level databases which sometimes, as in this case, compete head-to-head. In any business, brand identification is important, and with databases, this branding is accomplished through the interface. Experienced database users can identify the vendor by the interface alone whether a corporate logo is visible or not. But within a vendor's palette of database offerings is an equally valid consideration: the distinction between an aggregator and a proprietary database. *Opposing Viewpoints in Context* and *Points of View Reference Center* are not the first databases with markedly similar content from these two vendors; EBSCO and Gale have a history of providing competing, similarly purposed electronic databases. Like the initial

rollouts of EBSCO's *Literary Reference Center* and *Literary Reference Center Plus*, the initial *Points of View Reference Center* employed the tabbed display that long has been a part of Gale's first entry in the field which preceded the EBSCO databases, the *Literature Resource Center* database. With this interface, once the initial search is made, the content types are displayed horizontally by tabs, with results for each tab listed vertically. The spare, clean simplicity of this arrangement is efficient, effective, easy to navigate, and avoids the crowded appearance of databases whose interfaces try too closely to mimic the displays of internet webpages.

The current interfaces of both databases largely have sacrificed this uncluttered simplicity. Because the left and right panes of its landing screen are devoted to stationary images, *OViC* situates all its content in the center pane. In spite of this, on the initial landing screen and screens leading up to the topic overview essay, and on the full essay screen itself, the display is fairly clean and uncluttered; the same cannot be said for the overview essay landing screen (View More). Though neatly arranged, this page's center pane is content-heavy, and some of the content is redundant: the "On This Page" box in the upper right corner of the pane duplicates as links the facets in the center of the pane beneath the opening paragraph of the overview essay. One also could wonder about the "Tools" box situated beneath "On This Page," since the content on the page seems unlikely to require use of the tools offered. It appears Gale's design team also questioned the presence of this box and recently removed it from the page but retained it on the following screen displaying the full overview essay, where the Tools option is more germane: the links under that Tools facet are appropriate and relevant. Regarding other screens, one wonders if it is desirable to fill space just because the space is there, especially when the space is filled with choices which are available elsewhere on the same page.

Because *PoV*'s landing screen resembles *OViC*'s, its display reveals similar strengths and weaknesses. By combining the left and center panes into a single pane, the landing screen offers an intuitive arrangement in an uncluttered space. The right pane offers facets unique to that pane and that page. But once the overview essay is reached, the issues with redundancy and crowding seen with *OViC* are again in evidence. The first two things in the Related Items sub-pane inside the center pane also are present in the Related Information box in the left pane. Eliminating those redundant links and moving the Guide to Critical Analysis to the Related Information box would permit the relocation of the remaining items in the sub-pane to beneath the Tools facet, thereby eliminating the Related Items sub-pane entirely and creating a more substantial right pane.

Conclusion

In a head-to-head comparison of databases of similar scope and purpose, a declaration of winners and losers is to be expected. In this particular instance this is a difficult proposition since, even though these are competing databases, they are not exact duplicates of one another. Because of their proprietary nature each database offers something unique, which allows them to be seen more as complementary rather than competitive. An argument could easily be made for subscribing to both simultaneously. If only one can be chosen, however, and with cost considerations aside, the student demographic of the selecting institution should be the determining factor.

For grades 7 through 12, the best choice likely would be *Points of View Reference Center*, due to the content provided through the hyperlinks in the Reference Shelf box and the Guide to Critical Analysis in the Related Items pane -- information for which, because of their relative inexperience as researchers and writers, younger students would have a greater need. *OViC* does not provide these study guides. *PoV*'s format of a single point and single counterpoint essay for each issue might suffice for middle-school and lower-level high-school students, but it may offer less than what college students would need. Also, the Lexile ratings offered by *PoV* would be of more value to middle- and high-school teachers than those at the college and university level.

Older students, high school upperclassmen and especially college freshmen and sophomores, have higher levels of sophistication and experience and will require a greater number of information sources; for them the single point/counterpoint format offered by *Points of View Reference Center* might prove insufficient. The larger number of viewpoints offered by *Opposing Viewpoints in Context* is more likely to meet their needs, and libraries serving older students would be better served by this database.

Once they have matriculated past their underclassman core curricula, college students at the junior and senior classifications and beyond should supplement these two databases by developing more sophisticated search strategies for use in standard aggregator databases in order to take advantage of the greater number of items indexed in those databases.

Author

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