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## CONFERENCE REPORTS

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### **Indexing, providing access to information: looking back, looking ahead**

*20–22 May 1993, Alexandria, Virginia; American Society of Indexers*

The Old Colony Inn in Alexandria, Virginia, was the location for the 25th annual meeting of the American Society of Indexers. It housed the conference itself, as well as all of those attending.



Nancy Mulvany,  
Conference Organizer  
and Chair

Nancy Mulvany organized the conference, and also moderated and led the sessions with her own unique blend of iron rule and dry humour.

The first day, Friday 21 May, was devoted to large indexing projects, which inevitably meant database indexing. Only the session on indexing standards did not deal with computers and database indexing. Saturday 22 May had a general theme, the 'profession of indexing'. Speakers dealt with training and accreditation, back-of-the-book indexing, research on the use of indexes in books, and research into indexing; and two group sessions put indexers under several kinds of spotlight.

A book, the *Proceedings of the conference*, was made available to every member at the beginning. It included almost all the formal presentations and speeches, and was fully indexed (by Nancy). Two months after the conference, a re-reading of some of the papers still provides something new and interesting to mull over.

Attendance was officially 217, including speakers. Of these 144 were women, and all but nine American (six from the UK, two from Canada, and one from Australia).

Here follows a résumé of the main sessions, in order of presentation.

#### *Bureau of National Affairs (BNA)*

The Bureau of National Affairs is the largest employee-owned company in the USA, and one of the largest private publishers in the Washington DC area. It has an indexing section of 40 people, 27 of whom are indexers. Enid Zafran and Coleen MacKay presented a description of their work and of the changes resulting from their conversion from a mainframe-based indexing system to one using CINDEX™ on a network of PC microcomputers. The advantages included a huge increase in flexibility of indexers' time and ways of working, along with a decrease in indexing costs.

#### *Delivering database information*

Barbara M. Preschel, Director of Public Affairs Information Service, Inc. introduced a session on database indexing. This featured short talks from three people engaged in managing changes in indexing systems supporting specialized academic associations.

Daniel Uchitelle of the Modern Languages Association spoke of 'unintended consequences' and how to avoid becoming one. This talk highlighted the risks run by organizations that change their indexing systems midstream. The bibliography indexing is done by volunteer scholars, with the help of a small in-house staff. Changes in the system upset many people, there being a huge drop in volunteer work.

Sarah Mulholland, of the American Psychological Association, manages the database service PsycINFO which covers relevant literature from around the world. Again, a new system was installed, resulting in a generally better service. Indexing here was seen to expand towards subject analysis, a result I gather no one expected. Sarah described the typical indexer: for more information, one should consult the database (in a Boolean search, no doubt) under the headings *obsessive and compulsive behaviour*.

Monica Pronin of the American Petroleum Institute outlined the system used to support research by members of the institute. Indexers and abstractors take about a year for training. High quality is demanded by the clients, and a number of features of the work stem from this requirement. Client training is undertaken, the thesaurus (on which the indexing terms are based) is updated twice a year, and regular meetings with the clients (member firms of the Institute) are held.

### *Weaving the social fabric*

Christopher Locke of the *Internet Business Journal* spoke of indexing as a 'craft of place'. He pointed out that the information explosion of the past decade makes more demands on indexing than it is up to at the moment. Automation, in one form or another, was the only approach. The call was for more indexers and more librarians to guide users through the 'rain forests' of information that now surround us.

### *Computer-assisted database indexing*

Professor Bella Hass Weinberg chaired a session on computer-assisted database indexing, and introduced three people involved in the more practical aspects of this field.

Gail Hodge spoke of a survey of the current state of computer-assisted database indexing, highlighting her talk by describing the BIOSYS system. This is the world's largest database producer in the life science and biomedical fields, and indexes about 600,000 documents per year.

Susan Humphrey described the MedIndEx (Medical Indexing Expert) project, which tests a prototype interactive knowledge-based system for the MEDLINE database which covers the field of biomedical literature.

Matthew Koll of Personal Library Software Inc. spoke of relevance ranking as a complement to indexing. Relevance ranking of documents in information retrieval works with Boolean operators, and offers better precision in document search, better ease-of-use in setting up queries, and better recall of ideas by the user.

### *Standards for indexing*

Nancy Mulvany led a discussion of indexing standards which featured presentations from two people involved in their design.

James Anderson spoke of the NISO standard being developed in a committee dominated by ASI members, and of the research into indexing and of evolution of the standard. There is also the need to address indexes not found in the printed form (such as back-of-the-book indexes). The committee has to include database as well as automatic indexing.

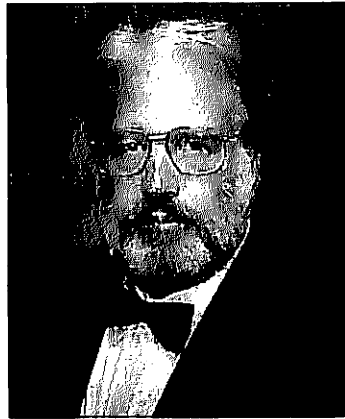
Janet Shuter outlined the differences between American and British indexing standards and committee structure. The British standard is used more for developing styles of indexing and indexing skills, in a more advisory capacity. She went on to describe the training and qualification structure including registration and accreditation, and the moves towards a National Vocational Qualification.

### *The profession of indexing*

Saturday morning included a panel session, 'An international perspective', where representatives from the four societies each described the state of indexing in their own country.

Tom McFadden, incoming President of ASI, spoke of the Internet and electronic indexing, and the need for some control and indexing of some of its contents. Electronic indexing is becoming more attractive to many as an alternative to print. The problems of printed material are pushing many towards using the Internet both as a communication tool and a source of indexable material.

Garry Cousins from AusSI, who was inaugural President of the New South Wales branch 1990-92, spoke on the beginnings of training and accreditation of indexers in Australia. Existing training and the registration process for indexers were described, as were ways of improving the situation. A survey of Australian publishers' views on training was outlined.



**Tom McFadden,  
ASI President**



**Michèle Hudon,  
IASC President**

Some of the views of Australian publishers ('we hardly ever have indexes in our publications . . .') will have a resonance with indexers' experiences in other countries.

Michèle Hudon, President of the Indexing and Abstracting Society of Canada, gave an overview of the profession there. There is plenty of indexing work in a relatively untapped market. Little or no formal training exists; what there is is found mainly in library schools. A particular feature of work in Canada is the need for bilingual indexing, as government works are published in both English and French.

Elizabeth Wallis, Chairman and Registrar of the Society of Indexers, spoke on the registration, training and accreditation of indexers in Britain. She described the setting up of the National Council for Vocational Qualifications and the more specific Publishing Qualifications Board. The Society of Indexers, in its training and accreditation scheme, seems to be well ahead of other bodies in its training programme. The registration procedure, as distinct from that for training and accreditation, was outlined, as were moves to limit publicity given to non-accredited and non-registered indexers in *Indexers Available*.

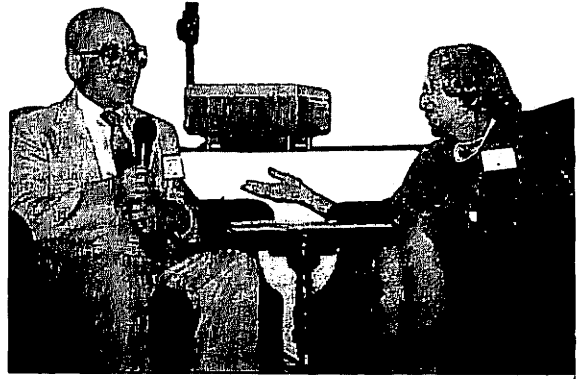


Garry Cousins



Elizabeth Wallis,  
SI Chair and  
Registrar

### Oral histories



Dorothy Thomas interviews Hans Wellisch

The most unusual session was led by Dorothy Thomas, a former President of ASI. She is preparing a series of oral histories for the ASI archives, and in this session interviewed nine distinguished indexers, seven of them past ASI presidents. Common threads emerged: training at Columbia University; the influence of Ted Hines, the late pioneer of computer-aided indexing; and an interest in music. This session was a welcome break from the more studious and weighty matters occupying most of the conference.

### Soft indexing

Hazel Bell was the keynote speaker on Saturday, speaking of *soft* indexing, her term for the work of the non-specialist, non-information retriever, back-of-the-book, people-centred subject indexer. She spoke of increasing regulation and standardization of indexing, often at the hands of non-indexers. In soft indexing the need is to study and interpret text as it is written, not by a set of rules rigidly laid down. Bergson's memorable phrase, 'obstinacy of momentum', covers those situations where a rule is invoked simply because it was the right decision in other situations. The soft indexer finds controlled vocabulary, authority lists, and thesauri limiting and inimical to the exercise of the 'art' of indexing.

### Book index characteristics

Elizabeth Liddy and Corinne Jorgensen described a research project at Syracuse University School of Information Studies on those features of an index that facilitate access to the information. A book was indexed (by three indexers) and seven versions of that index were created, each designed to test the effect of one feature (*see also* references, presence/lack of sub-headings, divided index [name/title and subject *versus* all-in-one, basic entries only *versus* a higher-level index, etc.]). These different versions were tested with groups

of volunteer subjects to determine which features (or their lack) posed specific problems. It was interesting to note that some subjects (from the School of Information Studies itself!) had little acquaintance with an index, or how to use one.

*Professional indexers: proof of*

Ira Kleinberg spoke on professional indexers, and their assumption that they are the best qualified to index a document. He reviewed current research on indexing, especially back-of-the-book indexing, and outlined findings in a series of projects and studies. He pointed out that we do not know enough about (i) indexing standards, (ii) indexing styles, (iii) consistency, and (iv) the uses to which indexes are put, and others. Another line of research, that on information retrieval, was described, and it was suggested that it be linked to research on back-of-the-book indexing. Ira stressed the need—still—to sell indexing to the academic community.

*Freelancers*

The conference was concluded by a panel discussion featuring five indexers: Babs Klein, Frances Lennie, Elinor Lindheimer, Jane Maddocks, and Alexandra Nickerson, chaired by Nancy Mulvany. In the first round, Nancy asked questions, and it was thrown open to the floor at the end. Questions were on (1) the kinds of indexing people do, (2) whether the current economic situation in the USA had affected them, (3) their technical situations and problems, (4) their views on accreditation. Additional topics covered were pricing



The inaugural conference reception. Foreground shows (left to right) Elizabeth Wallis (SI), Dorothy Thomas (ASI), Bella Weinberg (ASI), and Hazel Bell (SI).

for indexing work, the books that indexers have on their shelves, and publishers' perspectives on indexing.

*Quotes from the conference*

Daniel Uchitelle: On the confusion created by a change in the layout of the worksheets, Daniel said 'It made sense to us at the time.'

Babs Klein: 'The great thing about not being rich—you don't miss it that much.'

Hanlon's Razor: 'Never attribute to malevolence what can adequately be explained by stupidity.'

GARY HALL

photographs by BevAnne Ros

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

**Original ideas in indexing?**

*The Indexer* is replete with quotations on the subject of indexing, and so I am writing to put into the record a statement on the quality of the literature of indexing made by a noted authority in the field: '... nothing truly original in indexing has been published since Ranganathan's work in the 1930s. One might even claim that no really major contribution to the literature has been made since Cutter.'

The statement was made by F. W. Lancaster in a letter responding to my review of his book, *Indexing and abstracting in theory and practice*.<sup>2</sup> In the review, which was generally favorable, I criticized the absence of citations to the works of James D. Anderson, Jessica Milstead, Hilda Feinberg, Eugene Garfield, and Hans Wellisch. Subsequent reviewers, such as Cochrane,<sup>3</sup> have also noted the bibliographic lacunae in the book.

Readers of *The Indexer* who do not have a library science background may not recognize the names of the pioneers cited by Lancaster. Charles Ammi Cutter was an American librarian who authored *Rules for a dictionary catalog*, first published in 1876 and issued in a 4th edition in 1904.<sup>4</sup> In this book, he established rules for the formulation of alphabetic-specific subject headings and for syndetic (cross-reference) structure. These rules still influence Library of Congress Subject Headings and possibly cross-reference practice in book indexes as well.

S. R. Ranganathan, a prolific Indian librarian, is credited with the invention of chain indexing as well as faceted classification, although both of these ideas have their roots in the Dewey Decimal Classification and Relative Index. The theory of chain indexing was applied to book indexing by J. Mills in this journal,<sup>5</sup> and I have cited Mills' paper in responding both to