Databases in small specialized libraries

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**This study of indexing in two small special libraries reveals the pitfalls encountered but also focuses on the satisfaction of being able to provide timely and relevant information retrieval through indexing.**

In the mid-1970s, the authors – librarians in a small, specialized library – began to investigate more efficient ways of finding information rapidly. On several occasions, specific facts, vaguely remembered articles on academic topics or details of events from previous years had been urgently requested. This invariably resulted in hasty paging through reference works, books and periodicals, leaving library shelves in chaos, and frustrating clients and librarians alike when the latter were not able to provide the correct answers. This article focuses on the measures taken to alleviate this situation in one library and subsequent developments in another.

**Background**

The Jan Smuts House Library of the South African Institute of International Affairs is situated on the campus of the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa. It was named in honour of Jan Smuts (1870–1950), who was twice prime minister of South Africa, a member of the Imperial War Cabinet, a field-marshal in the second world war, a founder member of the League of Nations and the United Nations, and also the author of a philosophical work entitled *Holism*. Although an independent institute, the library was for many years financially supported by the university. Its focus was on international relations and economics, politics and related subjects. A separate section contained documents of international organizations, such as the ILO and the United Nations (it later became a depositary library for UN documentation). The library was primarily established to serve Institute researchers, but it also had strong ties with university staff and students and was used intensively by researchers, academics and students at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Although ties with the university were reduced to a large extent in 1998, and library staff, finances and stock much decreased, it now functions as a reference and resource centre for researchers and students, and still has many clients. It has also retained its depository status for UN documentation.

**Periodicals Index**

The first tentative efforts to establish an index to the periodical literature began after lengthy debates on the methodology. Which keywords were to be used? How was consistency to be ensured when dealing with current events in which new concepts regularly occurred? In what physical form references were to be presented? And in what detail? Eventually the following framework was adopted:

- A card catalogue seemed the most practical form of presentation in pre-computer days.
- A largely country-based keyword system was implemented, as international relations and events always involved specific countries or regions. Accordingly, concepts such as ‘Nuclear issues’, ‘Environment’, ‘Globalization’, etc. were arranged under these geographical area headings. Subheadings were freely added, as conditions and events arose – ‘Foreign Relations’, ‘Foreign Policy’, ‘Politics’ and ‘Economics’ were the most frequently occurring, but unique terms were also created, such as ‘United States – World Trade Center terrorist attack’.
- The amount of detail to be included proved to be problematic. For example, a term such as ‘Economics’ could cover a wide range of related topics. A third keyword was therefore introduced in order to avoid a plethora of unwanted references.
- To ensure consistency, we initially referred back to the growing periodicals index, typed up on cards. However, as time passed and the two indexers became more experienced, only occasional inconsistencies occurred. To rectify these, cross-references were added, which directed the user to additional articles.
- Periodical titles, volume and issue numbers, dates and pagination were the only references given – neither authors nor titles of the articles were included in the interest of economy in terms of time and space.

The Periodicals Index proved to be a useful tool and was extensively used by librarians, staff and students. Hours devoted to compiling references and then having them typed and sorted were well spent.

**From card index to database**

After some 15 years of indexing in this fashion (well into the computer age), it was felt that the index on cards had served its purpose and was long obsolete. Various options were considered; finally, in 1992, the Q&A program was selected. All new references were entered and the information on the card index was gradually transferred to the new system. This was a great improvement: the indexing system had finally entered the computer age.

However, within a few years, the Q&A system had also become obsolete. The university’s computer centre no longer offered a support system, and alternative programs had to be considered. As it was necessary to use software
with other library functions, such as periodicals cataloguing, archives recording and book ordering, an InMagic package was installed, which now provides fast and efficient service. From the first tentative beginnings, the Periodicals Database has grown to some 13,000 individual headings and totals some 100,000 entries. It forms an integral part of the Jan Smuts House Library and it is difficult to see how the library could function without it. To the best of our knowledge, this is the only specialized database of periodical articles in South Africa and it is being compiled in a small library on the Wits campus. It enjoys a high reputation and has a wide circle of users.

The Electoral Institute of Southern Africa

When the Jan Smuts House Library staff and its holdings were reduced in size in 1998, only one of the present authors remained in the library. The other became librarian of a non-governmental organization, the Electoral Institute of Southern Africa (EISA). At that time, articles were unprocessed and the only concession to order was a series of boxes containing related material. Labels were handwritten and blew precariously in the wind. A vague classification system had been devised, and a computer program ‘the Indexer’ was used in an unsystematic manner to catalogue the material.

Background

The EISA library, now known as the EISA Online Library, is only five years old. It was established to develop and sustain an integrated information and research service on election-related issues and democratic transitions in the SADC (Southern African Development Community) region, using the internet as its primary marketing and dissemination medium. Elements required to sustain the development, delivery and maintenance of such a service included, among others, research capacity, data/material collection, creation of digital collections, bibliographic data management such as cataloguing and indexing, and web interfaces.

Gradual steps and the creation of Elbi Online

Without a clearly articulated library policy, well-catalogued library material, relevant stock and, most importantly, access to the material, it was impossible to reach the primary aim of outreach and networking in the SADC region. Only once there was a concrete ‘product’ to disseminate could we begin to reach a wider audience than the EISA research staff, students from the University of the Witwatersrand and visiting academics. The following system was developed.

- In conjunction with the cataloguing programme, a thesaurus of keywords was devised to facilitate the retrieval of information in a logical manner.
- An in-house software program was developed, based on the experience gained in the Jan Smuts House Library.

- Unlike the Jan Smuts House Library, it included a full reference citation, annotation and a multitude of keywords to ensure precise information without having to use cross-referencing to any large extent. This was only possible because this library is an even more specialized one, concerned only with a rarefied political field – elections – and with a geographical focus on the Southern African region (though comparative literature is also essential to the full understanding of electoral processes).
- Material held by this library is mainly ‘grey’ literature, legal materials, articles and a relatively small collection of books. Cataloguing data were input directly into the automated bibliographic database.
- The database was named ELBI (EISA Library Bibliographic Database).

Problems

The system was not without its problems.

- Problems in the construction of the software were legion as it was not a commercially tested database like InMagic but one devised especially for the needs of this library. As a problem arose, the database changed once more. This method is not to be recommended, especially if one is on a tight budget.
- As with the Jan Smuts House Library, and despite the fact that there was a controlled vocabulary list of keywords, inconsistencies in terminology did sometimes arise.
- The use of inexperienced staff led to errors in data input.
- The Directorate’s expectation that the database (now some 6000 items) would be speedily created, and the desire for it to become instantly digital, meant that the work was done under constant pressure.

A web-based database

Eventually the problems outlined above were resolved and the bulk of material was catalogued and processed. The software was amended, first to provide fully detailed searches by author, title, ISBN or record number, and thereafter to generate an alphabetically arranged report. It was further improved to accommodate the transfer of material to the EISA website (http://www.eisa.org.za), where in the first six weeks, it scored 3000 hits. The facility for document delivery means that the material is available to all, obviously at a price, and with the frustration of waiting for the post, but a method has been devised of storing digital information already on the web. This means instant access to the text, a facility that will grow once all the hard-copy material has been scanned and put on the website. This is a long-term project but is now within the realms of possibility.

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