

Methods and Objectives in Judging the Information Content of Document Titles

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As early as 1949, Larkey and his co-workers¹ made detailed comparisons between the indexing method of CA, IM, BA and other services. I personally analyzed hundreds of papers that had been indexed by CA. Complete indexing sheets were provided to me by Charles Bernier, the former editor of CA, and reported on the number of indexing terms explicitly and implicitly indicated in article titles. I did the same for IM also on a large scale. When John O'Connor worked for ISI in the early 1960's, I discussed these experiments with him in relation to his own, even more detailed, analyses on which he has published.²

There are a number of reasons why people like to study the information content of titles. For example, Resnick³ wanted to know if they were as "useful" as abstracts for SDI purposes. He concluded that they were. Others like Bottle⁴ want to judge the relative utility of publications like *Current Contents*, *Chemical Titles*, etc. Others are interested in whether SDI systems are capable of anticipating the users' needs if title information is the sole input. On the other hand, a system like ASCA,⁵ which displays a title, employs selection criteria that are "automatic"⁶ but are neither purely title-derived nor produced by subject indexes. Thus, an otherwise seemingly information-poor title like "Review of Organic Synthesis," may be judged information-rich if it is known that the paper cites a particular author or in fact the user himself.

There are several reasons why title indexing studies fail to produce conclusive results. Indeed, some of the conclusions drawn by Bottle⁷ in earlier papers are clearly not supported by the facts of life, not the least of which is that reported user surveys have established that *Current Contents* is the most popular searching service available in the world today and certainly one of the most widely used in any particular field one chooses such as biology, medicine, chemistry, physics, etc.⁸

Theoretical experiments which prove otherwise seem rather suspect and here are some reasons why. Titles that are viewed out-of-context are not the same as titles examined in a contents page. Readers have a variety of reasons for scanning contents pages including so-called current awareness. It is impossible by any existing method

to judge, *a priori*, what may interest a reader of CC. A research manager may examine an issue of CC for the first time and simply be fascinated by the mere existence of a *Journal of Molecular Crystals* or the *Journal of Holographic Research*. That there is enough published to justify such specialized journals tells him something that his own market research department may have overlooked.

Similarly, if a symposium takes place and that "title" appears at the head of a contents page, it relates important social and scientific information to the reader. Any specific paper in that symposium, no matter how poor in information when read by a computer, has a great deal of relevance and may be information-rich.

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