Introduction to Symposium on Methods of Alerting Chemists to New Developments*

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The idea of a symposium on methods of alerting chemists to new developments occurred simultaneously to several people within the ACS Division of Chemical Literature. While work in this field has not rivaled that on information retrieval, there have been many developments in the past four or five years. Accordingly, the Program Committee of the Division of Chemical Literature decided that a symposium covering these new developments in relation to classical methods would be quite desirable. Organization of this symposium was then assigned to us, probably because we were among those who suggested it.

The importance of methods of alerting chemists to new developments is not new. Chemists engaged in dynamic work have always had both a need and an internal drive to keep abreast of new developments in their fields of involvement and interest. They now attempt to do this in various ways, or combinations of ways, but few are satisfied that they are succeeding—that they are getting all the information that they need in the time that they can afford to allot to this effort. Many chemists are not even certain that they know about or correctly use the multiplicity of alerting media that have been created for their benefit.

On their part, the creators of alerting tools still have much to learn about the relative as well as absolute merits of their systems, and even about the components of their systems—titles, abstracts, keywords, journals, newsletters, etc. This field is now moving quite rapidly, and developments have often been empirical rather than based on fundamental knowledge.

Further complicating the alerting picture for both the alerter and the alerted is the usual need to have the processed information also fit into an information-retrieval program, and the desire in both areas to present the pertinent information without much "noise" but without eliminating browsing completely.

If we may digress slightly for a moment, the subject of browsing receives sporadic attention from both alerters and retrievers, but really merits attention for its own sake. One of these days, perhaps we will hear a paper or symposium on its ramifications. About all that we can say here, however, is that alerting tools must somewhere make it possible; otherwise, there is a real danger that the chemist who is alerted to developments in his major field or fields will lose inspirational contact with information that did not seem to be quite on the main track.

This symposium on "Methods of Alerting Chemists to New Developments" has been organized to review the state of the art on alerting. Four papers deal with methods of alerting prior to any publication—a paper on "Meetings and Their Publications," one on the exchange of preprints, another on prepublication availability of complete manuscripts received by a major ACS journal, and one on use of information clearinghouses. Another group of papers reviews the status of the alerting publications with which we have long been familiar—journals, information-reporting services, reviews, abstract journals, and internal abstract bulletins. Finally, several papers deal with some of the new methods of alerting—title-announcement publications, internal use of keyword-in-context indexes for alerting, a computer-based literature-alerting service, centralized abstracting for an industry, and cooperation within an industry.

Trends are not yet easy to discern, nor has any formula yet been developed that will enable the producer or user of alerting tools to select easily from among them. Nevertheless, what was once a static art is now a dynamic one, and there is every prospect that those who need to be alerted will benefit from the present ferment.

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