



## THE PANS

### Information Science Abstracts

We all know the proverb that the cobbler's children go barefoot. Still, most of us would expect that the editor of a fashion magazine dresses well, a doctor takes good care of her own health, a car mechanic keeps his car spick and span. I certainly would have expected that Information Science Abstracts, published by IFI/Plenum, would show a good model for well-balanced coverage, consistent indexing, exemplary use of authority files, and regular updating. After all, this database was founded by the American Society for Information Science, and is sponsored by ASIS, the American Society of Indexers, the American Library Association, ASIDIC, the Association of Library and Information Science Education, the Medical Library Association, and the Special Library Association. Sponsorship and—implicitly—endorsement by any single one of these associations would seem to be a guarantee for quality, but it is not. I know that some of the work that goes into ISA has been voluntary, but users pay similar online charges as they do for the commercial databases of far better quality, such as INSPEC, or H.W. Wilson's Library Literature.

ISA is supposed to cover—among other types of documents—over 300 journals. It's a bad omen to find out that as of mid-October, there are 3,338 journal entries in its journal name index. A casual scanning of the index reveals blatant inconsistencies and errors in journal names. This is in sharp contrast with ISA's claim that the journal name field consists of standardized spellings of journal names as contained in a controlled list of titles of selected journals. The names of the same journals appear in various formats scattered around the index, often far away from each other. There are 1,610 entries that occur only once in the journal index. This is a clear sign of the absolute lack of authority control.

For many years ISA did not even have a controlled vocabulary for descriptors—the bare minimum expected from any database. Now it has, but it still does not make subject indexing consistent enough. One would expect from such a database a much less dirty author and author affiliation index, too. I have seen a lot of databases, but none of them had spelled patent assignee names in as many formats as ISA, even for fairly simple names, such as Siemens (20 variants including typos) and Toshiba (22 variants including typos). Cleaning up these indexes that aggregated through 30 years is an Augean task, no doubt.

Perhaps as a warm up the publisher could start with the simple language index. If these were merely eyesores I would not bring up that Afrikaans appears in four versions, Czech in seven, and that there are eight times as many entries under the non-existent languages Croato-Serbian and Yugoslavian as the correct one, Serbo-Croatian, or that Portuguese occurs barely more often (170 records) than Portugese (147). They are, however, more than eyesores. In the DIALOG version of ISA, you may browse around the language index and the other indexes, while your taximeter is ticking, but in the SilverPlatter DOS version there is only a single index to browse, and the language, document type, and publication year fields are not part of this index, thus are not browsable at all, and therefore you never realize why you don't find almost half of the Portuguese language articles. Actually, I found this out because I needed a comprehensive search before a trip to Brazil.

ISA claims that the core journals are indexed and abstracted cover to cover. Sample checks did not confirm this. While about 800 articles from *DATABASE* may look good, it is less than that in LISA (893), and

Ref	Items	Index-term
E1	850	UD=9508
E2	850	UD=9509
E3	800	*UD=9510
E4	850	UD=9511
E5	850	UD=9512
E6	700	UD=9601
E7	700	UD=9602
E8	700	UD=9603
E9	700	UD=9604
E10	700	UD=9605
E11	800	UD=9606
E12	850	UD=9607

Enter P or PAGE for more  
?\* Figure 3. Too round and too nice to be true

While the updates suggest the database was loaded with a nice round number of records every month, that was not the case.

far less than Social SciSearch (1,826). Having 70 records from the *Annual Review of Information Science and Technology* is not impressive, even at first sight. Knowing that a typical volume includes 10-12 chapters, and *ARIST* is now in its 35th volume, it is obvious that this coverage is not complete. A comparison with Social SciSearch that has 272 items from *ARIST* puts ISA's figure into correct perspective. Not only did it start to cover *ARIST* only in 1984 (seven years after promising in an editorial to strengthen its ties with *ARIST*), but it included fewer items per year than Social SciSearch, completely omitted the year 1988, and stopped covering *ARIST* in 1992. Similarly inconsistent and unreasonable patterns were found with other core titles as well.

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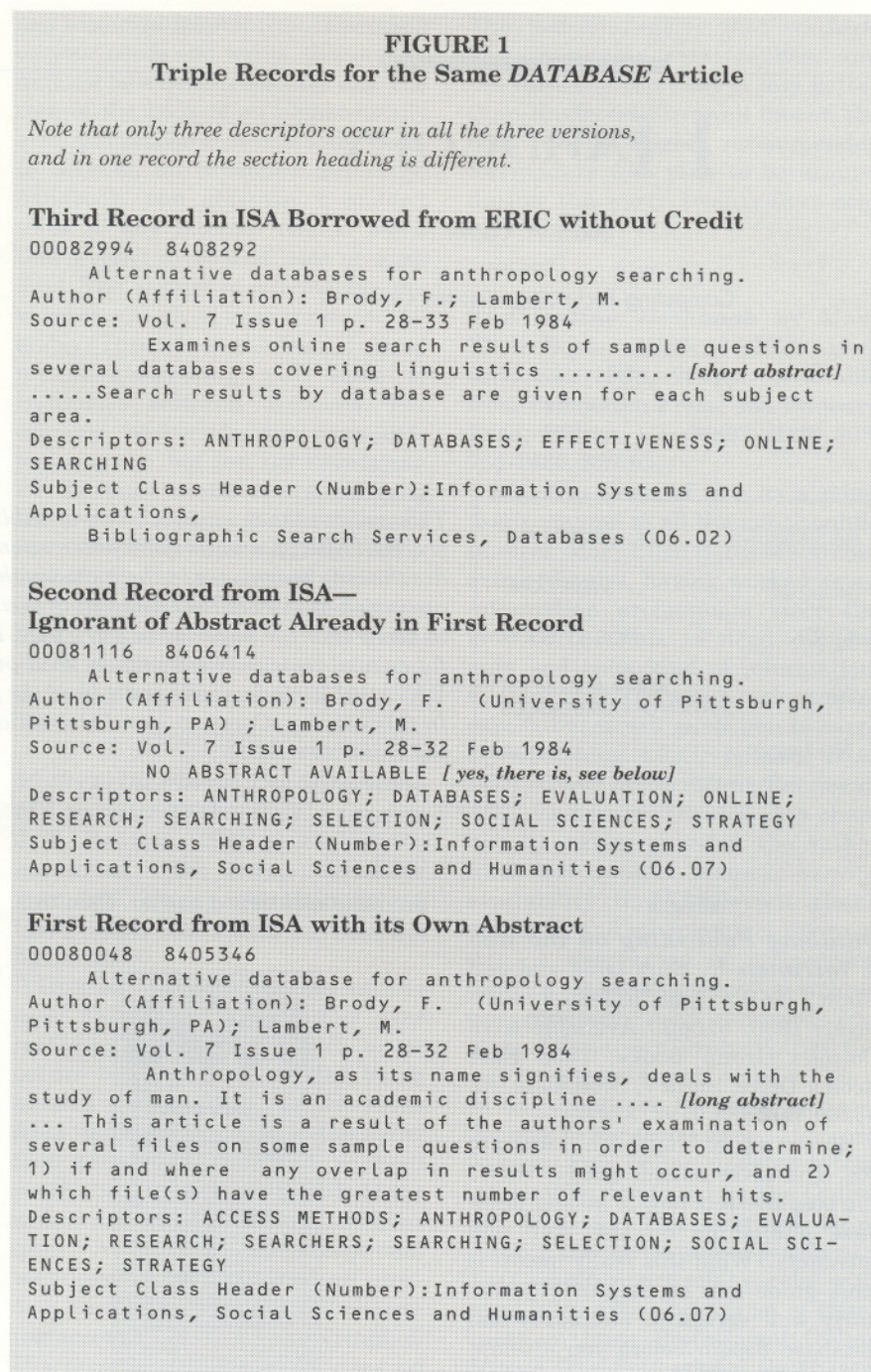
#### Information Science Abstracts

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Barbara Quint's comment made in 1993 that "Information Science Abstracts...had its own problem with updating and comprehensiveness of coverage" ("The Information Industry Counts." *Information Today*, July/August 1993, pp. 7-8.) remains valid. ISA is supposed to be updated online every month. Until mid-October it was updated only three times in 1996. The consecutive, no-gap update index entries (UD=9601, 9602, 9603, etc.) suggest that ISA had been regularly updated with a nice round number of records every month. In reality, the updates were bundled and dumped in the database on the three occasions. It is as if a nursery would feed the babies once a day, but would enter in the log as if they had been fed four times at the prescribed intervals. ISA did not respond to my fax about the permanent delays in updating. DIALOG indicated that there were problems with the tapes received. This is not good enough for a database that is to be updated monthly. The quarterly updated SilverPlatter version on CD-ROM has been ahead of DIALOG—yet another example of the myth that online databases are always more current than their CD-ROM brethren.

As for the too-round-to-be-true number of records added, I was always puzzled. I think I may be on the right track of figuring out how ISA does it. There are excessive numbers of duplicates and triplicate records for the same article in ISA (see Figure 1). Out of the 810 records for *DATABASE*, for example, 98 are duplicate pairs. Some of them are borrowed from other databases (ERIC, NTIS), and identified, but many are just borrowed without due credit. Since the duplicates and triplicates hardly add any additional information, they are just padding the database. ISA may have decided to give a nice look to it by adding duplicates and triplicates to make the "monthly" updates of 700, 750, 800 look very well balanced for the casual user.

I have to admit that the duplicates and triplicates have one advantage. Since the descriptors are reassigned, and a section heading is added by ISA to comply with its own, the borrowed records and their pairs provide



a fertile ground to evaluate indexing consistency. Obviously, the indexers or the editor were not required to compare the original ISA records and the duplicates, since the congruency among descriptors and even among the much broader section headings falls far short of expectations.

Space in this column limits me in presenting further details and examples, but some scholarly journals have expressed interest in publishing the findings of my grant project

about measuring and checking the various aspects of database quality as modeled through ISA, so if you wish you may locate them through ISA later this year. But, I understand if you would have second thoughts about using ISA.

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