
ASSIA - A New Reference Work for the Social Sciences

P.F. Broxis, FLA, MInfSc.

Library Association Publishing Ltd.

Although ASSIA (*Applied Social Sciences Index & Abstracts*) was not launched until 1987 it has a history going back nearly a decade. This article attempts to explain why this was, what ASSIA is, and to look at some of the lessons which have been learnt in developing this service.

The Library Association has been involved in producing indexing and abstracting services for a considerable number of years, the longest running being the *British Humanities Index* which goes back to 1915 under the title of *Subject Index to Periodicals*. This change of name took place in 1962 with the launch of *British Technology Index* (which became *Current Technology Index* in 1981). The other abstracting service which the Association produces is *Library and Information Science Abstracts*. This was produced on a voluntary basis from 1950 as *Library Science Abstracts* and was changed to an in-house publication under its new title in 1969.

For many years I was on the staff of the *British/Current Technology Index* and could see a need for a service to cover the Social Sciences. Talks with a friend who worked for various social services departments confirmed there was a need to be met. This eventually led me to formulate a proposal for an index to British social science journals which had a direct bearing on social work. The proposal was filed away. This was a time of great activity at the Library Association with a new managing director and the transformation of the publishing department into a limited company. Coinciding with these events was the appointment of a new sales and business manager, who was told of my proposal and who approached me since he realised the company needed new products if it was to grow. He also perceived that such growth would

come from serials publications rather than books for which the potential market was limited, whereas if a good subscriber base is established for a serial, a steady income is assured for many years.

The outcome of the sales and business manager studying the proposal was that a new one was drawn up for a service on a much larger scale since its predecessor was too limited and narrow to form a foundation for a good subscriber base. The revised proposal was for an international English language service covering all aspects of the social/human services together with the core material of sociology: it would cover over 500 periodicals with a strong emphasis on American titles and it would contain abstracts.

Such an ambitious proposal, not unexpectedly, received much discussion, both on account of the size of the product, the staffing level necessary to produce it and the level of investment necessary to launch it. "Would it not be better to start with a smaller product and to increase its size with the growth of the subscriber base?" was typical of the kind of question raised. The result of these discussions was that the Board proposed that a market research exercise should be undertaken by a commercial company. Results of this survey proved the need for the product and gave a satisfactory forecast of the likely subscriber base for the United Kingdom. The research also revealed that the product was the right size and that to reduce it would make it less desirable to potential subscribers. It was on the basis of the final report that the Board gave the decision for ASSIA to go ahead in June 1986 which was just in time to start publication in January 1987 with the first issue appearing at the end of April.

Needless to say, once the decision to publish had been given there was a considerable amount to be done - the editor had to be appointed! Once that was done, four full-time and one part-time indexers/abstractors had to be appointed, including one to act as the second person in the department, along with two editorial assistants whose duty it is to key the data, necessary to produce ASSIA, into the microcomputer. The computer had to be ordered, along with the supporting peripherals, and the programming requirements had to be discussed with the consultant who undertakes the computerisation work for the serials published by the company.

What of ASSIA itself? It is designed to cater for the needs of all those concerned with the various issues which affect the lives of people in our society, be it youth, ageing, ill health, handicap, race, housing, etc., with the social implications being supported by the economic, medical, and political aspects relating to these topics. This means that about 80% of the journals listed are completely indexed whereas the remaining 20% are scanned for relevant material. The indexing is done in such a way that the person or problem is in the lead position. This is where ASSIA differs from other indexing and abstracting services in the field (for example, *Sociological Abstracts*) where the stress is placed much more on the sociological phenomena with the coverage of areas like social work being somewhat sparse. ASSIA is designed to serve the needs of the student, researcher and practitioner alike.

A novel feature of ASSIA is that the abstracts are not numbered but arranged under alphabetical subject headings. This means that at the end of each year the bi-monthly issues can - and will be - cumulated into one alphabetical sequence, thus avoiding an index which refers back to a numbered abstract in an individual part published during the year. The result of this should be to make it easier to consult. The author index gives the citation of each article and the first two terms of the subject heading.

Another feature of ASSIA is its network of related headings which direct the user from general to more specific terms. For example, it is possible to get from **Social structure** to **Special needs children** by following through the related headings beginning at Social structure:

Social structure

Kinship

Families

Children

Special needs children

This enables searches to be made starting off with a very general topic and working down to a very specific topic and, by searching all or some of them, the terms contained under a list of related headings permits collateral searching.

The launch of ASSIA has added to our experience of marketing a secondary service. Because of the number of new publications, mostly primary journals, which have ceased publication after a year or two, potential subscribers are increasingly cautious about subscribing to a new service, especially an expensive large-scale indexing and abstracting service, until it has had time to establish itself - a fact that is very tough for anyone to accept when launching a major service involving a large investment. It is likely to be five years or more before ASSIA is able to reach its potential; hence those who subscribe during the first couple of years are greatly valued, especially when subscribing can mean that an institution has to sacrifice other subscriptions.

Another factor has been the conservatism of the American market. At three major exhibitions in the US considerable interest has been shown in ASSIA but the resulting subscriptions have so far been disappointing, although we have acquired some interesting ones. It seems that the Americans are rather more parochial and conservative than we are. This pinpoints the difficulty of producing a product designed to meet the needs of both the British and American market. About 45% of the journals covered are from America. In addition we cover so-called "international journals" published in this country by companies like Academic Press and Pergamon Press, some of which have American editors, but which are regarded in the eyes of the

Americans as British journals and therefore of little interest! Were the American journals to be increased significantly from the present level, British librarians would start to complain!

A factor which has recently come to light is the extent to which libraries tend to purchase indexing and abstracting services according to the number of journals covered which are in their own stock, thus using them as a means of exploiting their stock. The argument has also been put that if people are given access through indexing and abstracting services to material which is not held, the cost of interlibrary loans and photocopying will increase.

This short paper cannot be ended without mentioning the role of the various subscription agents who help in promoting both existing and new services. These are important since no publisher is able to maintain an exhaustive list of potential subscribers and agents are the best people to undertake publicity work on behalf of publishers. There is, however, a need for more agents to enter the marketing arena in overseas countries since all but the largest cannot effectively market overseas. An increase of services of this nature would certainly facilitate the marketing of ASSIA.