American Society for Indexing Conferences: An Analysis of Major Topics, 1997-2011

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Introduction

The American Society for Indexing (ASI) holds annual conferences to keep members informed of new developments in indexing technology and the expanding role of indexing (ASI 2012). Conferences also facilitate communication among members, provide educational opportunities, and raise awareness of quality indexing.

The first annual meeting of ASI was held on the evening of June 16, 1969, at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York (Harris 1969, 189-190). The meeting consisted of reports by officers as well as discussions of old and new business. Attendees suggested several projects that ASI should initiate, including a newsletter and "subject- or problem-oriented meetings."

In the early years of ASI, an annual meeting was limited to one evening (Thomas 1989, 125). This practice continued until 1972 when the First Annual All-Day Meeting was held (Preschel 1973, 176-179). This meeting consisted of two sessions on indexing training courses and one session on the expectations of indexers and publishers. Since that time, ASI conferences have increased significantly in length and content. The most recent conference was held April 28-30, 2011, in Providence, Rhode Island. The conference program included four workshops, two keynote addresses and thirty seminars, with themes ranging from "How to start a freelance business" to "Embedded indexing in FrameMaker" (ASI 2011).

The purpose of this article is to identify major topics discussed at ASI conferences from 1997 through 2011 and to explore how the topics have changed over time. ASI conference programs reflect topics of interest to indexers and thus provide insight into concerns of the profession at large.

Literature review

Rowley (1981, 16-18) has written about the value of conference literature and the ways in which it may be used. Conference literature may summarize current problems and solutions in a discipline, offer an understanding of techniques and approaches in use, and provide insight into new advances and technological developments.

Several research studies in the field of library and information science have concerned the content of conference presentations. Coughlin and Snelson (1983) and Snelson and Talar (1991) examined the quality of research presented at selected national conferences of the Association of College and Research Libraries. Wilson (2010) analyzed sessions from library conferences in western Canada over a period of five years to determine their target audiences. Garner, Davidson and Williams (2008) studied the North American Serials Interest Group Conference proceedings from 1986 to 2005 to identify major topics and trends.

Methodology

This analysis of ASI conferences from 1997 through 2011 is based on conference reports published in Key Words, as well as conference program information accessed through the "Past Annual Conferences" page on the ASI website. A complete preliminary program for the 2007 conference was not available on the website, but was accessed through the author's personal collection. All information about the 2006 conference was taken from reports in Key Words because very little information about that conference was found on the website.

Reports of presentations and poster sessions were included in the analysis. Types of presentations have varied over the years, as well as the terms used to describe them. They included workshops, seminars, general sessions, breakout sessions, plenary sessions, question and answer sessions, panels, roundtables, and keynote addresses. Excluded from the investigation were reports of awards ceremonies, business meetings, dinners, receptions, orientations, tours, software fairs, and one-on-one peer review sessions.

Limitations

This content analysis is based on major topics in presentations that were described in preliminary program announcements and conference reports. It does not constitute an exhaustive examination of all subjects addressed in each presentation. This study excluded a few presentations because their descriptions did not provide enough information for content analysis. It is not known if all of the presentations listed in the preliminary programs were actually given at the conferences. Presentations were excluded from the analysis if the Key Words conference reports indicated that they were cancelled.

Categories

Perhaps one of the most difficult aspects of analyzing content from conference presentations is deciding how to categorize the topics. Calls for ASI conference presentation proposals have included a wide variety of categories. This analysis included eight categories, which appear in rank order in Table 1 and Figure 1. Some presentations were placed in more than one category because they covered more than one major topic.

Table 1

Topic	No. of sessions
Indexing Specialties	173
Resources for Indexers	112
Business Aspects of Indexing	105
Indexing Techniques and Methods	92
Activities Related to Indexing	37
Professional Issues	24
Evaluation of Indexes	21
Personal Development	7

Indexing Specialties

The term "indexing specialties" refers to the indexing of particular subjects, genres or formats. This was the largest category in the study, and was covered in 173 presentations. All fifteen conferences included presentations in this area.

The indexing of electronic media was the most popular subject in this category. There were 68 presentations on this theme, and it was discussed at every conference from 1997 through 2011. Specific subjects included web indexing, embedded indexing, database indexing, online help indexing, e-book indexing, and CD-ROM indexing.

Trends in presentations on electronic media indexing reflect changes in the publishing
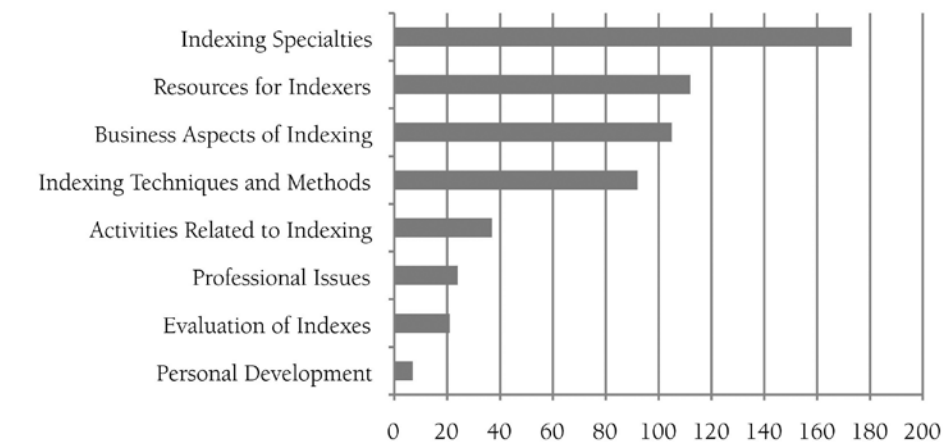

Figure 1

industry. Presentations on CD-ROM indexing have diminished sharply since 2000, while those on web indexing have increased dramatically. This reflects the fact that many types of resources that once were issued on CD-ROM are now made available online. Another trend concerns the growing popularity of e-books. One of the first presentations on e-books occurred in 2002 with a session entitled "Why you don't want to index e-books." This was not the last word on e-book indexing, and interest in this subject has expanded since 2002.

Other popular indexing specialties included periodicals and newspapers, law, technical manuals, scholarly materials, foreign languages, medical/health sciences, history, images, and social sciences. Themes covered less often were the indexing specialties of aerospace, archaeology, art, biography, botany, children's books, culinary, earth science, environmental science, fiction, gardening, genealogy, humanities, journalism, library science, literary criticism, political science, psychology, public policy, science, sound recordings, terrorism, and theology.

Resources for Indexers

The second most popular topic of the conferences was resources for indexers. This topic was discussed at every conference from 1997 through 2011, and was represented in a total of 112 sessions. The most prevalent presentation themes concerned dedicated indexing software such as CINDEX, MACREX, and SKY Index. Additional presentations covered a variety of software, including Adobe products, Microsoft Office products, voice recognition software, and vocabulary management software. Other presentations dealt with finding information resources to assist in indexing. Four presentations covered reference sources for indexers, and eleven presentations concerned effective online searching.

Business Aspects of Indexing

The third most popular topic concerned business aspects of freelance indexing. This topic was covered in 105 presentations and was discussed at every conference from 1997 through 2011. The most prevalent subjects in this area were client culture (concerning relations with editors, authors and publishers), project management, starting an indexing business, marketing, and finances. Subjects discussed less often included office organization, record keeping, working on the road, and working with other indexers.

Indexing Techniques and Methods

Techniques and methods of indexing were addressed in 92 presentations, and were covered in all fifteen conferences. Each conference included at least one instructional session on basic indexing techniques. Other popular themes included index editing, name indexing, term selection, and techniques for productive indexing. Subjects covered less often included acronyms, character sets, cross references, exhaustivity, index style guides, note indexing, secondary indexing, subheadings, and the visual appeal of indexes.

Activities Related to Indexing

The topic of activities and skills related to indexing was discussed in 37 presentations, and was addressed in fourteen of the fifteen conferences in the study. The most popular subjects by far concerned the creation of thesauri, controlled vocabularies, and taxonomies. Other subjects included abstracting, information architecture, metadata, self-publishing, and the teaching of indexing. Presentations in this category have been more popular since 2003, reflecting developments in digital information retrieval that offer new opportunities for indexers.

Professional Issues

Professional and career issues were the focus of 24 presentations. This topic was covered at twelve of the fifteen conferences in the study. The most popular subject in this area was training in indexing, with a recent emphasis on the ASI training course. Other themes in this area included the certification of indexers, continuing education, ethics, and the activities of indexing societies in other countries.

Evaluation of Indexes

Twenty-one presentations dealt with the evaluation of indexes. This topic was covered at twelve of the fifteen conferences studied. The most popular theme by far was index usability. Other sessions dealt with index evaluation in general, peer reviewing, and judging indexes for the Wilson Award.

Personal Development

Seven presentations concerned the topic of personal development. A recent trend began in 2007 with presentations on physical exercise. These sessions have covered physical fitness, stretching, yoga, and exercises for stress management. Other sessions in this category covered work-family balance and psychological aspects of indexing.

Discussion

This analysis of ASI conference presentations has revealed major issues as well as trends in indexing. The trends have reflected developments in information technology, the publishing industry, and the profession. Presentations on indexing specialties have encompassed new electronic formats as they were adopted by the publishing industry. Presentations on resources for indexers have provided a wealth of information about advances in indexing technology. Presentations on activities and skills related to indexing have included developments in digital information retrieval that offer new opportunities for indexers.

Considering the depth and breadth of conference offerings, it is clear that ASI conference planners and presenters have demonstrated a firm commitment to supporting practitioners at all levels. They have placed an emphasis on looking forward, embracing new technologies and adapting to change in the profession. These efforts have enabled ASI "to make a continuing contribution to the publishing industry and the world of information" (Thomas 1989: 125-126).

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Sometimes I will in the subject index deal with the Restatement of Law in terms of subject matter, while in the Table of Authorities I deal with it in terms of citation. In other words the subject index entries look like this:

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Restatement (Second) of Torts
    defamation, 326
    invasion of privacy, 123
    negligence, 233
```

And the corresponding Table of Authorities entries look like this:

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Restatement (Second) of Torts
    § 282 . . . 292
    § 525 . . . 202
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Then in the subject index I often add a note to point users to the second type of coverage in the Table of Authorities:

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Restatement (Second) of Torts
Note: For treatment by Restatement section number, see the
        separate Table of Authorities.
    defamation, 326
    invasion of privacy, 123
    negligence, 233
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While my examples come from the field of law, this type of note can be applied to books in other areas that require specialized separate indexes.

There are other occasions when I like to use internal notes in the index, and I will save that discussion for a future column. As you can see if you have made it this far, I had quite a lot to say on the topic of notes on high and how helpful they can be. The indexer not only can make the index work more successfully for users by these explanations but can demonstrate the added value that the index brings to the text.

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