



## International Bibliography of the Social Sciences Indexing Policy

The International Bibliography of the Social Sciences (IBSS) is an information retrieval service whose mission is to provide easy access to international social science and interdisciplinary research. IBSS contains over 2 million bibliographic references to journal articles and books, reviews and selected chapters. IBSS is available in a range of media, including online, print and CD versions.

### 1 Background

In February 2004 the Association for Information Management (ASLIB) ran a customised IBSS training day. The course, entitled *Indexing: Principles and Practice*, was run by David Bawden, a specialist in the field of information retrieval, knowledge organisation and information literacy. As a result of this training session IBSS first evaluated its existing indexing practices and then drew up an expanded indexing policy.

The following issues specific to IBSS were also taken into consideration:

- *The broad coverage of subject areas*  
The creation of a uniform indexing standard is complicated by the wide range of social science and related disciplines IBSS covers. It is understood that users come from different backgrounds, have widely different subject interests and therefore make very different types of searches. It problematizes the indexers' tasks of identifying users' interests and developing knowledge in all the areas covered by IBSS.
- *Electronic and print formats*  
One of the main challenges to a uniform IBSS indexing policy is the different media formats in which IBSS is available. Electronic and print formats each require different search strategies and therefore should have specific indexing guidelines. For practical reasons however indexing principles must suit both formats.
- *Current search facilities*  
The current interface allows searching by one or a combination of index terms. At present IBSS index terms are not integrated into the interface. A new service could make use of IBSS terms - possibly through an integrated thesaurus – to facilitate and guide users' search strategies.

## 2 Information retrieval

### 2.1 Indexing at IBSS

According to the International Organization for Standardization indexing is ‘the act of describing or identifying a document in terms of its subject content’<sup>1</sup>. For IBSS therefore indexing is one of the key ways in which it can present and organize content to enable users to find the most *relevant* information for their research. Indexing functions alongside and complements other information management tools available to users of IBSS: these include classification schemes, abstracts and other bibliographic data (such as titles, volume and issue details, and author names). IBSS indexers rely on their subject knowledge to select appropriate index terms from a large controlled vocabulary list of 13,000 subject terms. An additional controlled vocabulary list is used for geographic terms. As over 25% of the data in IBSS is in languages other than English, indexers also make use of their foreign language expertise to provide appropriate English index terms for materials not written in English.

### 2.2 Searching IBSS

IBSS is available electronically and in print.

Users of IBSS Online can search by:

- Words in “*Title, Keywords and Abstracts*” fields
- Words in the “*Title*” field only
- Controlled index terms in the “*Keywords*” field only
- Author name
- Journal title, issue and date
- Book title and date
- ISBN
- ISSN

The print version of IBSS can be searched using the:

- Classification scheme
- Index of authors
- Index of subject terms (controlled index terms)
- Index of geographic terms (controlled index terms)

The methods of searching on two such different formats differ considerably, however the same basic principles apply. Search facilities provide the links between users’ requests and the organised information. The success of a user’s search depends upon the flexibility of the search facilities and the accuracy of the descriptive information contained within the service.

In terms of retrieving relevant information, index terms present an advantage over, for example, titles or searchable abstracts, because the vocabulary is controlled, precise and generally descriptive (rather than

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<sup>1</sup> ISO 5963:1985, *Methods for examining documents, determining their subjects, and selecting indexing terms*

figurative) <sup>2</sup>. Indeed, a user should be directed to relevant information through the (descriptive) accuracy of index terms and use the abstracts to evaluate and decide whether the document is relevant to the user's needs.

### **3 IBSS indexing practice**

For over 40 years (between 1951 and 1994) IBSS indexed records exclusively for print bibliographies. Since the introduction of the Online service in 1995, index terms have taken on a somewhat different role and now are key to precision search strategies. For example, a user of the online service can search for several index terms simultaneously, choose to exclude certain terms, or combine previous searches in order to retrieve the most relevant information.

New IBSS editorial assistants/indexers receive training during their first three months in post. Familiarization with controlled index terms and classification schemes is key to the successful completion of this initial training, with more experienced colleagues checking and monitoring the accuracy of this indexing during this time. Regular weekly team meetings and occasional index term review meetings are the main forums at which team members can discuss indexing policy and practice. It is estimated that approximately 70% of an IBSS editorial assistant/indexer's time is taken up with indexing duties.

### **4 The aim of an indexing policy**

Improving the IBSS service through quality of indexing can be achieved by two related policies: improving the consistency of indexing and adopting user-focused indexing.

#### **4.1 Improving the consistency of indexing**

Quality of indexing can be measured in part by consistency. Consistency is achieved through the agreed standardization of the terms to be used to index a document. The aim of the indexing policy is to provide indexers with guidelines on the selection of index terms which will therefore increase the predictability of IBSS indexing. By making these guidelines publicly available on the IBSS website, users will also gain a better understanding of the indexing practices at IBSS and should therefore be able to plan their search strategies more efficiently.

The aim is not to achieve absolute consistency, but rather to ensure that indexers are following the same basic method for indexing. The use of the controlled vocabulary is one way in which IBSS can guarantee a certain degree of consistency. Other factors include ensuring that indexers adopt user-focused indexing practices (see 4.2 below) and familiarise themselves with the concepts of exhaustivity and specificity (see 5.1 below).

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<sup>2</sup> For example compare an article entitled "Mazes of globalization" with the assigned keywords: International economic relations; Globalization; Economic conditions; International political economy; Economic policy.

## 4.2 Adopting user-focused indexing

User-focused indexing means the selection of index terms that best reflect the potential ways in which users search for information. Practically, this means that indexers need to anticipate the type of requests (or searches) users run when looking for information.

A user-focused indexing policy requires good knowledge of IBSS users and their information needs. The IBSS User Survey of 2004 revealed that the majority of IBSS users are postgraduates or researchers who are specialists in their field, and who therefore require high quality, highly specialized information. IBSS assumes among its users a broad understanding of social science concepts and of search techniques.

However the Survey also showed that IBSS users come from a wide range of social sciences and related disciplines. The major challenge faced by user-focused indexing for IBSS therefore is how to encompass the range of interests of IBSS users.

## 5 Indexing principles

The indexing process can be divided into the conceptual analysis and translation stages.

### 5.1 Conceptual analysis

Conceptual analysis refers to:

- Determining what a document is about, and
- Selecting principal concepts which will be of interest for our users.

To determine the content of a document indexers may pay particular attention to titles, headings, abstracts, introductions and conclusions. Indexers should also ask themselves questions such as:

- Which IBSS users are interested in the content of a document?
- How would IBSS users construct searches to find this document?
- Which index terms would best anticipate these searches?
- Which combination of index terms would satisfy different users interested in the same document?

Although the breadth of IBSS's subject and geographic coverage precludes any attempt to systemize fully the indexing process, some general guidelines are offered concerning the "exhaustivity" and "specificity" of indexing.

#### 5.1.1 Exhaustivity/selectivity of indexing

In deciding *which* and *how many* concepts or subjects to index in a particular document, the question always asked by IBSS indexers is "would this document be of interest to a user searching on this subject?"

Indexing practices run on a scale from exhaustive to selective. Exhaustive indexing (assigning index terms for all concepts mentioned in a document) improves the *recall* of user searches: more results will be returned per search. Selective indexing (assigning terms only for selected concepts, usually the major concepts) improves the *precision* of searching: fewer results will be returned, but they will be more relevant to the search.

IBSS aims to strike a balance - assigning enough terms to ensure that there are a suitable number of access points to a document, but not so many as to lessen the relevance of results for our users. The number of terms assigned will vary according to a document's content.

In selecting index terms, IBSS indexers will bear in mind the breadth of interest of its users, and think about a document from diverse social science perspectives. If the document would be of interest to researchers across a wide range of social science fields, then more terms will be assigned.

However, IBSS does not assign index terms for concepts that are minor or peripheral to a document (for example, for a concept mentioned in just one paragraph) if it is judged that a user researching that subject would find the document of little or no relevance.

### 5.1.2 Specificity of vocabulary used

The concept of specificity refers to how *precisely* the indexing language describes the subjects and concepts in a document.

The principle followed by IBSS in this respect is to represent concepts in terms as general or as specific as those used by the author, and/or as specifically as the controlled vocabulary allows.

For example, if an author talks exclusively about the dollar, then IBSS will use the index term *Dollar* and not the term *Currencies*. If an author discusses currencies with particular reference to the euro and the dollar, then the terms *Currencies*, *Euro*, and *Dollar* will be used.

Where a single controlled term exists, this will be used rather than a combination of terms. For example, for an article on financial history, the term *Financial history* will be used, but not the terms *Finance* or *History*.

## 5.2 Translation

The second stage in the indexing process is the "translation" of the selected concepts into the indexing language of the database.

IBSS has always used a controlled vocabulary for indexing. This helps to improve consistency among indexers. This controlled vocabulary also contains related terms, narrower terms and broader terms, and these relationships can be viewed (in list form only) on the Online service help pages.

Once a concept has been selected in the conceptual analysis stage, indexers should choose the closest term available in the IBSS controlled vocabulary database. If the indexer is not satisfied with the terms available in the controlled vocabulary, then an uncontrolled term can be chosen. These terms will be checked against the archive databases to maintain consistency with previous use and spelling of these concepts.

## 6 Key strategies for indexing

The IBSS indexing policy aims to improve the quality of the service by:

- *Ensuring consistency*  
A consistent indexing service improves predictability, helping users to acquaint themselves with IBSS's indexing practices and to achieve better retrieval results.
- *Promoting user-focused indexing*  
A user focus helps indexers to adapt their indexing to the needs of the audience for which a given article is most relevant.

The IBSS indexing policy suggests that indexers use the following key strategies:

- i. *Establish the content of a document:*
  - Indexers should consider both the subject focus of a document and the type of user who would be interested in retrieving that document.
  - Indexers should consider each document as a possible subject search result. Indexing therefore should be based on an awareness of the type of subject searches that might be used to locate the document.
  - Indexers should be prepared to be flexible in using index terms to describe content. This is particularly significant in IBSS because of the breadth of subject coverage.
  - Indexers should be aware of the notions of exhaustivity and specificity. Having more keywords does not necessarily equate to better indexing. Too many keywords, or the use of very broad terms, may mislead users. But too few keywords may not allow enough access points to a document.
- ii. *Translate selected concepts into indexing language:*
  - Indexers should use the IBSS controlled vocabulary whenever possible to describe the content of documents. The controlled vocabulary is designed to ensure a degree of consistency over time.
  - If no available term is appropriate, indexers should use an uncontrolled term which represents the selected concept. These terms should be checked against the archive database.