

Soon after David Martin became the Executive Secretary of the Royal Society in 1947, [See Title 61] he conceived the idea of a Conference devoted to 'Scientific Information'. This took place during the summer of the following year at the Royal Society's 'Apartments' (as they were called) in Burlington House. "It was my first big task and enabled me really to know my staff at the Society," he told me later. It was a large Conference to which scientists came from Europe, the USA and the Commonwealth. [See Title 78]

At that time, 1947, I was working at BIOS [Title 34] and was often confronted with the question "Who is the best expert on this or that subject?" Only laboriously and often after much research, could I find an answer. How useful, I thought, if there were a 'Subject Index of Scientists', which could mechanically, or now electronically, sort through thousands of records and give an easy answer, suggesting a few names, their subject and of course their address.

The Scientific Information Conference provided me with an ideal platform to launch such an Index and I proceeded to write a Paper on the subject which I submitted to the Conference and which was duly published in 1948, as Paper Number 12 in the Report of the Conference by the Royal Society. It must be remembered that in 1947 electronic computers were still only a dream for most and the one or two existing ones were in secret military establishments.

Existing books of reference about scientific information I found inadequate for my purpose. My task then fell into two parts, collecting information about scientists, and secondly, searching this information efficiently for the required answers. I drew up a Specimen Questionnaire of which I suggested 30000 should be printed and distributed.

The answers to the questionnaire were to be coded and punched into Hollerith cards, and I worked out the relevant codes for general and special subjects of research of each scientist, using for this purpose the UDC system of library classification. The cards were to be stored alphabetically by name of the scientists, and passed through a collator to locate the subjects of research or any other required information. I calculated that 28000 cards could be sorted in one hour, and as the Index would in the first instance only include British scientists, an answer could be obtained in about one hour. As the cards could be mechanically duplicated, copies of the Index could be distributed throughout the Commonwealth in an exchange arrangement.

It all sounds so simple, but I admit the difficulties speak for themselves. No wonder I never heard of anyone to this day who tried to make such an Index, even electronically.