

Analytical Abstracts:

User Reaction Study

***Analytical Abstracts*: User Reaction Study**

THE purpose of this note is to summarise, and to comment on, the findings of the recent survey of subscribers to *Analytical Abstracts*.

The aim of the Society for Analytical Chemistry was to discover in what directions it should seek to develop *Analytical Abstracts* during the next 5 to 10 years, particularly in view of current trends towards computer-based publications and other developments in the information field. The survey was conducted by Aslib and was, in part, supported financially by the Office of Scientific and Technical Information (OSTI) of the Department of Education and Science. The survey was made by means of a questionnaire, the detailed form of which was evolved from discussions between Aslib, OSTI and the Society. The questionnaire was sent to all subscribers to *Analytical Abstracts* with the August, 1967, issue of the journal, together with a letter explaining the Society's aims in commissioning the survey.

The time limit set for return of questionnaires completed by subscribers was December 1st, 1967. The returned questionnaires were processed by Aslib, who analysed the resulting data and issued their findings at the end of February, 1968, in a report entitled "*Analytical Abstracts*: User Reaction Study." This report has of course been studied at length and in detail by the Abstracts Editorial Committee, whose views, together with the report, have been considered by the Publications Policy Committee and by Council.

The results of the survey, as recorded by Aslib, and the implications of these results, as subsequently discussed in Council and the relevant Committees, are summarised below. The various headings relate to the individual questions, or associated groups of questions, posed in the questionnaire.

RESPONSE TO THE QUESTIONNAIRE—

1023 completed questionnaires were returned, corresponding to 15 per cent. of all subscribers to *Analytical Abstracts*; 482 respondents were from the United Kingdom and 541 from overseas, the latter group covering 42 countries. The total response is thought to be reasonable, bearing in mind that the majority of users of *Analytical Abstracts* are overseas.

Information provided by the respondents, permitting classification with respect to type of employment, field of interest, etc., suggests that the completed questionnaires received corresponded to an adequately representative body of users. This conclusion is further supported by the generally consistent percentages of various categories of the respondents replying in similar manner to the various questions throughout the questionnaire.

ACCESS TO *Analytical Abstracts*—

Respondents were asked to describe the way in which *Analytical Abstracts* was made available to them. 84 per cent. had access via library copies, in the majority of cases by a system of regular circulation; on average, the circulated library copy was seen by 7 people. Only 8 per cent. of respondents had access via a private subscription copy.

These figures are perhaps indicative of an untapped potential for sale of the journal, and steps are to be taken by the Society to boost sales of the journal by advertising, particularly abroad.

PURPOSE IN USING *Analytical Abstracts*—

Questions were posed to establish the main use made of the journal by subscribers. 33 per cent. of respondents said "scanning monthly issues," 13 per cent. said "literature searches," while 54 per cent. attached equal importance to scanning and searching.

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The Society has thus learnt for the first time that the main use of the journal is for current awareness, with literature searching playing an important but lesser part. The implications of this information arise in particular in considering the answers given to questions on more detailed topics later in the questionnaire.

SECTIONS USED REGULARLY—

Respondents were asked to indicate which of the (at present) five main subject sections of *Analytical Abstracts* they used regularly. The answers were General Analytical Chemistry, 59 per cent.; Inorganic Analysis, 58 per cent.; Organic Analysis, 50 per cent.; Biochemistry, 43 per cent.; General Technique and Apparatus, 55 per cent. The average number of sections used regularly per reader was 2.7.

It is therefore apparent that the five main sections are of fairly uniform interest, and that some three out of the five sections are relevant to the activities of the average reader. There is thus no case for separate sale of individual sections of the journal.

SUBJECT ARRANGEMENT—

Information was sought as to whether the general arrangement of abstracts in the journal caused any special difficulty in the location of particular topics. The response to the three answer categories provided was "Yes," 6 per cent.; "Sometimes," 18 per cent.; "No," 75 per cent.

Further questions were included to enable those in the "Yes" and "Sometimes" categories to indicate the nature of their difficulties and to suggest solutions. Such difficulties as were quoted were fairly evenly shared between location of individual techniques, elements and compounds, and between sections 2 to 5 of the journal; section 1, General Analytical Chemistry, received little complaint. The itemised subject topics said to cause difficulty in location showed a very wide "scatter," so that no one topic emerged as presenting marked problems of location. Among the suggestions for improving the location of abstracts on particular topics, prominent proposals were for more sub-division of sections, creation of new main sections, more cross-references, and use of keywords in the titling together with a monthly keyword index.

As 75 per cent. of respondents had reported no difficulty in locating particular topics, it is clear that most users find the present subject arrangement of the abstracts satisfactory. Nevertheless, it has been thought desirable to take steps to help that minority of users who do find some difficulty, particularly in view of the knowledge now obtained that current awareness is the main use made of the journal. For this purpose, certain changes are to be made to come into effect in the January, 1969, issue of *Analytical Abstracts*, namely, the upgrading of four sub-sections to main sections and the much greater use of headed sub-divisions within the sections. It should be emphasised that these changes leave the sequence of subject arrangement virtually unaltered, but have the effect of including many more "signposts" to aid the location of particular topics.

SUBJECT AND JOURNAL COVERAGE—

96 per cent. of respondents considered that the subject coverage of *Analytical Abstracts* was "satisfactory" or "very satisfactory." Only 9 per cent. of respondents wanted coverage of additional journals. However, of the additional journals suggested, most fell into one of the following categories:—

- (i) journals that are already regularly abstracted;
- (ii) journals that are regularly scanned to enable the occasional paper of analytical interest to be abstracted;
- (iii) journals that are very obscure or of minimal analytical interest.

It is concluded that both subject and journal coverage are currently ample for the needs of almost all users.

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TIME-GAP—

Respondents were asked to indicate whether they were "frequently," "sometimes" or "rarely" inconvenienced by the current time-gap (about 15 months) between the publication of a paper and of the corresponding abstract in *Analytical Abstracts*. The replies in these three categories were, respectively, 7, 35 and 56 per cent.

Respondents were further asked to indicate "an endurable but realistic time-gap," bearing in mind that a short time-gap would result in increased costs; the answer categories provided were 3, 6, 9 and 12 months. Only 42 per cent. of respondents chose to answer this question, and of these the majority (24 per cent.) plumped for a 6-months time-gap.

It is perhaps somewhat surprising that the current time-gap is not unacceptable to most respondents, particularly in view of their answer that the main use of the journal is for current awareness. The conclusion from this is that while the Society should continue its efforts to reduce the time-gap, it should not seek to do this by drastic measures such as would reduce the quality or amount of information given by the journal.

FORM AND CONTENT OF ABSTRACTS—

67 per cent. of respondents recorded a preference for abstracts of the present style and length. Two other answer categories were given, 18 per cent. of respondents voting for "longer more informative abstracts" and 4 per cent. for "shorter indicative abstracts."

The 18 per cent. preference for longer abstracts may be interpreted as a demand for "working" abstracts. However, for papers describing a particular analytical method, it is already the policy of *Analytical Abstracts* to aim to include in the abstract sufficient detail to permit the user to try the method.

A further question invited respondents to indicate the type of abstract they wanted. The most prominent suggestion (9 per cent.) was for short abstracts for papers from readily accessible journals, and longer abstracts for papers in less easily available journals or in foreign languages. This particular request conforms to the current policy of the journal, and this was in fact pointed out in the letter accompanying the questionnaire.

The conclusion from the answers to this set of questions is that the present form and content of the abstracts substantially fulfil subscribers' needs and that no changes in these respects should be made at present.

FORMAT—

94 per cent. of respondents said that the present format of the journal was satisfactory. Clearly the format should be retained.

However, if the number of abstracts published annually continues to increase, as would be expected, it may be advantageous in a few years time to have slightly larger pages with a 3-column instead of the present 2-column format.

INDEXES—

The present system for *Analytical Abstracts* is to issue annually a comprehensive author and subject index. Respondents were asked to give their preference for one of several choices, viz, the present system, more frequent author indexes issued alone, more frequent subject indexes issued alone, more frequent author and subject indexes issued together, or some other kind of index which respondents were invited to describe. The respondents advocating more frequent indexes were also asked to suggest the frequency they required.

63 per cent. of respondents expressed a preference for the present index system, 20 per cent. requested more frequent subject indexes and 8 per cent. more frequent subject and author indexes. Only 1 per cent. requested more frequent author indexes and 4 per cent. some other kind of index; in this last category, the most common suggestion was for a key-word index.

When more frequent indexes were requested, the most common suggestion was for 6-monthly indexes, with monthly and quarterly indexes ranking second and third, respectively.

It is clear from these figures that while most users are satisfied with the present index system, there is nevertheless an appreciable demand (about 30 per cent. of respondents) for more frequent indexes, particularly subject indexes. In part because of this demand, it has

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now been decided, with Council's approval, to publish *Analytical Abstracts* in two volumes each year, commencing 1969; the issuing of author and subject indexes for each volume will provide a half-yearly frequency of indexes.

The possibility of having even more frequent indexes, and specifically of including a keyword index with each monthly issue, has been appraised. It has been concluded that this innovation is at present impracticable with the number of editorial staff currently available to *Analytical Abstracts*.

KIND OF ABSTRACTS SERVICE REQUIRED—

In an open question, respondents were invited to give comments on the kind of abstracts service they would like to see in the future. Only 19 per cent. answered this question, 3 per cent. saying that no changes were needed. The remaining 16 per cent. offered a variety of suggestions, but these mainly echoed the answers already given in other parts of the questionnaire, such as requests for shortening the time-gap, for longer "working" abstracts, etc. Only 2 per cent. of respondents requested abstracts on tape or other form suitable for computer processing.

Clearly there is at present no sizeable demand from users for any major change in the kind of abstracts service currently provided by *Analytical Abstracts*.

MOST ESSENTIAL CHANGES—

In an attempt to obtain guidance on the priorities of any changes required, the following question was included in the questionnaire: "Bearing in mind the possible increase in cost that might arise from any changes, which of the improvements in the service you have suggested is most essential to your work?"

Only 30 per cent. answered this question and, perhaps inevitably, the suggestions for the most essential changes had a wide scatter. Most prominent were those relating to shortening the time-gap (8 per cent.), more frequent subject indexes (5 per cent.), and an index in each issue of the journal (3 per cent.). It should also be noted that 3 per cent. of respondents either stressed the importance of a balance between improvements and costs, or urged the need for careful thought before introduction of any improvement that would drastically raise subscription costs.

COMPARISON WITH *Chemical Abstracts*—

The final series of questions in the questionnaire sought to obtain a comparison between *Analytical Abstracts* and *Chemical Abstracts* as sources of analytical information. To enable such a comparison to be put into perspective, the first question in this series asked whether respondents had access to *Chemical Abstracts*. 57 per cent. of respondents had access to the whole of *Chemical Abstracts*, while a further 9 per cent. had access to part, including the analytical sections. In aggregate, this major part of the total respondents was clearly adequate to provide a basis for the desired comparison between the two journals.

In the further related questions, respondents were asked to indicate their preference for *Analytical Abstracts* or *Chemical Abstracts*

- (i) for scanning new issues for analytical information;
- (ii) for literature searches on particular analytical topics.

In each case, respondents were asked to give reasons for their preferences.

With respect to scanning new issues, *i.e.*, for current awareness, 60 per cent. of all respondents preferred *Analytical Abstracts*, 13 per cent. preferred *Chemical Abstracts*, and 8 per cent. said that the two journals were equally used. For literature searches, the corresponding percentages were, respectively, 42, 24 and 12 per cent.

The reasons given for preferring one journal or the other were very similar with respect to scanning and searching. A marked preference for *Analytical Abstracts* arose from its availability; many organisations may have only one, centrally held, copy of *Chemical Abstracts*, but several copies of *Analytical Abstracts*. Such effects are undoubtedly related to the marked difference in price of the two journals. Another commonly mentioned reason

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for preferring *Analytical Abstracts* was the view that the abstracts were superior with regard to form and content, *e.g.*, more informative, lucid and containing more essential detail. *Analytical Abstracts* was also commonly preferred because its coverage was restricted but relevant, *i.e.*, concerned solely with analytical topics. A related general reason for preference was that *Analytical Abstracts* was more compact and easier to handle.

When *Chemical Abstracts* was stated to be the preferred choice, the most common reasons advanced were wider subject coverage, shorter time-gap, and superior indexes (more detailed and easier to search).

The information obtained from this comparison shows that, in the eyes of users of *Analytical Abstracts*, the chief virtues of the journal are its specialist content dealing solely with analytical topics, the quality of the abstracts, and the ready availability of the journal, presumably resulting from its modest price. This conclusion provides another indication that any steps taken to improve some aspects of the journal, *e.g.*, lessening the time-gap, must not be such as to lower the quality of the abstracts.

GENERAL COMMENTS—

While one would naturally expect the users of a journal to be somewhat in its favour, it is apparent that the users of *Analytical Abstracts* very substantially approve of the journal in its present form. The results of the survey as a whole, and in particular of the comparison with *Chemical Abstracts*, clearly justify the concept of and continuing need for *Analytical Abstracts* as a specialist abstracts journal devoted to analytical chemistry, supplying abstracts of high quality. It would, however, be wrong to remain complacent and inactive in the light of these conclusions, and, as indicated earlier, steps have already been taken to improve in certain respects the service offered by *Analytical Abstracts*.

The survey has been of considerable value to the Society in providing fundamental information not previously available, such as the relative importance of the different uses made of *Analytical Abstracts*. The survey has also been rewarding in providing clear indications of the directions that short-term developments of the journal should take. Steps have already been taken to increase the frequency of indexes and to facilitate the location of abstracts on particular subject topics. Other improvements that the survey has shown to be desirable, *e.g.*, shortening the time-gap and the establishment of monthly indexes, are not immediately attainable and remain to be achieved.

It must be acknowledged that the survey has given little guide from users as to any radical change or evolution of the journal that may be required on a long-term basis. It is clear that, for the moment, any impetus for major developments of the services offered by *Analytical Abstracts* must come from the Society itself. It is for this reason, and because of the computer-based abstracts service now beginning to be offered by other journals, that the Publications Policy Committee has instituted a Sub-Committee to assess the potentialities of computer-based systems for *Analytical Abstracts* and for the Society's other publications.

On behalf of the Society, this opportunity should be taken to express publicly appreciation to OSTI for financial assistance for the survey, and to Aslib for a comprehensive analysis and lucid presentation of the data from the questionnaire.

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