

The Changed and Changing ADI/ASIS/ASIS&T After 75 Years

by Robert V. Williams



EDITOR'S SUMMARY

A review of the history and growth of ASIS&T since its origin as the American Documentation Institute (ADI) reflects the development of the concept of information science. Spearheaded by Watson Davis in 1937, the ADI focused on micro-photographic techniques and bibliography and on documentation principles and practices. Despite a shaky start and meager funding, the ADI adapted to new technologies, terminology and subject analysis methods, and started the journal *American Documentation* in 1950. Growth in science research in the '50s and '60s sparked an explosion of technical reports, prompting coordination with the Special Libraries Association and other groups and leading to a demand for more specialized professional skills, which was met in the '60s and '70s by expansion and focus on education in information science. The membership shifted to a majority in academia and shrinking minority in industry, and debate continued over the geographic scope and name of the organization, which added "and Technology" to its name in 2000. *American Documentation* transitioned in stages into the *Journal of the American Society for Information and Technology*, while the *Bulletin* and *Annual Review* were added, and annual conferences provided another educational resource. The publications became the basis of an arrangement with the publisher Wiley that would stabilize finances. Over 75 years, from ADI to ASIS to ASIS&T, the organization has met the evolving needs of the information science and technology community.

KEYWORDS

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On Saturday, March 13, 1937, approximately 60 people gathered at the National Academy of Sciences building in Washington, DC, to discuss and then establish the American Documentation Institute (ADI). They were unofficial representatives of 32 scholarly and scientific societies, government bureaus and libraries and were responding to a call issued by Watson Davis, director of Science Service, a small unit affiliated with the National Academy of Sciences. Preliminary meetings of many of the 60 attending the March 13 meeting had taken place earlier in the year, and Davis had issued a "Plan for a Documentation Institute" in late 1936. Nevertheless, some of those attending were not familiar with the term *documentation*, and several variations on a definition were offered in this first meeting. The attendees were also concerned about financing this new venture, what it would do and how representation of the participating organizations would be structured [1, pp. 66-70].

Issues of what the new institute would do, how the organizational structure would operate and how it would be funded would be continuing problems over the next few years. The initial purposes were operation of the existing Bibliofilm Service and the Auxiliary Publication Service, development and application of micro-photographic techniques and equipment for bibliographic purposes, and research and development on documentation principles and methods. Membership representation would be based on nominations by the more than 80 organizations and government agencies included on a list compiled in 1937, and others could be added based on a membership vote. A board of trustees was appointed, and at an April 1937 meeting of this group officers were elected. Watson Davis was elected president, a position he held for the next 10 years. The name "American"

was prefixed to the initial name, “Documentation Institute,” and it was incorporated in Delaware as a non-profit corporation. The initial funding was \$2,500 remaining from an earlier grant to the Documentation Division of the Science Service by the Chemical Foundation.

Disagreement over structure, operation and funding was evident at this organizational meeting but the attendees proceeded anyway, some believing that the differences could be worked out and some believing that it was likely that the organization would not survive very long given such limited and uncertain finances and with so many stated objectives. Forty-five attendees voted to establish the institute, five voted against and 10 abstained. Those objecting were mainly the librarians, many of whom were fearful of a centralizing organization focused on microfilm and bibliography that might bind their organizations in some way. Librarians were, however, very involved in the affairs of ADI, and the American Library Association (ALA) published the *Journal of Documentary Reproduction*, 1938-1942, which served unofficially as the newsletter of the ADI.

For Watson Davis, the key purpose of this new organization was improving the provision of scientific and technical information to researchers worldwide using the relatively new and rapidly improving technology of microfilm. A secondary purpose was to extend in the United States the documentation movement in Europe. Davis was a science journalist, and his home base in the Science Service provided him a front row seat to observe the information needs of scientists. The new *documentation institute*, as he initially termed it, would enable him to enlist scientists and scholars in this endeavor. For the first few years of its existence, ADI, through its Bibliofilm Service and the Auxiliary Publications Service, made a remarkable contribution toward improving the dissemination of scientific information, copying thousands of pages from scientific books, journals, theses and newspapers and sending them to scientists worldwide for a low price. Interestingly, even though many of these were copyrighted documents, ADI was never challenged about copyright violations. A so-called “Gentleman’s Agreement” regarding copying copyrighted materials was worked out at the time and would later become the basis for the concept of “fair use” in later copyright law [1, p. 33]. Davis envisioned one large scientific “library” and one large scientific

“journal” that would both capture and disseminate science information. Significant improvements were made in microfilm camera and reader designs during this time. These activities continued to be the central purposes of ADI during World War II and brought in a small amount of funding.

The membership structure of ADI was a complicated affair. First, an organization or agency had to be nominated and accepted and a representative assigned; then a board of trustees was elected to run the organization. In the early years all the major library associations, information agencies of the federal government and even a few commercial organizations were actively participating as members. The most influential librarians, archivists, microfilm entrepreneurs, scientists and academics of the time were recruited. Davis envisioned ADI as a coordinating body for documentation organizations but the issue of how members were to be represented continued to fester. Was it to be an organization of documentalists or documentation organizations? Various efforts were made in the late 1940s to dissolve or, at least, change the structure of ADI and establish a new organization, but for a variety of reasons they failed. Complicating these discussions were the issues of whether ADI was the appropriate organization to represent documentation interests in the

revitalized International Federation for Documentation (FID) and its desperate financial status [1, pp. 150-166].

By the late 1940s and early 1950s Davis was rapidly losing influence in the affairs of ADI. His 10 years as president ended in 1946 (though he remained on the Board of Trustees and as secretary/treasurer for several more years), and a new group of leaders



PHOTO COURTESY OF MOOERS AND DAVIS FAMILIES

Wedding photo of Calvin Mooers and Charlotte Davis, 1945. Left to right, Watson Davis, Helen Davis, Charlotte Davis, Calvin Mooers and Calvin Mooers' parents.

was becoming prominent. Foremost among them was Luther Evans, former Librarian of Congress and now the new head of UNESCO. Evans presided over the September 27, 1952, general meeting where a new constitution and bylaws were adopted and power was vested in the membership, which now elected officers and council members. Membership had reached 200. The ADI was now an organization of documentalists, much to the disappointment of Davis, who referred to it as “just another library association.” [1, p. 183]

Change was the hallmark not only of ADI but also of the world of documentation. While microfilm had dominated the activities and discussions of documentalists in the early years, issues surrounding the handling of the rapidly growing world of scientific information now took precedence. New technologies such as edge-notched cards, punched cards, microfilm retrieval devices, automatic translation and the beginning of the use of electro-mechanical devices and computers for information retrieval were now dominating discussions. Subject analysis methods in handling scientific information were equally important topics, and names like Calvin Mooers, Mortimer Taube, James Perry, and, yes, Vannevar Bush were prominent in the annual meetings of ADI. New terms, such as *descriptors*, *semantic coding*, *telegraphic abstracts* and *Uniterms*, were the focus of meetings and in the new ADI journal, *American Documentation*, which had been established in 1950, thanks to funding from the Carnegie Corporation.

The focal point of many of these changes was the technical report. While not a completely new form of document, the tremendous quantity produced each year was new and came from all scientific and technical disciplines and from both government and industry. Reports were overwhelming traditional library cataloging and classification processes as well as the subject analysis abilities of most libraries and librarians. Because the scientific disciplines were expanding so rapidly it was essential to have the reports processed and available for researchers as soon as possible. ADI members, by the early 1950s mostly from scientific and technical backgrounds, had experience in this area and began devising new technologies, standards and techniques. The old Auxiliary Publications Service of ADI became a model for new government agencies to handle federal technical reports, the Office of Technical Services and the Publication Board. The technical report problem,

subject analysis expertise and new technologies meant that expertise was needed on a variety of fronts. Thus, extensive cooperation and overlapping memberships took place among ADI, the Special Libraries Association (SLA), the newly formed American Chemical Society Division of Chemical Literature group and others with similar interests such as archives and records management staff. The formal education of these groups varied considerably, and most did not have any kind of library training, with many believing this kind of training was outdated or unnecessary. This point of view led to some animosity between the special librarians and ADI members and a derisive expression that “documentation was librarianship performed by amateurs.” [2]

Changes made in 1952 to restructure the membership of ADI appear to have had many long-term consequences. Membership began to grow rapidly; by 1959, it had increased to 1,221 individuals and 64 institutional members. Annual meetings were finally held outside Washington, DC, during this period, and workshops on documentation were held at various locations. Regional chapters began to form, with the Potomac Valley Chapter the first in 1958, followed closely by the Delaware Valley and Metro New York chapters in 1960. Nascent special interest groups (SIGs) were being discussed, and by 1966 seven had been chartered. ADI was a major sponsor of the International Conference on Scientific Information (ICSI), the first such conference of this type held in the United States. It was attended by almost 1,000 information workers from many different fields around the world. The ICSI conference proceedings (75 papers were presented) were a prominent display of the multi-faceted nature of the world of documentation and the rich research potential of the field, but they also showed that the field lacked a clear synthesis and direction [3].

The late 1950s were a time of dramatic change in the United States and for ADI. The launch of Sputnik shocked the scientific world, and many began to question the strongly held assumption that American science was the best in the world. One reaction was increased U.S. government funding of all kinds of scientific endeavors, including research and development in documentation. The National Science Foundation Office of Science Information Service (NSF/OSIS) began funding a variety of new approaches

to handling scientific information, and ADI members were frequent recipients. By the early 1960s NSF was joined in support of research and development in documentation by the U.S. Air Force, the U.S. Navy, U.S. National Institutes of Health and other government agencies. *American Documentation* began to reflect this new work and was gaining respect as a scholarly journal.

Even though things were definitely improving for ADI and its members, there were still problems and issues that needed serious attention. Funding for the Institute had always been a challenge, and, despite expectations, only a few small foundations grants had been received. Maintaining a headquarters office and an executive director were continuing problems. Funding for *American Documentation* was also a problem in the late 1950s and control of it was turned over to a private publisher; control by ADI was resumed in 1961, though difficulties with financing the journal would resurface later. However, an NSF grant in 1960 enabled ADI to hire its first fulltime executive director and move into its own headquarters office in 1961. The question of cooperation vs. competition with SLA was a continuing concern, despite the high overlap in memberships and frequent productive areas of cooperation between the two organizations. A merger of the ADI and SLA was seriously contemplated, even to the extent of forming a joint operations committee, but ADI eventually terminated those discussions [4].



PHOTO COURTESY OF CLAIRE SCHULTZ

Claire Schultz, first female president of ADI, about 1960

The most serious issue of this time, however, and the one with the greatest impact on later developments, was what to call this rapidly changing field. By the early 1960s the term *documentation* was beginning to sound old-fashioned and inadequate in this new world of computers, information systems, information retrieval and information-seeking-behavior studies – to name only a few of the many topics on which ADI members were actively working. Scientific information work was the phrase on the

lips of most members, but it did not adequately describe what the field was doing. The ADI Council first considered a name change in 1963 but the official decision to change the name to American Society for Information Science (ASIS) was not made until 1968. As was true in 1937, the new name did not satisfy everyone, and some observed that *information science* was as vague and poorly understood a term as *documentation*. Some wanted to drop *American* in the name so that it would be known as an international society, especially since information science was universal, but that motion failed. Others wanted to rename it by adding the phrase “and Technology” but that also failed – and would not return for another 32 years! [1, pp. 190-200]

Preparation for this new name and the new discipline, information science, had been slowly laid by members during this time. Claire K. Schultz, the first woman president of ADI (1962), had a strong influence on attention to disciplinary issues with her “documentalists bookshelf,” begun in 1959, and a state-of-the-art seminar on documentation and information retrieval at the 1961 Annual Meeting. This seminar on foundations of the field led directly to and was strengthened with the appearance of the first issue of the *Annual Review of Information Science and Technology (ARIST)* in 1966, edited by Carlos Cuadra. A \$65,000 grant from NSF greatly aided the success of *ARIST*. The first comprehensive textbook on the field, *Information Storage and Retrieval*, by Robert Hayes and Joseph Becker, appeared in 1963. The work of Hans Peter Luhn, a noted IBM engineer and ADI president in 1964, on indexing and selective dissemination of information (SDI), added to the reputation of the field. Luhn’s connection to IBM also led to the first technical book ever composed on electronic data processing equipment in the production of the preprints of papers for the 1963 Annual Meeting [5, p. 50].

Efforts to define the field also meant that attention had to be paid to how students of the field should be educated. During the late 1940s a few schools began courses on documentation, but they were scattered, and no school had made it a central focus. Jesse Shera, dean at Western Reserve University, established a “documentation institute” and a few conferences were held that focused on the topic. Grants from NSF to the Georgia Institute of Technology and Ohio State University (and later to Lehigh University) in 1965 led to symposia and educational programs in information science.

These symposia and the 1965 ADI-sponsored Working Symposium on Education for Information Science (the Airlie Conference) began to add some clarity – and recognition – to the nature of information science. Several highly prestigious universities, including MIT, Harvard, Michigan and Pennsylvania, began offering interdisciplinary courses or programs in information science. The traditional “library schools” were also slowly beginning to offer at least courses in documentation or information science, but full-fledged programs dedicated to information science were rare. The board of ADI/ASIS encouraged and stimulated these developments during the late 1960s and early 1970s but did not attempt to set requirements or get involved in any type of certification or accreditation process [1, pp. 199-200]. By 1967 there were eight student chapters.

The 1970s were again a period of remarkable change in the United States and in the renamed ASIS. Online searching systems, painstakingly developed in the 1960s, began covering many scientific disciplines and were commercially available to users – and ASIS members were the stars in developing and using them. The art and science of online searching were the topic of many ASIS meetings and in the Society’s newly named journal, now the *Journal of the American Society for Information Science (JASIS)*. The new *Bulletin of the American Society for Information Science* first appeared in 1974 (an occasional newsletter to members had been published in the 1950s), and the *Bulletin* was a significant improvement in communications with members. Membership in ASIS was growing, and by 1979 membership had risen to almost 4,000. A 1979 membership survey showed that almost 36% were employed in industry and 27% were in academia. Management of information services or databases as a principal function was almost 29% of the membership. Searching for information and related operational functions occupied another 29%. This survey also showed the remarkable diversity of the field: more than 100 different degrees were reported. Library and information science degrees continued to dominate with 34% but significant numbers were reported for the social sciences (27%) and science and engineering (22%) [6].

The finances of ASIS continued to be a problem but were given a temporary respite with the successful bidding in 1970 to operate the Educational Resources Information Center’s (ERIC) Clearinghouse for

Library and Information Science (CLIS) for a period of four years. However, when ASIS lost the ERIC contract in 1974 because of a merger of ERIC centers, financial troubles returned. Financial stability only returned when ASIS sold the rights to *JASIS*, the major negotiable asset of ASIS at that time, to the publisher Wiley, Inc.

The 50th anniversary year of ASIS, 1987, was a year of great celebration and optimism. There were many accomplishments to note: an excellent scholarly journal; the continuing good reputation of *ARIST*; increasing numbers at the Annual Meetings, particularly academics presenting their research results; a significant growth of regional chapters and SIGs, many reflecting – and attracting practitioners from – the new fields in information science; an expansion of participation in national information policy activities; an expanded publications program; and, even a mild appreciation of the history of the society. The early history of the society was well documented in an outstanding 1987 issue of the *Bulletin* and even included an article by Watson Davis, which had been delivered at the 25th anniversary meeting but never published. All awards of prior years were listed in detail, with particular attention to the Society’s two major awards: the Award of Merit (whose winners were called “Pioneers of Information Science”) and the Watson Davis Award [7, pp. 1-84].

If the 1970s had been the decade of online services, then the 1980s and the 1990s were years of even greater change as the personal computer became a commonplace tool and the Internet and World Wide Web caused even greater shifts in the life and work of ASIS members. These developments should have been the “bread and butter” of ASIS members – and they were – but the society struggled for solid financial footing and for retention of members. ASIS was more of an “umbrella” society instead of a central-purpose organization and members often felt greater allegiance to other organizations where they had a more direct connection to a specific technology or a management issue. Finances were dependent not only on membership dues but also on income from the Annual Meetings, the Mid-Year Meetings and the sale of publications. If one of these streams did not meet expectations then financial problems arose and limited what the society could do to respond energetically to the significant developments that were transforming the



PHOTO COURTESY OF EUGENE GARFIELD

Eugene Garfield with copy of his science newsletter, *The Scientist*, about 1980.

information world. In 1999 incoming ASIS president Eugene Garfield compiled a chart of membership from 1976-1999 showing a gradual decline in membership over that period, from about 4,000 to about 2,500 [8, p. 27]. The same source showed net income during the period 1986-1998 hovering around \$4,000, and over the three-year period of 1996-1999, ASIS spent \$175,000 of its reserve funds. Much of this decline in finances could be attributed to the deal made with Wiley in 1976 for a \$350,000 loan against royalties over the next 10 years. Under this agreement the Societies royalties were reduced from 20% to 5%.

As noted, this *could* have been the perfect time for ASIS and ASIS members to shine. The information world had expanded dramatically in the two decades prior to the 21st century. ASIS members were involved in almost all aspects of information work, from basic research to building and maintaining extensive databases and online systems. The Society, however, had changed dramatically in those two decades. The most notable change, according to a 2003 membership survey, [9] was in the nature of the membership: 57% were now from educational institutions and only 18% from business and industry (in 1979 it was 36%) and 8% in government. A large portion of the membership (86%) now saw ASIS as the place to report their research results. Reporting on the 1999 meeting, John Berry of *Library Journal* asked “Is ASIS to be a tenure track meeting or for the field?” [10, p. 18] However, he also noted that the topic of knowledge management dominated the conference and the word *libraries* was mentioned as prominently as at American Library Association meetings. The dramatic change in the nature of the membership reflects two major themes: first, the society was no longer an information-industry-oriented association, and, second, research in the field of information science had gone through a significant and positive maturing in recent years.

As the new century began ASIS also began a small revival. Renegotiation of the *JASIS* contract in 2000 helped finances (adding \$100,000 each year to the bottom line), and membership showed a series of small increases. With the urging of Eugene Garfield, 1999-2000 president, the name of the society was changed in August 2000 to add “and Technology,” making it ASIS&T, a change that had been rejected at least twice in earlier years. Garfield argued that this addition was both accurate and essential to the identity of the society. (And, a few members were happy to have this new acronym, remembering the jibes by some librarians about AS-IS!) Simultaneously helping finances and reaching out to a new audience was the addition of a topically oriented mid-year meeting on information architecture in 2000. (The original Mid-Year Meetings had become a financial drain in recent years and were discontinued.) The Information Architecture Summit meetings have continued, have been financially successful and have attracted some new members.

In the years since 2000 ASIS&T has continued to thrive financially, and there were small, regular increases in membership. Member retention has continued to be a problem. The issue of whether to eliminate or change the word *American* from the name has continued to be raised occasionally. The arguments against and for this move resembled those raised in 1937. Those for this change believe it would enhance international membership (which has stayed fairly constant at about 10% for personal members; 20% institutional [11]) and those against believe *American* is a cachet for excellence in science and technology.

This brief summary of the history of ADI/ASIS/ASIS&T may leave the impression that “the more things change the more they remain the same.” To some extent this is true because certain issues and problems have been recurring themes throughout the history of the society. The larger picture that I hope comes through, however, is of a professional society that meets and effectively responds to the challenges of modern information societies. Sometimes those responses are limited because of the size and resources of the Society while the needs are great. Michael Buckland, 1998 president of ASIS, has questioned why, given the problems of the so-called “Information Society,” ASIS is not larger. He notes that he has “...found ASIS to be

consistently the most comfortable and the most interesting of the societies in which I have participated.” [12, p. 973] Part of his answer is to urge ASIS&T to more vigorously pursue all the challenges, old and new, presented by the constantly changing world of information.

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