

# The Assurance of Noise in an Informed Society— Adaptation of New Irrelevancies to Very Old Norms?

**Herbert S. White**

*School of Library and Information Science, Indiana University, Bloomington*  
Presented at SIG/CON, October 18 1982, Columbus

You cannot imagine my surprise when I found that the title of my paper indeed came up to an acronym which turned out to be Tanis Anivon ("tennis anyone?"). Now, it surprised me, but it also pleased me because obviously acronyms are indeed important in any professional endeavor. I must congratulate those of our forebears in this society who had the foresight to name our society with initials that can indeed be pronounced *as is* and thereby certainly keep out of the group any of those undesirables who want to do forward-looking things.

Now, the subject on which I want to report is one of the greatest significance to the information profession. We've been aware for quite some time that neither users nor administrators have the vaguest idea of what an information system is or does. The measurements of the value of an information system which we have developed, have therefore been entirely quantitative in nature—two pounds of information are twice as good as one pound of information. And these criteria have served us well, since they require nothing of users or administrators, except an ability to look at the upward slope of a graph.

Such ideas as relevance and pertinence and information evaluation introduced gradually over time during the past 20 years are therefore of considerable danger to us. Not only because they threaten the quantitative dominance which we have established, but also because we recognize that once people ask whether or not the information system serves a useful purpose, we are in big trouble. It has therefore been the purpose of our investigations carried out over a period of several years to seek evidence in support of hypothesis that irrelevant information is just as good for users as so called relevant information.

Our attempts to work in this area have been met with a wall of conspiratorial silence. I would venture to guess that most of you have not heard of our work, and I am therefore deeply grateful to Dr. Puppybreath, and I share in the general dismay at his inability to be here, for allowing me the opportunity to present our findings. Our study was submitted for funding to the National Science Foundation, Division of Information Science and Technology, and was rejected by that body after one reviewer suggested that the study had potential practical application. Now, since it is widely known that NSF and particularly this division rarely funds studies with potential practical application, that evaluation served as the kiss of death.

Our proposed study has great significance for the library and information professions in the attempt to assure the existence of noise documents in the information system, be it as the result of an SDI or online retrieval. We asked selected users to develop profiles representing their interests, as with the evaluation of any more traditional information system. These were then translated into search terms which received *not* values in the development of the Boolean equation. In other words, the profile contained only terms to be ignored and all other terms were included. Since this system provided more notification that even an approach based on the premise that more information is good information can tolerate, a cut-off of 10,000 documents was established for each user in the test.

Notifications were combined with the mailings made periodically by the Publishers Clearinghouse. No reactions whatsoever to these notifications were received by us—a result which we found highly gratifying, since we already knew from many other studies that this is how clients respond to notifications which are presumably of interest. We were therefore prepared to

postulate that user response to an information notification system is actionem and therefore, independent of the content of notification. However, the consultants which we employed on this project cautioned us that it was possible that part of the lack of response might be attributable to the lack of the reaction to Publishers Clearinghouse notification, rather to the specific contents of our notifications.

We therefore undertook to conduct in-depth interviews of a sampling of recipients as attendees at national and international professional conferences. As interviewers, we selected the members of the Indiana University Cheerleader Squad, who between the basketball and football seasons are not heavily utilized. We dispatched these young men and women to professional meetings with instructions to seek out the subject at a time at which distractions would be at a minimum. The time selected was 2:00 AM; the place—the subject's hotel room.

Four conferences of diverse professional groups were selected. One was the conference on the effect of herpes on the development of athletic dexterity, a conference of physical education researchers held at St. Thomas Virgin Islands. The second was a conference on the effect of herpes on international trade balances, an economics conference held at Hilton Head, South Carolina. The third was the effect of herpes on the marketing of playtex products, a marketing conference held at Nice on the French Riviera. The final conference was on the effect of herpes on the survival of the nuclear family, a sociology conference held at Camden, New Jersey.

Responses to our interviewers demonstrated clearly that neither the method of selection for notification nor the quality of these notifications were of any interest to the subjects of the test. Reactions varied from "Do you realize it's 2:00 in the morning?" to threats to contact hotel security (these responses were considered acceptable to the hypothesis of the study). We found that 52% of our researchers were in fact invited to stay in the room for further discussion. But we learned the following morning that these quickly strayed from the subject of investigation and were therefore judged to be spurious by our consultants.

The results of our study are specific and emphatic. Users of information systems clearly do not care what we give them, or for that matter, whether or not we give them anything. We can therefore safely ignore such absurd and antiquated concepts such as relevance and pertinence, user friendly systems, interrogative dialogs, cost efficiency, cost effectiveness, and cost benefit, and we can return to the simpler and management-trying techniques of supplying information in quantity regardless of what it is. Based on our study, we would suggest that this is most easily done through procedures of noise assurance such as we have suggested.

Survey findings were plotted against an x-axis of document supply and a y-axis of user satisfaction. The results appeared at first to be widely dispersed. We were also concerned that the use of cheerleaders as survey takers might in fact have influenced the survey results, particular in the lower range of the graphical findings. However, we judiciously applied the laws of Zipf, Bradford, Mooers, Lotka and Gresham, the law of the wild, the law of the jungle, the law of eminent domain, the law of survival of the fittest, the probability of drawing to an inside straight, the accreditation standards of the American Library Association, the projected federal deficit as averaged between budget director David Stockman, and congressional budget officer Alice Rivlin, the prime rate in August 1967, the Illinois winning lottery number on February 24 1981, and the work by Garfield, Small and Griffith on citation cluttering and citation littering.

We were thus able to so distort our data that we clearly succeeded in meeting our hypothesis. Further data analysis showed that as document supply selected through this process of generation of noise increases, so does satisfaction. As document supply reaches the optimum, taxing all methods of delivery including the now revived pony express, user satisfaction begins to reach euphoria.

Our study findings have other uses. the same data can be used to show unit cost measured against document supply. Hence, It is easy to demonstrate that as the supply of noise assurance increases, unit cost decreases to the point where ultimately there are no costs at all.