

"Come Blow Your Horn"
Why We're Proud of the
Social Sciences Citation Index

March 24, 1975

Number 12

Most readers of *Current Contents*® (CC®) are members of the academic world, where undisguised self-promotion is barely tolerated. Presumably, good work speaks for itself. But in the commercial world a certain amount of unabashed pride is necessary if a product is to be successfully marketed.

The Information Industry Association (IIA) is a trade organization whose members, including ISI®, produce an incredible variety of information products and services. Each year IIA selects an "Information Product of the Year". This year the Awards Committee selected seven finalists from about thirty nominees. At a meeting in New York on March 5, 1975, the producers of the seven finalists were required to make a presentation on behalf of their nominated products, taking into account the viewpoints of key users.

ISI's *Social Sciences Citation Index*™ (SSCI™) was one of the seven finalists this year. We had the onerous challenge of justifying its nomination before a jury of our commercial peers. I am personally very proud of the SSCI, and am generally more than willing to talk about any ISI product without having my arm twisted. But in this case I found it a task best performed by someone else.

Several of us worked on the description of the SSCI that follows, including Steve Aaronson, who is largely responsible for the *ISI Press Digest*™. Steve suggested that we let the SSCI talk about itself, so to speak, in an interview with a key user. And so we arranged a telephone conference with Professor Robert K. Merton of Columbia University. Professor Merton reminded us of some of the obvious, and some of the less obvious virtues of the SSCI. Presentation of the draft that resulted was entrusted to the oratorical skill of Melvin Weinstock, ISI's director of product planning and market research.

It has been some time since I last told you anything about the SSCI.¹ CC readers who have no direct interest in the social sciences and their literature may be interested to learn that

their social sciences colleagues have been much readier than 'hard' scientists to appreciate the values of an interdisciplinary citation index—much readier, for example, than the average chemist or physicist. Perhaps social scientists have simply had more reason to accept bibliographical innovation. In general, the literature of the 'hard' sciences has over the years been better organized. In recent years efforts to improve that organization even further have been so lavishly funded that 'hard' scientists have been well-nigh deluged with different information systems and approaches to information management. Most of them must now find it difficult to work up any interest in the latest entrepreneurial—or government-sponsored—information scheme or gimmick. Whatever the reason for the social scientists' attitude, I hope that it will prompt many 'hard' scientists to reexamine their thinking about the potential of citation indexing—especially in view of the bibliometric and sociometric applications in which the analysis of citation data plays a central role.^{2,3,4} As Newell predicted long ago,⁵ there is little that you or I can do about the reality of this use of citation indexes and citation data, or about the demonstrated validity of that use in competent hands. At the least, it behooves us all to be familiar with the advantages and pitfalls of citation analysis, lest it unexpectedly surprise us in evaluation of the impact of our own work.

Librarians who like to consult book reviews may wish to refer to a thoughtful review of the SSCI in a recent issue of the American Library Association's *Booklist*.⁶ A bad review in *Booklist* can be the kiss of death. But the SSCI still awaits a group appraisal of the type attempted by Steinbach in the case of the *Science Citation Index*® (SCI®) when it first appeared in 1964.⁷

Let us acknowledge that much of the work of any awards committee, especially in its final phases, becomes highly subjective. That is an inescapable and acceptable fact. Actually, it would seem to me an impossible task to

decide—at least at this time—whether the *SSCI* has made a more significant contribution to science, scholarship, and society than, say, the *Index to Current Urban Documents* (Greenwood Press), another of the finalists. Whatever the outcome of the judges' final round, it was a gratifying experience to blow our own horn, on request, an experience that

even the most disciplined academic might enjoy once in a while. Without Mr. Weinstock's charismatic *persona*, what follows may not be a remarkable description of the *SSCI*, but I think (in that unabashed pride I've mentioned) that you'll find it a useful enough description of a remarkable product.