



feature

Dr. Searchlove

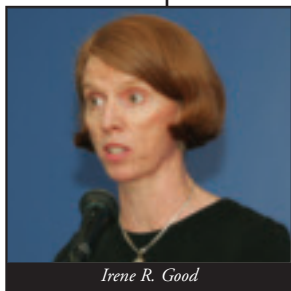
Or how I learned to stop Googling and love pre-coordinate indexing

by Mary Elizabeth Williams

photos by Brant Bender

Should I feel badly about Googling the speakers who presented at the AALL Annual Meeting program, “Indexes, Taxonomies and the Google Generation: What You Don’t Know Will Hurt You”? It turns out I probably shouldn’t feel (too) guilty. It merely proves that—despite my reluctance to admit it—I am indeed a member of the Google generation. But, as each of the four speakers in this excellent program clearly illustrated, that’s nothing a little education can’t fix.

Two of the program speakers represented commercial indexers and two were law librarians who work primarily with law students and attorneys. Each of the speakers provided evidence of the efficacy of using indexes as opposed to open Web or full-text searching. They convincingly argued to a full, rapt audience that indexes improve searching not only in terms of accuracy and thoroughness but also speed. In sum, all four speakers encouraged the audience to be more vigilant about teaching our user groups when, why, and how to use indexes.



Irene R. Good

Metadata is Your Friend

Chuck Knapp began the program by presenting the results of a usability study conducted by his team at the Bureau of National Affairs Inc. Nearly 30 law students from American University, Catholic University of America, and the University of the District of Columbia comprised the study’s user group. Knapp’s team compared users’ success rates and completion times while searching for information using either an index or full-text searching.

With this study, BNA sought to test its expectations about the success rate and effectiveness of using indexes rather than text searching.

The study included both single answer and more complex research tasks. Knapp described the study’s methodology and presented evidence that plainly showed using indexes was, in the case of both types of research tasks, faster and more successful than text searching. Overall, index users had a success rate of 86 percent with an average time of 57 seconds; text searchers fared

considerably worse with an average time of 2 minutes and 47 seconds per task for a paltry 23 percent success rate.

After the rare experience of listening to a clear and entertaining description of an empirical study, Dan Dabney began his presentation by showing the audience some vacation photos. What does a parade in Zurich have to do with effective legal research? It’s all about context.

Dabney, senior director of research and development at Thomson/West, made the case against free text searching by describing the impact of context. First, he displayed two pictures of the same thing in different perspectives: (1) a close-up of two people kissing in a parade and (2) a wider angle view of the parade, with people walking down the street in costumes and spectators on the sidewalk. The first picture, Dabney explained, was stripped of its context, while the second was clearly a parade *qua* parade.

Dabney went on to list the five types of legal research tools—narrative restatements, codifications, controlled vocabulary indexes, citation



Dan Dabney

indexes, and free text—each of which either enhance or remove context. He argued that free text as a research tool decontextualizes information in the same way that the close-up photo erased the parade. Context matters because without it, researchers are likely to miss unique concepts common to the field of legal research (e.g., chattel), they are likely to miss comparisons to related terms that might be useful, and they will often miss the outer limits of a research task since results in free text searching seemingly have no boundaries.



Advice from the Trenches

If you weren't persuaded of the importance of eschewing Google for a good index by the first two presentations, then the law librarians surely won you over. Irene R. Good, educational technology specialist, legal information librarian, and lecturer in law at the Boston College Law Library, offered up two examples she uses when teaching legal research. One research problem involves an arbitration issue and the other deals with a hostile work

environment case. Both examples reinforced the results found in BNA's usability study: using indexes improves accuracy, eliminates false positive results, and leads to completion in ways that full-text searching simply cannot.

Good illustrated her message by showing side-by-side screen shots of human-indexed tools and full-text searching of the two research examples. In both cases, full-text searching failed. Good's method was a helpful model for convincing Google generation law students that full-text searching is not the answer for many of their legal research needs.

Christine Graesser, legal information specialist at Brown Rudnick Berlack Israels LLP, concluded the program with a view of "life in the trenches" at a private law library. Her insight into how attorneys really use legal resources was recently informed by an e-mail survey she conducted in her firm. The survey asked the attorneys what kind of legal research resource they preferred to use. The number one choice was—you guessed it—Google; treatises placed a surprising second on their list of preferences.

Graesser read the results of her study as evidence that librarians have ceded the research edge to technologically-savvy patrons, with unsatisfying results for all. She urged librarians to take back the information edge by keeping up with technology and by more firmly asserting our expertise.

Finally, during the Q&A session, the panelists agreed that commercial publishers still need to work on providing compelling electronic presentations of human-indexed products in order to compete with the siren song of simple full-text search engine interfaces. The commercial indexers also encouraged law librarians to provide them with feedback regarding bad indexes.



Chuck Knapp

I left this program with new favorite speakers and a renewed interest in one of the core tools of this profession. And as much as I'd like to blame my occasional over-use of full-text searching on attending library school in Google-happy Seattle, my professors taught me—and I know—better. *Mea culpa.* (Is your Latin a little rusty? Try Googling it.) ■

Mary Elizabeth Williams (*mew7@u.washington.edu*) is a reference librarian at Columbia University's Arthur W. Diamond Law Library in New York.

(facing page top) From left: Irene B. Good, Christine Graesser, Marilyn M. Bromley, and Dan Dabney spoke during "Indexes, Taxonomies and the Google Generation: What You Don't Know Will Hurt You." Each of the speakers provided evidence of the efficacy of using indexes as opposed to open Web or full-text searching.

Irene R. Good, (facing page) educational technology specialist, legal information librarian, and lecturer in law at the Boston College Law Library, shares her experiences teaching legal research to the Google generation.

Dan Dabney, (facing page bottom) senior director of research and development at Thomson/West, made the case against free text searching.

A packed audience (left) takes in "Indexes, Taxonomies and the Google Generation: What You Don't Know Will Hurt You."

Chuck Knapp (lower left) presents the results of BNA's study of users' success rates and completion times while searching for information using either an index or full-text searching. Overall, index users had a success rate of 86 percent while text searchers had a 23 percent success rate.

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