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A Return to Volume 1 of *World Patent Information*

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Abstract

The author looks at the context of the articles published in *World Patent Information's* first volume, in 1979, in the light of subsequent developments over the ensuing 25 years. He provides examples of articles from 1979 and from recent years to illustrate his comments. Amongst themes that continue to be significant throughout this period, are patent classification schemes, patent information for techno-commercial intelligence and policy analysis, and the less than optimal take up of patent information by actual and potential users. By contrast, the author notes that microfilm, punch cards and batch computer searching, key themes of 1979, have given way to Internet technology. In conclusion he emphasises both the massive changes brought about by technology changes and the substantially unchanging situation in many other respects, for example in the major players in the provision of patent information databases and in the importance of effective patent searching.

Keywords: Historical context; *World Patent Information*; patent classification schemes; patent searching; commercial intelligence; policy analysis; microfilm; punch cards; batch computer searching; Internet technology; patent information providers.

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Twenty five years old! My own involvement with the gestation of *World Patent Information* was minor. When I met Dr Henning Bank of the European Commission at a patent information meeting in 1978, he told me that he was thinking of recommending to the Commission and to WIPO that a journal be started to cover patent information. I strongly endorsed the idea, dropped a heavy hint that I would like to be involved by being on the Editorial Board, and told him that I had a couple of articles in my kit bag that I would submit to the new journal should it get launched soon. My endorsement might have encouraged him further, but my hint took 21 years to come to fruition.

When the Editor in Chief invited me to write a short piece looking back over the past 25 years, I thought it would be interesting to revisit the first two issues that comprised Volume 1 of the fledgling journal. Revisiting these issues, what struck me was how little has changed as well how much has changed. The style of the journal is, incredibly, hardly changed. The mixture of scholarly articles, short book reviews, general articles from patent offices, announcements from patent issuing authorities and patent information services, reports of conferences, a current awareness bulletin of articles of relevance, even the odd interesting old patent has remained the same throughout the journal's quarter century. Some of the authors' names are familiar too. In other regards, though, it has changed a lot, most notably the content in detail (about which more later), and who publishes it. It started with Saur, moved on to Pergamon and though it retains that name, Pergamon is now part of Reed Elsevier. The early issues of the journal were also a good deal smaller than current issues.

Some topics, such as the development and implementation of patent classification schemes, remain a constant theme. The invaluable Technology Assessment and Forecast Program of the USPTO ([1] Marmor, Lawson, & Terrapane, 1979) remains alive and well, although its publications are no longer free as they were in the 1970s and 1980s [2]. Indeed, the use of patent information for techno-commercial intelligence and policy analysis remains a recurring theme from 1979 ([3] Hausser, 1979; [4] Mlodzik, 1979) to the present day ([5] Breitzman & Moguee, 2002; [6] Ernst,

2003; [7] Meyer, Urtecht, & Goloubeva, 2003). There was also an emphasis on the promotion of patent literature to potential users ([8] Lenoir, 1979), a concern that remains to this day ([9] Bell, 2000; [10] Carbone, 2002). Finally, one Charles Oppenheim published an article in Volume 1, Number 2 ([11] Allen & Oppenheim, 1979) – and is still doing so 25 years later! However, in many respects the emphasis has changed dramatically. This is particularly true when we consider the impact of technology. Volume 1 was focussed on microfilm – see for example, ([12] Keller, 1979), microfiche (there is a complete section entitled “Microforms” in the current awareness part of the journals), punch cards and batch computer searching as the means of retrieving patent information. As Edlyn Simmons’ fascinating article on Markush ([13] Simmons, 2003) shows, we have moved a long way from fragmentation codes on punch cards for the retrieval of chemical patent information in recent years.

It is not just in technology that changes are obvious. In 1979, the European Commission was actively interested in patent information ([14] Anonymous, 1979), whereas today it does little active in the field¹.

Perhaps the most interesting article in the first volume of *World Patent Information* from the point of view of a 21st century reader is a predictive one ([15] Starkloff, Hesse, & Ingeborg, 1979). This article reported the results of a survey of actual and potential users of patent information in West Germany, France and Ireland. They found that utilisation of the patent literature as a source of technical information was rather limited – something that more recent research ([16,17] Hall, Oppenheim, & Sheen, 1999, 2000) has shown to be little changed. Patent searchers were found to be keen on more precise, yet more complete searches. Ironically, this wish (which no doubt remains unchanged) is probably impossible to achieve because of the well-known inverse relationship between recall and precision that occurs in all information retrieval systems. One sentence in this article states, “patent-oriented users cannot express clearly why they spend their time on patent literature”, a sentiment I am sure many patent searchers today can relate to. The article is interesting because of its

¹ Although they do, for instance, support the biennial Patinnova conference run in tandem with the EPO’s Epidos Annual Conference. Editor.

prediction of future trends. The predictions were that the numbers of inventions per inventor will probably decrease, the number of patent applications per invention will remain the same until a Europe-wide patent system is adopted (in fact, the EPO had already started, as reported in ([18] Vandecasteele, 1979)) and that overall, the volume of patent literature will not change significantly; indeed, the authors predicted that the numbers of patent documents produced was likely to decline. Ah, wishful thinking! There were also predictions that access to the patent literature would improve because of improvements in subject classification of patent libraries, easier access to patent libraries, improved speed and costs thanks to improvements in IT and better co-ordination of IT systems. In fact, the role of patent libraries in the provision of patent copies and simple patent searches has declined because of the dramatic changes in IT, not least the Web, though that decline has been balanced somewhat by the libraries filling other, and arguably more interesting roles, such as the provision of training and similar services. Overall, the authors thought there would be some increase in the use of patent literature in the future.

So how would I sum up the changes? In 1979 there was without doubt some naivety regarding the potential of IT to change the face of patent searching, but patent literature experts were not alone in that regard. But in other regards, I am surprised how little has changed. The importance of effective patent searching, of the need to promote patent literature to non-users, and the importance and value of patent information in applications outside simple technical searches was already recognised. The major players in the patent information field, such as Derwent, INPADOC, the EPO and the USPTO were already well-established. Whilst some new players have entered the arena, the picture for patent professionals has not changed that significantly. What has changed is the emergence of free Web based patent databases. I think those who were active in patent searching when *World Patent Information* was born might be a little jealous of the ease, speed and low cost with which one can address patent searching today. However, the advent of free databases brings with it concomitant problems, and in particular a lack of understanding of patent classification systems and their importance. So whilst the picture has without doubt improved over the past 25 years, there is now a real threat to patent searching experts as end users naively use the free Web based sources and think they've done all that is needed to complete a comprehensive and precise patent search. But it is not

all bad news. It may well be that as a result of naively using Web based search engines and making bad decisions, users will recognise, return to, and appreciate better the skills of experienced patent searchers.

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[Exeter/ Chennai: Please place the author's photo here, as printed in the Guest Editorial of Vol 24 No 4, together with the following biographical note. Many thanks. Michael Blackman. Editor]

Professor Charles Oppenheim

Charles Oppenheim has been Professor of Information Science at Loughborough University since 1998. Prior to that, he held a variety of posts in academia and the electronic publishing industry, working for International Thomson, Pergamon and Reuters at various times.

His earliest research interest was patents information. In addition to this, he is interested in knowledge management, portals, citation studies, bibliometrics, national information policy, the electronic information and publishing industries, ethical issues and issues to do with the digital library and the Internet. He is also interested in the economics of information, especially methods of valuing information and intangible assets in industry, and the economics of the electronic publishing industries and of electronic libraries.

He has been involved in legal issues in information work since the mid 1970s. He is, for instance, author of "The Legal and Regulatory Environment for Electronic Information" (Infonortics, 2001).

Charles is an Honorary Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals. He is a member of the Legal Advisory Board of the European Commission. He is a regular contributor to conferences and to the professional literature, and is on the editorial board of a number of professional and learned journals.

Ref: Oppenheim 261