A GPR INTERVIEW

AN INTERVIEW WITH JAMES B. ADLER AND ESTHY ADLER, FOUNDERS, CONGRESSIONAL INFORMATION SERVICE, INC.

Interviewed by Sandra Peterson, Federal Publications Executive Editor, and Susan Tulis, Legal Information Executive Editor

JAMES B. and ESTHY ADLER

Abstract — In the course of this interview, James and Esthy Adler related the circumstances and environment that led to the inception, development, and ultimate success of the CIS/Index and subsequent products that revolutionized research in the field of government information. The Adlers also comment on the present government information scene, and speculate as to what areas are ripe for private sector entrepreneurship.
Imagine answering government information reference questions every day without consulting a CIS Index, database, or microform collection and one begins to realize the enormous contribution James and Esthy Adler and their company, Congressional Information Service (CIS), have made to the field of documents librarianship. Locating congressional and statistical information prior to the 1970s was serendipitous and extremely frustrating for both the librarian and the user. Much government information was simply buried, sometimes forever.


The editors of Government Publications Review wanted to hear in the Adlers' own words how and why CIS was founded. James and Esthy Adler met with us in their office in Bethesda, Maryland, on December 18, 1987. The discussion that took place follows.

MR. ADLER: Why are you interested in doing a piece on us and the early history of CIS (Congressional Information Service, Inc.)?

GPR: There are a lot of people who do not remember what it was like to provide government information reference service before CIS. A large number of practitioners in the field have joined the profession since the establishment of CIS; they do not realize the size of the contribution that CIS has made to government publications reference service. I would like to see that contribution recorded so that the information might be used in an historical sense in classes. Students today in library science classes are accustomed to using CIS. It would be good to have an account of how a business that so revolutionized government information retrieval in depository libraries and elsewhere came about. From where did the idea for CIS come?

MR. ADLER: In the late 1960s, I was running a business called James B. Adler, Inc., which was involved in trade book publishing. I received a contract from a trade publisher who wanted to do more books in the area of public affairs. He was interested in a number of different subjects; the one I remember in particular as an issue of great importance in the late 1960s was the relationship between the Congress and the President vis-a-vis the right to declare war. Every time I did research on such public affairs topics I kept coming up against difficult-to-locate congressional materials that were very good sources of information. I specifically remember, for instance, that the only history I could locate at that time on the relationship between the Congress and the President on war power was a staff study — a committee print — that had been issued by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. It became increasingly apparent that there was a large body of congressional material — at that time it was 300,000 to 400,000 pages a year — that was extremely valuable, but rather inaccessible. The materials themselves were uncontrolled and there was no overall bibliography of the material.

GPR: So, in effect, CIS grew out of your own research needs?

MR. ADLER: Yes. We spent more than a year trying to figure out how the problem could
be solved. During this time I was coming down to Washington, D.C. from New York quite often, trying to develop books on public affairs. I stopped off at the Library of Congress and talked with people in what was then called the Legislative Reference Service (LRS) [later renamed the Congressional Research Service] to try to find out how they gained access to congressional materials. They acknowledged that they were very heavy users of this material but nevertheless found it very frustrating. They noted that they would love to have better bibliographic access to this body of literature, but they could not get funding from Congress to undertake such a project. They said that if I were crazy enough to try to get a handle on this material, they would be as helpful as possible. They were quite specific in indicating what their needs and desires were. Our feeling was that if we could meet the needs of the people at LRS, then we could meet the needs of most other users of congressional information.

GPR: What research and development was done toward creating the CIS/Index?

MR. ADLER: It took a little over one year to figure out how to solve the problem. What evolved was what was to become the CIS/Index. Once we were persuaded that we had a solution I spent a significant amount of time talking about it with librarians. "Is this a solution that would work for you? Could we modify it so that it will work for you?" I received many good responses, but the response was not uniformly encouraging. At that time some documents librarians acted like priests or priestesses. They believed that nobody else knew how they got to the information, and I believe there was some fear that their jobs might be in jeopardy if their secrets were discovered. These were people who were insecure enough to feel threatened that something might enable library users to get directly to this information without needing a librarian’s help. We developed the product with a lot of assistance from many librarians who were quite explicit about what they would like to see in the way of a tool. I will not discuss with you the agonies of raising the money, but when we brought the CIS/Index to market we found that we had a winner.

GPR: Were the indexing and abstracting conceived of as part of the micropublishing program from the beginning?

MR. ADLER: I wish I could say I had the foresight to realize that the micropublishing was as important as it turned out to be. We viewed the CIS/Index as an entity unto itself. I will say that we had the foresight to imagine that sometime in the future people might want to search for documents electronically rather than through hard copy. We designed the method for producing the CIS/Index in such a way that we could ultimately make it available as an electronic database. But as far as micropublishing was concerned, we originally produced an indexing and abstracting journal for a market that presumably already had the documentation. There were 1,100 or 1,200 depository libraries at that time. I assumed that was the market. We did a little bit of market research and found that there was a secondary market. But, clearly, the depository libraries were the core market.

GPR: Was there any noticeable impact?

MR. ADLER: For the first time these congressional materials in depository libraries began to be quite heavily used. In a lot of libraries this increased use began to happen almost overnight. Also, libraries then discovered that their collections were not very complete. We then began to feel a demand for microform copies of these elusive congressional
materials that we had indexed and abstracted. It was not an easy demand to meet. At the time there was a great deal of uncertainty and a lot of technical questions that librarians themselves had about microforms. Should the microforms be roll film or microfiche? Should the microforms contain positive or negative images? Then, of course, microforms in the late 1960s and early 1970s were not a widely accepted medium. The people in the market did not really know what they wanted. It took us quite a while to figure out how to do it. In the end we decided that we had to do it ourselves. To respond to your original question, we went into the micropublishing business because the CIS/Index created an awareness among librarians that their collections were not complete. As long as the collections were not being used, I guess they did not mind — or maybe didn’t know!

GPR: So you did the filming of the congressional documents yourself?

MR. ADLER: We started by hiring someone else to do it for us. We discovered that they would not take seriously the archival standards and other qualities, such as exacting resolution, that librarians demanded. We finally ended up building our own facility. I do not know anyone who runs a more sophisticated facility for producing archival microfiche than CIS.

GPR: How was CIS able to have a comprehensive collection in microform when the U.S. Government Printing Office (GPO) did not have such a collection?

MR. ADLER: This is a matter of the difference between the bureaucratic approach and the profit-seeking approach to establishing a business. We felt that if we were to build customer loyalty in the information and research field then people had to be able to assume that if they did not find it in the CIS/Index it did not exist. The only way that we could do that was to be pretty determined about getting everything that fell within the definition that we had given to the body of literature that we were covering. It meant being active rather than passive — the procedures that existed at the GPO at the time were relatively passive; there was no motivation for them to be more active. Nor was there any requirement on the part of any of the congressional committees to inform anybody about what they were publishing. We went around from committee to committee and from subcommittee to subcommittee; there were well over 250 publishing entities on Capitol Hill at the time. Esthy had to establish a contact with each one of those committees and subcommittees and convey that she meant business.

MS. ADLER: It took a while. Staff members of the committees at first said that a number of people had thought of collecting these publications, but that they gradually had given up. I was the only one that consistently showed up and was there when I said I was going to be there. After a while the staffs realized that I meant business. If I could not get materials one way, I would get them another.

GPR: How so?

MR. ADLER: You discover after a while that very often there are multiple paths to the same information. One must keep all paths open. It was a job that required a tremendous amount of persistence. You also had to win the confidence of the people on the committees. We took the position at the outset that we would exclude from the CIS/Index anything that the committees themselves deemed to be confidential. Every once in a while
something fell into our hands that was supposed to be confidential. We were careful to return it to them and not release it until the committee chairman was ready to say that the material could be released. We understood very well that if even only once we let anything get into the CIS/Index to which a chairman objected, he effectively could cut off the flow of documents forever.

GPR: The Congressional Information Service enjoys a good working relationship with documents librarians, unlike some other companies. How did this situation develop?

MR. ADLER: It was not an accident. When I started talking to the librarians at the outset — the very people with whom I consulted in trying to design the CIS/Index — I discovered that there was in the library community an enormous amount of suspicion of publishers. Publishers were viewed simply as peddlers who were trying to maximize their profits and had no concern for what happened to the product once it got into the library. For the library community to think of CIS in that way would be counterproductive. We had to take the time to learn what the librarians were really concerned about, to demonstrate our interest, and to be sure that this interest became, for CIS, a part of what is now termed corporate culture. We took pains to assure the librarians with whom we worked that we shared the same professional goals that they did. A major contributing factor was that the men and women who were on the sales force when we were running CIS — and I think, to a very large extent, they are the same people today — know more about documents librarianship than many documents librarians.

GPR: You have to know the territory in order to sell the product.

MR. ADLER: I do not know the extent to which other companies share that philosophy. The people at CIS know that this is expected of them.

GPR: It seems ironic that librarians on a personal level have a good relationship with CIS, but through such organizations as the American Library Association (ALA), librarians have an adversarial relationship with the information vendors, CIS among them, that comprise the Information Industry Association (IIA).

MR. ADLER: It is ironic and unfortunate. I do not know whether there is a way of dealing with the problem successfully. There are a lot of bright public-spirited businessmen in the information industry and not all of them are the type of peddlers of whom librarians may justifiably be suspicious. I do not know what the best mechanism is for establishing better communication between people in ALA and people in the IIA.

MS. ADLER: To a certain extent it is unavoidable. For some of the companies, the products that they produce are very costly. Yet the librarians seem to feel very often that they should be given the information for nothing because it is information that is in the public domain. What they do not realize fully is how much it costs to process the information and to put it in a form in which it is most useful. So, there has always been that confrontation — and probably always will be.

MR. ADLER: There is a word that has two different meanings. That word is free. Everybody is in favor of free access to information. However, free meaning unfettered and free meaning costless are two different concepts. If you are in business, you know that there is
no activity that is free of cost. The only question is who is going to get the bill. If you run a library you may know that your budget simply will not accommodate all that you are supposed to be doing and anything that is cost-free is better than something for which you are paying the bill. That is going to create a certain amount of friction no matter what you do. People in business have to be paid; people in libraries do not always have the money to pay it.

GPR: In retrospect, what are your reactions to GPO's decision to get into the microfiche business? Do you think this is, and should continue to be, a concern for the private sector?

MR. ADLER: If you want a one word answer, the one word is yes. I will say that I tried rather hard to find a basis either for cooperation between the government and the private sector, or for competition between the two, so that there were multiple sources for similar kinds of services. I cannot say that I met with much success on either score. I had the feeling then that had I been successful, it would have been good for information users.

GPR: Based on your insights of 10 years ago, what areas do you see in government information today that entrepreneurs might be looking at?

MR. ADLER: More and more government information is being held in electronic form and not even published. Even when it is made available, potential users' access to it is almost necessarily very narrow and limited. By its very nature electronic information is very hard to get at; it is difficult to know what is in a database — it is hard to know how to use it. I would guess that the needs lie there. There are probably many potential users of this information who are frustrated by the fact that they do not even know what is there. If I am correct, then if somebody can solve the problem they will have opened up significant opportunities for themselves and at the same time serve some important information needs.

GPR: Do you see a large commitment by government to distribute information in nontraditional, electronic formats? If your answer is yes to that, why do you think that government might jump on the bandwagon and distribute information in electronic format when they did not distribute audio-visual materials through the depository library program?

MR. ADLER: Yes, I think they will. When we were involved in government information what we saw over and over again was that the government collects information on an agency-by-agency basis for that agency's own needs. An agency does spend a certain amount of time and money to distribute the information, but a lot more time is given to the needs of the agency than to the needs of all potential information users, which may be many, many more people than that agency even imagines exist. This is all very logical when one thinks about how government has to run. I do not see anybody in government who has the responsibility and the budget for distributing information in a useful manner after having gathered all of this information, even though it has such enormous potential value for a wide variety of people. No one agency or person is charged with saying, "Let's figure out how we can maximize the value of the information by distributing it." I do not think that there is anybody in government that does that. Necessarily, therefore, the amount of effort, energy, and money that is invested in distributing information is always going to be less than it took to gather the information to begin with. This to me would seem to leave a never-ending series of opportunities for people who are in the information business.
GPR: One would think that there would almost be a gold rush of entrepreneurs heading for the mother lode of government information. Why isn’t this happening?

MR. ADLER: The way the government is set up may actually discourage people from getting into this dissemination function. There is a possibility that if the government is not careful there will be people who may get into the business and simply exploit it and take advantage of the information user by overcharging. Someone must worry about that as well.

GPR: How did you decide, once you had done the initial CIS/Index, what should be next?

MR. ADLER: In the early 1970s there was a Presidential commission on statistics. A couple of the Commission’s staff people came to CIS and said to us, “You know something about taking large bodies of government information and making them accessible. One of the issues that has come up before the Commission is the issue of creating a central inventory of and index to all federally produced statistics.” I said, “Good luck.” But we took a look at it. The more we looked at it the more it appeared that the fundamental problem was one that we had already solved with the CIS/Index. It was just a different body of material. We finally went back to the Commission and said that we believed that the techniques that we had already developed to work with congressional materials would work with statistical materials as well. We said that we were going to try. They said, “That’s nice,” and we went ahead and did it. That is how American Statistics Index (ASI) came into being.

GPR: If there were 250 congressional offices where you found information, there must have been significantly more offices generating statistics. Did you approach them in the same manner?

MS. ADLER: It was very much a similar approach. We started with the Department of Transportation. I remember we found a lot more information than we thought we originally would.

MR. ADLER: Many agencies did not even know the materials existed — that was the amazing thing.

MS. ADLER: They did not even know what they had in the office. When they told us about their materials most agencies vastly underestimated the amounts. Then, when I went to pick up materials, they kept saying, “There is more, there is more.”

MR. ADLER: The compartmentalization of the federal government is amazing. People who work down the hall from one another do not know that each other exist or what they do. People who were supposed to know the information output of their agency did not know about the nooks and crannies within their own agencies. We discovered well over 1,000 statistical producing programs within the federal government that ultimately we began to monitor.

MS. ADLER: It was a monumental job.

MR. ADLER: That one [ASI] really was. I have to say that Esthy’s experience in dealing with Congress on the CIS/Index really helped us with the ASI project.
GPR: Were you, Ms. Adler, still doing the document retrieval from the agencies on your own by that time?

MS. ADLER: By that time I had worked in some people to cover the congressional materials. That way I could concentrate on training people to cover the agencies. We had several people covering the agencies. We created a prototype of what should be done and how they should go about it. We must have had about five people going around to the statistical agencies. By then it was easy because the prototype had been established. They knew what they had to do. It was the original conception and how to go about dealing with such large bodies of material that presented the problems. It was just conducted on a larger scale than the CIS/Index project. It was pretty much on the same model.

MR. ADLER: You discover that there are a lot of people in the federal government who work very hard generating information, and I believe they are frustrated that so few people use it. There is a tendency on their part to want to share the information. Every once in a while you might run into a place where people were uncooperative, but the overwhelming number of individuals were really delighted that somebody cared — somebody was getting their work out and it was going to be used. There was a lot of information but we were operating in an atmosphere of cooperation.

GPR: At what point did you decide to venture into retrospective materials?

MR. ADLER: From the very beginning, almost from the time we did the first issue of the CIS/Index, we started feeling pressure from documents librarians for retrospective materials, for example, the Serial Set.

MS. ADLER: The Serial Set, in particular, we were told was needed. They felt that it was incomplete. Librarians had been told it was complete but they were frequently finding holes in the collection. They asked if we could do something about it.

MR. ADLER: There was really an enormous amount of demand for the Serial Set. The problem was that we could not do it on the same abstracting basis that we were doing the current materials, for obvious reasons. We had to figure out a way that would provide adequate information access and that still would have a cost that would not go so far out of sight that nobody could afford to buy it. We were dealing with millions upon millions of pages with the Serial Set. It was quite an interesting balance to try to strike. It took us a while to figure out what kind of indexing method we should use. When we solved that problem we went to the market and found out that the market was delighted to have it and we went ahead and did it.

MS. ADLER: But then we had to figure out where to find the missing pieces. Some libraries had complete sets of parts and some libraries had complete sets of other parts. It took some time to figure out who had what.

MR. ADLER: There was no absolutely complete set of the Serial Set anywhere in the country. The U.S. Senate had the most complete set.

MS. ADLER: Even their collection was not complete.
MR. ADLER: We ended up using a large number of libraries to help make the CIS Serial Set complete.

GPR: What would you say was CIS’s most significant contribution to government information?

MR. ADLER: Establishing standards.

MS. ADLER: GPO had to begin to look at our standards.

MR. ADLER: When we came into the field, standards for tools accessing government information were abysmally low. There was not anything out there that really had high standards. CIS came in and, in essence, said that these are the standards that can be reached, we are going to reach them, and if anyone wants to compete with us, you have to have similarly high standards.

GPR: Tell us what you are currently doing. I know that after you sold CIS you started another business. Could you tell us a little bit about this venture?

MR. ADLER: We started a publishing company and have published about three dozen books since we started in January 1986. We, however, are going out of business; our last books will come out in June 1988.

GPR: Are you concentrating on a specific subject area?

MR. ADLER: No, if we had been we might have made life much easier for ourselves. Actually, we tried to do something that was a bit old-fashioned — we tried to start from scratch a small, personal, general publishing house that wanted to do quality books with an emphasis on nonfiction. In this day and age that is very difficult. We have published a number of good books. One of our books was just selected as one of the notable books of the year by the New York Times Book Review. We have done a number of books that we are rather proud of, but to establish yourself as this kind of publisher in the 1980s is not something that we have been able to do successfully, at least on a profit-making basis.

GPR: So, do you have other plans?

MR. ADLER: Our plans right now are to explore the possibilities. There are plenty of them out there.

GPR: Thank you.

MR. ADLER: Thank you for coming. It is very flattering.