Index versus Search

In *Indexing Books,* Nancy Mulvany says ". . . an index is a device for providing access to relevant information. . ." A search engine will provide information, but it is not always the relevant information a searcher seeks, nor is it organized with subentries to aid in information access. Search engine optimization can also influence the information received from searches.

In standard indexing practice, newsletters and trade journals are not indexed in great detail. Generally, articles are indexed by main topics, secondary topics, important terms and author's names. An index filters information so that only significant references to a topic are included. In contrast to an index, a search engine will produce every mention of a word without any filtering. The searcher then has to go through all the references to find the information they really want. An index directs the searcher to more specific information while lessening the burden on the searcher. Indexes also provide multiple points of information access. For example, you can find an article by topic or by author's name.

Here's an example of search versus index from the Arizona Native Plant Society's website:

Using the search box on the ANPS website, a search on the word "saguaro" produced more than 75 references. The references included every mention of the word, including

- passing mentions and references to the term when not a main or secondary topic
- mentions on non-indexable pages, such as on the President's or Editor's page
- references in plant lists that were agreed not to be indexed in detail
- references to Saguaro National Park, not the cactus

In contrast, the index contained 3 references to the Saguaro cactus:

Saguaro
      Cora Estelle Cameron Mosher Floral Drawings, 2020;43:1:7
      Surveys of Saguaro (*Carnegia gigantea*) on the Florence Military Reservation, 2015;38:1:12
      20 Columnar Cacti for Landscape Use in Central and Southern Arizona, 1984;8:3:3

A search on the term "saguaro cactus" produced only 9 references but did not produce 2 of the references included in the index.

A different search on an author's name produced irrelevant references such as the author's name in the journal's masthead or on lists of board members. There were many of these references to check before finding which were references to articles authored.

As these examples show, an index provides easier and more reliable information access to relevant formation.