

Perilous powers in authorial hands

Hazel K Bell

Details the abuse of so-called automatic indexing software, in particular by book authors.

“Automatic indexing is an oxymoron”, declared Nancy Mulvany five years ago (Mulvany 1994). But it is an oxymoronic mirage ardently pursued by some information scientists and apparently cherished by some authors.

It was first noted in *The Indexer* fifteen years ago (Bell and Suggate 1984), after a jubilant letter appeared in *The Author* extolling “the piece of magic which has made the indexing of my forthcoming book simplicity itself” (Allan 1984). The spell had been cast by Alpha Data Services, whose advertisement claimed to “have developed [sic] a method of INDEXING using a microcomputer”. The resultant index to Allan’s *William Robinson 1838-1935: father of the English flower garden* (Faber 1982) was examined by members of SI’s Board of Assessors, and found to be erroneous in alphabetization; inconsistent in style; with subheadings ill-chosen, misplaced and incorrectly arranged (‘Comes alive again’, ‘Old mare and carter’) — the whole a miasma of confusion.

Four years later an equally eager and easily pleased technophile editor wrote to *The Times* (November 1989) boasting how he had “created the index for our 250,000-word *Encyclopaedia of Social Inventions*”: with “one keystroke on the computer our off-the-shelf software whizzed through the text ...” (Bell 1990). Inventions in this index were listed only under title, as: ‘Bringing hobbies into the school curriculum’ under B; just ‘Two Sir Humphreys’, under T, to indicate a proposal to reform the Civil Service.

The ghostly hare of automatic indexing as offered in commercial programs for non-indexers to produce book indexes was laid to rest in a review in *Key Words* (Mulvany and Milstead, 1994). Two professional indexers tested Indexicon, a program boxed with the claims: “With just a click of the mouse you create back-of-the-book indexes; Produce professional quality indexes at a rate of up to 50 pages a minute”.

The reviewers found “a lack of the analysis and synthesis expected in a professional quality index; ... omission of entries; ... no ability to provide conceptual entries; no knowledge of commas in series or double entry; ... fails to meet the presentation criteria of any standard for indexes; ... cannot create cross-references; ... stumbles over simple matters such as personal names, names of states, and singular and plural forms”. They concluded, “back-of-the-book indexes cannot be automatically generated”. Indexicon was pulled from the market, and no PC tool claiming to be able to create both main headings and subheadings seems to have succeeded it.

However, authors who have their text in electronic file still hold dangerous powers in their keyboard-controlling hands, which may be irresponsibly exercised. They have the PC-bestowed capability to flag all terms they choose in their text,

and have the fascinating results printed out in alphabetical order. They may then choose to compare these pseudo-concordances with the selective indexes supplied as commissioned by their publishers.

This may well have been the course taken by the author of the biography of a playwright who insisted on the travesty of my index described in *The Indexer* (Bell 1996). He supplied to the publisher a long list of “References the indexer has missed” and insisted on their being incorporated into the index I had provided. Long, useless strings of minimal page references were thus slapped on top of my carefully selected and subdivided subheadings; lengthy titles quite insignificant in the text were to be inserted, as were references within quoted passages, including to ‘Christ, Jesus’ when merely exclaimed by a dramatic character. This automatic production of a pseudo-index can prove a very dangerous tool in the hands of an author who does not understand the principles of indexing or accept that any word he has written can be regarded as insignificant — not meriting a place in an index.

Recently I have noticed another example of such a power-crazed author, a woman of vehement feminist views. Her publishers regarded the index that had been professionally prepared to her book, which dealt with violence against women, as perfectly satisfactory; but this author insisted that it be made “more sensitive to women”, with more topics and headings to be inserted. She supplied an 11-page list of ‘Index omissions’ - about the same length as the first index provided. Nothing on this list, however, had actually been omitted from the original index: either different terms had been used, or the author was seeking to emphasize her ideas by frequent reappearance of items in the index. Thus, ‘racial discrimination’, ‘discrimination’ (two separate entries) and ‘oppression’ were listed as omissions from the index, when ‘apartheid’, ‘racism’ and ‘violence’ already had full entries; ‘sex’ was to be given a subheading, ‘forced’, while ‘rape’ already had a huge entry.

Surely only a slavish flagging and replication of words just as used in the text could result in the author’s proposed additional subheadings for ‘violence’, *sic*:

against black women
against women
against black people
beaten
criminal
in the home
mother-child
parental physical
physical
political
severity of violence used by perpetrator

slapped
spanked
stab
tortured
whipped
white racist

The subheadings for this topic in the original index had been:
violence

Afrikaner families
against black people
child-father
English-speaking South African families
father-child
husband-wife
mother-child
partners
in pornography
power from
in prostitution
public/private
sexual
siblings
women's
see also wife-beating

Under 'white' — a heading not used in the original index — were to be listed: domination, elite, homes, immigrants, males, mentality, minority, owned farms. Other strange subheadings required, suggesting word-occurrence in the text rather than concept, were 'filthy' and 'problems' under 'sex'; 'Elsa thought she deserved the' under 'torture'.

The final amalgam of the original index with the author's interpolations was indefensible by any criteria of good indexing. Topics were clumsily subdivided and repeated, overlapping. The author had broken up some main entries into several beginning with the same word: Afrikaner daughters, Afrikaner families, Afrikaner(s), Afrikaner men, Afrikaner women (the original index had Afrikaner families with ten subheadings and a cross-reference, and Afrikaners with nine subheadings); patriarchs, patriarchal power, patriarchalism (the original had 'patriarchy' with subheadings — Afrikaner family; English-speaking South Africans; internalised; ownership; *see also* entitlement). All this caused the most convoluted cross-references in a maze of repetition.

Other items appeared several times under different terms in a most inconsistent way, apparently intended to reinforce the author's views, and often referring to the same single page. 'Steprelatives', with one page reference, had eight examples added — stepbrothers, stepchild, stepfathers, stepgrand-daughters, etc. — each referring only to page 9.

Nevertheless, the publishers tell us that they "had such a difficult time with this author that they had no option but to allow her revision of the index, but were not taken in by it and would much have preferred to use the original, perfectly competent index". The volume was published with the travesty-index.

It's a growing trend. An ASI member reports being told by the production manager at a publishing house specializing in college-level text books that two of their authors wanted to index

their own books and had asked to have their edited, paginated files returned to them so that they could use embedded indexing software. She wanted to know if some appropriate improvement in indexing software had come about. No, said the indexer.

But if authors insist on the right to remould the indexes provided nearer to their hearts' desire, and embedded coding systems give them the power to produce their own ideas of indexes that will pamper and promote their texts in the teeth of all good indexing practice — what are poor standard-conscious indexers to do?

References

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HOW TO RESCUE AN INDEX AND COME OUT ON TOP!



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