BOOK REVIEW

Information indexing and subject cataloguing: alphabetical: classified: coordinate: mechanical. JOHN METCALFE

NEW YORK, SCARECROW PRESS, 1957. 338 pp. 60/-. (British agents: Bailey Bros. & Swinfen)

Is indexing a science or an art? There is no doubt that the skilful, detailed indexing of a complex book is more art than science, but there are situations where science – in the form of carefully worked out and logically interrelated rules of indexing – is most necessary. Such codified methods are needed for large indexes to which many workers must contribute, but which must be as uniform as possible.

Such ‘information indexes’ are of increasing importance in research today, particularly in science and technology, where the volume of literature to be controlled is so great, and the search questions asked are so varied in specificity and complexity. Although the traditional alphabetical index is still the basic form, a great deal of thought is going into the design and testing of other kinds of index. Classified indexes have been developed into much subtler and more complicated structures. Techniques of ‘coordinating’ terms to form compound subjects have been worked out. Machine searching is being tried. And lastly, these developments are in turn reacting back on alphabetical indexing methods.

It is this fermenting situation which Mr Metcalfe (an Australian librarian) attempts to survey – on the whole with disapproval. He examines much of what has been written during the last decade, and finds it to have little value. He reviews in turn the pros and cons of alphabetical or classified indexing, the practice of the dictionary catalogue, classifications and their notations, and mechanical selection methods. Some of his criticisms of current work are very well taken, some are trivial and some are unfortunately based on an incorrect understanding of what he is criticising.

Mr Metcalfe swears by the alphabet, and his bête noire is classification – especially the newer, ‘faceted’ type of classification which tries to cope with compound subjects such as ‘Bacteriological study of the tuberculosis of the lungs, using the electron microscope’. Attacking the alleged complexity of modern classification techniques, he does not appreciate that they are trying to provide both for access to very specific subjects and for very general survey – the two extreme types of search for which indexes may be designed.

The virtues of this book are that the author attempts to assess indexing systems from the view point of the user, and that he upholds throughout what he takes to be the ‘common-sense view’. Its weaknesses are that he all too often criticises non-essentials rather than the strong points of the systems he dislikes, and has, indeed, not always understood their aims or their methods.

The book offers few concrete solutions to indexing problems. It is not a manual, but a polemic. Those not already familiar with the systems discussed will find much of it hard going. It could not be recommended as a text from which the newer techniques of information indexing might be learnt. However, anyone who is interested in current controversies and developments in this field will find Mr Metcalfe’s onslaught, though often wrong-headed, most stimulating.

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