INDEXING AND INDEXERS FROM A PUBLISHER'S ANGLE

Bruce Wilcock,
Science Editor, Oxford University Press

Mr Wilcock began by pointing out that, as science editor of a university press, he was probably not typical of publishers in general.

Publishers, he said, are now under great and increasing financial pressures, and are therefore more than ever concerned with cost and speed of production; capital is tied up while a book is being produced, and delay costs money. An index adds to the cost of producing a book, and to the time spent in producing it, but the value of a good index is out of all proportion to its cost. Recent changes in production methods are probably not a significant factor, since they do not greatly affect the cost of index production. Even when a book is reproduced directly from typescript, the index merely takes its share of the reduction in cost.

Reviewers often deplore the lack of an index, though it is uncertain whether reviews greatly affect sales, especially in the case of academic books which are often reviewed long after publication.

Regardless of the cost factor and of the possible effect of an index, or lack of it, on sales, the better publishers are concerned with index quality. But what exactly is quality? How can money be spent on indexing to best advantage?

Type of index

Whether a book should have an index, and what kind of index it should have, is usually decided by the publisher, in consultation with the author, who is usually required to pay for the index. An author often needs advice about the best way of indexing his book; the editor should be able to give this.

Most academic books require author and subject indexes, whether separate or combined. It is usually inadvisable to combine an author index with a bibliography, as the complexity of the setting may increase the cost of proof correction and may prove confusing for the user of the book.

The indexing of a multi-author book presents particular problems, since the volume editor must organise it, and his enthusiasm for the project may at that stage have been blunted.

Who should prepare the index?

The four possibilities are: (i) the author; (ii) a professional indexer; (iii) someone on the publisher's editorial staff; (iv) the author in collaboration with indexer or editor.

The author will know his book better than anyone else, but may underestimate the needs of his readers, tending to forget that they may lack his special knowledge of the subject. Authors may also lack indexing skill. A professional indexer, on the other hand, may find difficulty with specialised subjects, especially where the book is near the frontiers of research. The publisher's staff are usually too busy to undertake the work. The ideal solution is for the author and a professional indexer to work together, but difficulties and delays can result, especially if they live some distance apart and cannot meet.

Payment for the index

The publisher would like the best of both worlds—he decides whether an index is needed, but the author pays for it. Its cost may be made a charge against the author's royalties; but with academic books, where royalties are often very small, this may result in the publisher having to bear the cost for a year or two. Fixed payments are more common than royalties in the case of multi-author books.

If the author, or the publisher, arranges for an indexer to do the work, two ways of arriving at the fee are commonly employed: the negotiation of an hourly rate, or agreement in advance on a fixed fee. An hourly rate can be unduly favourable to a slow or inefficient indexer, while a fixed fee can result in the indexer having to choose between skimping the work and being underpaid if the task proves more complex than was expected. Mutual trust between indexer and editor is necessary, since it is usually the editor who recommends a suitable indexer to the author. The editor should know what the market rate is and be able to advise the author accordingly.

When should the index be prepared?

Some authors—and publishers—like to begin the index from the typescript, but Mr Wilcock said he discourages this and usually advises indexing at page proof stage, even though this may slightly delay production. If indexing is begun before page proofs are available, the page numbers have to be inserted later, and to take two bites at the cherry in this way can be both time-consuming and inefficient. The indexer often finds errors and inconsistencies in the text, so that production departments usually hold back page proofs anyway until the index copy is received. When a book is set from camera-ready copy, the index can of course be compiled before the book goes into production.

Typescript and proofs

Double-spaced typescript is the ideal, but indexes are sometimes submitted on slips or cards. A hand-written index is acceptable if the writing is legible.
The typographical style of the index will depend on the book. It is often more convenient, for example, to have each sub-heading on a new line, but the cost is greater and space may not be available.

Corrections in proof are now extremely expensive, as they are done by hand whereas the original setting is done on a machine. Everything in the index should therefore be absolutely right before it goes to the printer, and proof-correction should be confined to printers' errors.

Summing-up

There is a need for cost-consciousness all round—from publisher, author, and indexer—and this is good professional discipline. It need not detract from quality, but care and imagination are needed to produce first-class work without causing delay. Efficient procedures that avoid waste of time or money are essential.

DISCUSSION

Mrs Wallis asked what instruction publishers received in evaluating indexes. Mr Wilcock thought that editors are not as well informed about indexing as they should be. Indexing is not prominent in courses for editors, and the Publishers Association should be approached about this. Mr Wace agreed—he encourages editors to study indexing, and his firm (Macmillan) has an internal leaflet on the evaluation of indexes.

Mrs Findlay suggested that publishers should be sure to tell indexers what they want. She had known them to change their house style without telling the indexer. Mr Wilcock agreed.

Mrs Hall pointed out that the quality of an index may suffer when dates are not kept by the publisher and the time available for compilation of the index is cut. The indexer is often expected to make up for time lost earlier, but a reasonable amount of time is needed for indexing. She also asked how the space available for an index is decided upon, saying that publishers' estimates are often badly out in this respect, and she asked whether the indexer could be appointed at an earlier stage to give professional advice on the kind of index that would be appropriate.

Mr Wilcock replied that he sympathised about the time problem, but pointed out that unforeseeable delays do occur. MSS., for example, are often late in arriving, and further delay may be incurred in editing and setting. It is often important to get the book out by a particular date, such as the beginning of the academic year, and publication may have to be delayed for a year if the deadline is missed. As to length of index, the O.U.P. is not dogmatic where academic books are concerned, though superfluous entries are pruned. It is important to keep the book to an economic size. He agreed that the indexer should be brought in as soon as possible.

Mr Duke, of Longman, said that his firm gives the indexer a copy of the MS. and asks his advice about the index at that stage.

Mrs Pollard pointed out that if the indexer is appointed well before proofs are ready, and the book is subsequently delayed, he may have other commitments when the book eventually arrives. Mr Wilcock replied that the editor should keep in touch with his indexers about scheduling, and added that it is perfectly fair for an indexer to relinquish a job that fails to arrive on time.

Mr Raven questioned whether it is right for the author to be asked to make, or to pay for, the index. He thought it was not. The author knows what should be indexed, but is usually bad at organising the index, e.g. arranging it on the same plan as the book. An author often skims the work, often providing few, if any, sub-entries. A shallow and trivial index is the result. The author is usually not an experienced indexer, and is also asked to undertake the work at a difficult time, when he has simultaneously to deal with the proofs—which can be a traumatic experience as well as time-consuming. As regards payment, the index is not a part of the author's text but a guide to the subject-matter of the book, and should be provided by the publisher much as he provides prelims and jacket copy. The index should be a cost of production, and if the author makes it he should be paid a proper fee for doing so.

Mr Wilcock agreed that authors have shortcomings as indexers, but said that he had often found them to be over-enthusiastic in providing excessively elaborate indexes. Some are idiosyncratic and forget the viewpoint of the reader. But can anyone else really understand the subject-matter? This applies particularly to the kind of book that he usually deals with. He agreed that the author may have an emotional crisis, but said that in his experience it tends to come later than page proof stage. Authors tend to be possessive about their work, unwilling to let anyone else deal with it. If an indexer does the indexing, Mr Wilcock thought, the author should certainly see the index before it is set. At the O.U.P. at least, he added, the author is expected to provide a table of contents and to draft the jacket blurb. As regards payment, it would in theory be feasible for the publisher to treat the index as a cost of production, but he saw no justification for such a course. With costs rising rapidly, such a change of policy would be difficult to implement at the present time.

Mrs Blake pointed out that, in the case of multi-author books, the publisher is rarely delayed by the time taken to make the index, as he has to spend more time getting proofs back from so many authors. She said that an indexer can often help by sending corrections in instalments, and Mr Wilcock agreed that this can be most valuable.

Mrs Frame raised the question of copyright in indexes and the possibility that the indexer might...
receive a royalty. Mr Wilcock replied that most publishers ask indexers at the outset to assign the copyright. He had not heard of publishers making further payments to indexers in the form of royalties, and said it would be up to the indexer to negotiate this with the publisher clearly in advance. If royalties were to be paid, the amount of paperwork might be prohibitive in relation to the small sums of money involved; if any additional payment were made for copyright, he thought a lump sum would be a better arrangement.

INDEXES IN CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Cecilia Gordon,
I.L.E.A. School Libraries Organiser

Mrs Gordon declared that adequate indexing of children's books must be considered an essential educational adjunct from an early age. She emphasised the importance of familiarity with our alphabet, something which in her experience is often neglected by teachers and which needs especially to be taught to pupils who have English as a second language. In London infants' schools, children are early taught the basics of indexing, since books are broadly categorised by subject by means of colour-coding, the key to this being an alphabetical index on the classroom wall.

Mrs Gordon deplored the fact that some publishers do not seem to share her opinion of the importance of indexes in children's information books. In the Education Library at County Hall, the display collection of children's books has 1,223 titles in its Natural Science section; of these, only 723 have indexes of any description—and the politest description for many of them would be 'inadequate'. There still seems to be widespread confusion, she said, between the purposes of a contents list and those of an index, but even conventionally arranged indexes are not always helpful. In a Hamlyn book on giraffes, for example, the index contained a heading 'giraffes' followed by no fewer than sixty-two page references. She gave other examples to show that poor indexing is by no means confined to books on natural science, or to the output of only a few publishers.

One-volume encyclopedias are in particular need of good indexes, especially as so many of them are arranged thematically in a way that is confusing to a child. The need is even greater in the case of multivolume encyclopedias. Mrs Gordon criticised Macmillan's *Our world* encyclopedia for its poor indexes, and the *Oxford junior encyclopedia* for its use of roman numerals for volume numbers in the index while the spine of each volume is numbered in arabic.

DISCUSSION

*Mr Wace* briefly defended *Our World*, and *Mrs Gordon* invited members to examine it and judge for themselves.

From *Mr Harling*'s question about the age at which children learn alphabetical order it emerged that there is as much individual variation as in the age at which they learn to read, if not more. *Miss Keenan* wondered whether children's awareness of the principles of indexing would be affected by different methods of teaching reading. Perhaps, but not decisively, thought *Mrs Gordon*: it would be more potently affected by the presence of numerous nationalities and native languages among the children in one class at school.

In response to *Mrs Holmes*'s comments on the *Oxford General Reference Library*, *Mrs Gordon* praised the series highly but remarked on the O.U.P.'s apparent tendency to take it for granted that all children have a reading age of about fifteen and come from bookish homes.

LOOKING AHEAD

J. Ainsworth Gordon,
Secretary of the Society

Mr Gordon began by inviting the Society to consider whether a national conference should be instituted as an annual event, or whether members would prefer to meet, perhaps, biennially. He suggested the possibility of a residential conference, perhaps for a weekend. Members should also review the possibilities of different venues, he suggested, because members were already well distributed nationally and meetings in the midlands or the north might appeal to many. He invited those present to express their views during the discussion, and added that members who were not present might be invited to send their views later.

Membership

Mr Gordon reported that the United Kingdom membership stood now at about 350, with 250 in the American Society and another fifty in the now-independent Australian association. If the Society was to speak with an authoritative voice, however, membership might need to be greatly strengthened: it was worth considering how many practising indexers were at work in Britain without being members of the Society. He suggested an objective for 1977: that every member should try to recruit at least one new member.

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