After a statement on the importance of good indexes, some government-produced style manuals are briefly described, particularly in their treatment of indexes from the aspects of compilation and typographical presentation. Concludes that most such publications are concerned with printing rather than the compilation.

The purpose of any index is to enable the reader of a text, or someone consulting a publication briefly, to find information in it quickly and reliably, if not under one heading then under an alternative, and to find references to the specific information the publication contains.

To make this possible and satisfactory to all who use it, the index must be comprehensive and accurate. This means that it needs to be compiled by someone who is a careful and methodical worker. It is commonly held—and sometimes stated, unfortunately—that the author is the best-equipped person to compile an index to the text that he has written; on the face of it, this is reasonable because the author has a full knowledge of the text. The author is not for this reason always the best person because authors often cannot see another point of view than their own, or consider dispassionately what they have written, as from another person's standpoint. Or they may be too pressed for time because of other writing in hand to devote the time and care necessary to index their work adequately; they may not be able to view their work objectively and think, for example, of alternative names or terms which another person may think of when consulting the index, or they may not have the type of analytical approach that is required to be able to compile a competent index.

Many publishers and their staffs consider that authors are not the best people to compile indexes to their own books. Why then do they sometimes compile them? One reason is that many publishers' contracts require authors to provide an index, and they are disinclined to pay a fee for the work to be done by a professional indexer. Often they, and their publishers, do not realize what constitutes a good index and they are consequently prepared to provide anything which has headings and page references and therefore looks like an index.

In order to be acceptable as an effective guide to the contents of a book, every index should provide all the references to the whole of the text in order to enable information required to be found in it. This means entries under all the names and subjects (including double—i.e. duplicate—references under alternative headings) mentioned in the text. If an index is not comprehensive it is useless, and the time and effort expended in compiling it has been wasted. Most serious searchers for information are constantly being frustrated by not being referred to information which they know is in books, due simply to inadequate indexing. I have had personal experience of this when consulting many books on English history in the past four years, and have come to the conclusion that a high proportion of indexes compiled in the last ninety years are quite inadequate. This comment relates to commercial publications, many of them being very recent ones, but it also applies to some government publications. Even H.M.S.O.'s annual list Government publications suffers from inadequate subject double entries which must result in many items being considered to be absent when they are entered under another heading.

Books and booklets issued by governments and government departments need indexes as much as do commercially issued publications, and it may
be useful to discover to what extent guidance on the provision of indexes is given in guides prepared for the compilation and printing of 'government' publications.

'Official' publications are sometimes completely prepared by civil servants, but sometimes the whole of the text is prepared by professional writers or subject specialists writing under a financial arrangement with the government or with a department, the government printing office serving as printer or as an agent for the printing. Indexes may be compiled by civil servants as part of their official duties or under contract in a free-lance capacity. Some indexes to books and periodicals are compiled by professional indexers; one of these, published by H.M.S.O., was awarded the Wheatley Medal.

H.M.S.O. as the Government publisher has, because of the large number of publications issued, a considerable, though silent, influence on the establishment and maintenance of standards in all aspects of publishing.

International organizations could have an even wider and possibly greater influence, and, as far as the provision of indexes goes, it is regrettable that so many publications—for example some published by Unesco, are issued without indexes—but that is another matter and outside the scope of this article.

A very few governments have issued guides in the form of style manuals for the guidance of writers and printers. In a fully developed country these may not now be necessary owing to a high degree of competence in writing and book production having been achieved, but in a developing country they could be very useful. With the improvement of publishing in mind, the Loughton College of Further Education is organizing a fourteen-week course on Publishing in Developing Countries which is being held this winter.*

The style manuals which have been published give guidance and help both to set and to maintain standards. Their contents vary in scope; and so does the amount of information given. They may be concerned with such aspects of writing the text as punctuation, the use of capital letters and quotations, compounding words and the preparation of copy; or these aspects of book production may be completely ignored and the publication be concerned solely with the production of the physical book—the 'parts' of a publication, illustrations, tables, printing and reproduction processes, the compilation of bibliographies, indexes, etc. The information given may be instructive or merely descriptive.

Size may vary from the small 44-page Standards for authors and printers (H.M.S.O.), 1958, to the 476-page American GPO Style manual, 1973. I have only been able to trace two others, and these are the 417-page Australian Style manual for authors, editors and printers of Australian government publications, 2nd ed. 1972, and the 176-page Canadian Stylemanual for writers and editors, 1962.

In the H.M.S.O. Standards for authors and printers the guidance relating to the provision of an index is dealt with in ten lines and is solely concerned with the typographical presentation of the index to a publication. I understand that this publication is to be revised. The extent to which the guidance is followed, or adhered to, or varied in actual practice in H.M.S.O. publications may change from time to time. Examination of H.M.S.O. publications suggests that the details in the presentation of parts of a publication may follow typographical fashions, or someone may be allowed to go his own way when determining some aspects of the publication, for instance the style of the index to a given text.

Recently, I had occasion to consult the well-known publication giving all kinds of authoritative official information about government and quasi-government activities—Britain 1975—an official handbook compiled by the Central Office of Information and published by H.M.S.O.—and was appalled at the apparent jumbled order of the index entries. It was extremely difficult to find any desired entry, and it became evident that the cause was that someone, presumably the typographer, had gone all modern and decided to 'set flush'. There was very little indentation in the whole of the many-page index. One has got to use such a setting to see how much we rely on indentation for quick consultation of an index. I had never had such a frustrating experience with previous issues of this annual. The guidance given in the Standards . . . with regard to the presentation of an index to a publication is 'Subordination of an item in an index to the one preceding it is marked by a one-em indentation.' This is the common practice, and is also recommended in British Standard 3700 Preparation of indexes.

A number of entries from this index are reproduced as Fig. 1. The normal appearance, with

*This article was type-set for the April, 1976 issue but was held over due to pressure on space.
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Fig. 1. A page from the index of Britain 1975.
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Fig. 3. A page from the index of Britain 1976.
indentations as recommended in the Standards..., of the same group of entries from the 1974 edition of Britain is Fig. 2. Other people have apparently also experienced the same frustration in using the 1975 index, and probably complained, for there is a slight improvement in the 1976 edition (see Fig. 3); but look at the Church entries. It is still not as easy to find the entries as in the 1974 edition; the amount of the indentation is inadequate. Perhaps I may digress from my main theme to make three further points:

(1) The choice of the type-face is also important. The type used in Fig 2 looks larger than in the others, but it is not; it is just a more easily read design.

(2) The choice of the bold face is also important. The same type-face was used in Figs. 1 and 3, but the bold in Fig. 1 was so similar to the ordinary face that it was hardly distinguishable from it. In Fig. 3 a slightly bolder bold was used and it is much more effective.

(3) Entries which over-run to a second line should always be indented in order to assist reference. Compare the setting of 'Children, National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to' and 'Children, voluntary Child Care organisations' in Figs. 2 and 3. Guidance on this is also given in the H.M.S.O. Standards... as follows: 'A continuation of a line too long to fit in the column is marked by a two-em indentation on the preceding line.' Comparison of these examples shows how excellent these recommendations are; it is a pity they were not followed.

The British Standard 3700:1976 recommends that 'Headings, subheadings and sub-subheadings should be progressively indented. Run-on continuations should be indented sufficiently to avoid confusion with sub-headings.' The Chicago University Press's A manual of style explains that the indented arrangement 'makes a very complex index easier for the eye to follow and also allows for the use of sub-subentries.'

The Canadian Style manual* (which is also under revision), unlike the British H.M.S.O. Standards..., gives some instruction on the compilation of an index. This is included in a chapter 'Reference Matter', which deals with references, bibliography, footnotes and index. The section on the Index occupies only two pages; it deals mainly with compilation and there is only one

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* I am indebted to Mr Peter Greig for a Xerox copy of the relative parts of this publication.

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of style for authors, editors and copywriters, published by the University of Chicago Press, 12th ed., 1969. The thirty-two pages which relate to indexes have also been separately published. The guidance given covers all aspects of the subject and is comprehensive. This publication is widely used as the authoritative guide to good book production and serves as a guide to the best practice. For the practising indexer this is a more practical and useful publication than the American National Standards Institute Z39.4-1968 Basic criteria for indexes, largely because it gives more examples to illustrate the recommendations. In this respect, the Chicago Manual of style is similar to the English BS 3700.

To sum up, on the whole the 'official' guides give little, or no, guidance as to compilation of indexes, being concerned more with the lay-out and printing aspects. Good indexes are an important part of every publication except some pure literature forms, fiction and very small pamphlets published by a government, and by the world-embracing organizations such as Unesco and similar bodies and the organizations proliferating with their assistance, no less than those issued by commercial publishers. What use is a publication if one cannot find out what is in it by means of an index—and find it quickly without reading much of the text in one's search? All government style manuals need to have incorporated in them, a practical guide to compiling indexes, unless a satisfactory one is published in the country and is recommended for guidance by all indexers—and it can be incorporated with the author's agreement. The existing 'standards' and the books referred to in this article are recommendations or guides to indexing and not complete manuals. It is not suggested that the guidance given on indexing in a government style manual should be anything more comprehensive than these. They will not give the answer to every problem that will arise in indexing—this is where the knowledge and experience of professional indexers is so important. But the inclusion of guidance, as suggested, in government style manuals should help to better indexing of government publications. The professional indexer may be essential for long and complicated texts or when special subject knowledge is required; it may be convenient, economical and in other ways an advantage to use his services.

The author is indebted to the Central Office of Information for permission to reproduce pages from Britain.

Correspondence

The Editor
The Indexer
Sir,

Mr Geoffrey Hamilton's otherwise admirable article, 'How to recognise a good Index', seems to me mistaken in assuming that a 'good' index is necessarily synonymous with one suitable for presentation to the Wheatley selection committee. But many excellent indexes are no more of a kind to compete for this medal than a cookery book for the Nobel prize. In particular, his first observation that the length of an index should be at least five per cent of the text cannot be accepted as a general rule. Many books provide material for only two or three per cent but would be the poorer without indexes.

May I, as a relative novice to indexing but an ancient user of indexes, suggest that indexes could more often help the general reader to tackle scholarly or specialised works if they included references for technical, foreign or unusual words. A location reference to the first appearance or definition of a word can be invaluable. And it can sometimes be useful to compile a combined 'Index and Glossary'.

Yours truly,
Michael Gordon
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Mr Hamilton's comments on points made by Mr Michael Gordon are as follows:

Mr Gordon has taken two points in my article further than they were meant to go. I did not intend to suggest that every 'good' index is necessarily a potential Wheatley Medal winner. To receive that accolade an index has to have some characteristics which make it in addition an outstanding one. The suggestion, for which I claim no originality, that an index should amount to at least five per cent of the length of the text indexed was so hedged round with qualifications that I hoped it would be clear it was not put forward as a universally applicable rule. Nonetheless it is a useful rule of thumb so long as it is not used as the sole arbiter of what constitutes a 'good' index.

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