Complaint against the BBC
by Mrs E. Wallis

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Programmes Complaints Commission)

The BBC Programmes Complaints Commission
has issued the following report and adjudication.

Summary

Mrs E. Wallis, Registrar of the Society of
Indexers, complained that she and the society had
been unfairly treated by an item on indexing
included in Woman's Hour, on Radio 4, on 25th
January 1977. Mrs Wallis had contributed to the
programme.

So far as the society was concerned, it was said
that, in various respects, the broadcast conveyed
an inadequate and misleading account of in-
dexing and of the aims and effectiveness of the
society.

As to Mrs Wallis herself, complaint was made
that she had been given no prior information that
her interview would be broadcast in conjunction
with a contribution recorded by another person
on the same subject, and that it had been unfairly
edited. Mrs Wallis also complained of unfair
discrimination by the BBC, arising from their
choice of another contributor to the programme,
and also that her name was incorrectly spelt in
Radio Times.

The only complaint which the commission
uphold is the complaint that the BBC failed to
inform Mrs Wallis of the use which would be
made of the interview she recorded.

Details of the complaint

On 25th January 1977, the BBC included in the
Woman's Hour programme, on Radio 4, an item
dealing with the subject of indexing. After in-
troductory remarks by the presenter of the
programme, there followed an excerpt from a
recorded interview with Mrs Elizabeth Wallis,
described as a member of the Society of Indexers,
in which the nature of indexing was discussed.
This was followed by a substantially longer
excerpt from a recorded interview with a Mrs Liz
Till (not a member of the society), which included
the sentence, ‘... at least [indexing is] a job you
can do largely sitting with your feet up at the end
of a hard day's work', but which also described
some of the difficulties of indexing and the skill
required to do it properly. Mrs Till's remarks
were summed up by the interviewer as follows:

Not as easy as you might have first imagined, and
certainly not the way to earn a bit of pin-money on
the side, unless you happen to have specialized
knowledge, and even then it sounds like very hard
work to me.

A further excerpt from the interview with Mrs
Wallis was then given, in which she spoke about
the need to have some knowledge of the work to
be indexed, and about the aims of the Society of
Indexers.

Mrs Wallis, who is the registrar of the Society
of Indexers, made a number of complaints to the
commission about the broadcast. As first
presented, her complaint was that she personally
had been unfairly treated, but she later explained
that her complaint was also made on behalf of the
society, and alleged that the society had been
unfairly treated.

Mrs Wallis's complaints were as follows:

1. She said it was unfair for the BBC, in
dealing with a subject requiring skill and
knowledge, to give the greater part of the allotted
time to someone who did not claim to be an
experienced indexer, as compared with the time
made available to a professional indexer.

2. She said that the broadcast conveyed an
inadequate and misleading impression of in-
dexing and of what the Society of Indexers stands
for. The society was introduced as 'an
organization which tries to protect the interests of
indexers', whereas the society's primary interest
is to safeguard and improve indexing standards,
and only secondarily is it concerned to protect the
interests of indexers. Mrs Till’s statement, ‘... at
least it’s a job you can do largely sitting with
your feet up at the end of a hard day's work', was
quite inaccurate and had proved deeply offensive

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to members of the society. It had also unfairly put the society to expense and inconvenience in dealing, after the broadcast, with fruitless enquiries from listeners.

3. Mrs Wallis also complained that the fact that such a broadcast could take place unfairly suggested that the society was ineffective in looking after its members.

4. Mrs Wallis said that she had been given no prior information as to the possible use which would be made of her interview, which had been recorded several months before the broadcast. In the event, it had been extensively edited, and the second excerpt from her interview had been made to appear as her comment on the statements by Mrs Till, which, in fact, she had not heard. The manner of presentation had led some members of the society who heard the broadcast to believe that she and Mrs Till had been interviewed together, and it was, she said, unfair to imply, erroneously, that she had heard Mrs Till's remarks.

5. Mrs Wallis noted that Mrs Till was called by her Christian name in the programme, whereas she herself was not. From this appearance of discrimination, it could be concluded that some personal acquaintance had unfairly led to the choice of Mrs Till as a participant in the programme.

6. She also complained that her name was incorrectly spelt in Radio Times, and this, she said, was indicative of the BBC's carelessness.

The BBC, in their submissions to the commission, rejected the complaints of unfairness. They argued that the item, taken as a whole, had not given an unfair picture of indexing. Mrs Till, who was a lucid speaker, had been chosen for interview because she had held a responsible editorial post in a publishing firm, had commissioned indexes, and had also done indexing herself. Neither the interviewer nor the producer of the item had any previous acquaintance with either Mrs Wallis or Mrs Till. As to the enquiries which had followed the broadcast, the BBC said that they had offered to deal with these on behalf of the society, but the society had declined their offer. The BBC believed that people being interviewed should be told if others are to take part in the programme. Mrs Wallis's evidence is that she was not told. We think that it was unfair to Mrs Wallis that the BBC did not tell her.

Mrs Wallis complains that her closing remarks were made to appear as comment on an interview with Mrs Till which she had not herself heard. We have to decide whether a reasonably attentive listener would have got the impression that the two contributors were interviewed together, and, if so, whether unfairness to Mrs Wallis was caused thereby. The first question is one on which opinions may well differ. On the one hand, Mrs Wallis has given evidence (which we accept) that some members of the society received the impression that Mrs Wallis had heard Mrs Till's contribution before making her final comment. On the other hand the BBC point to the phrases, 'went first to ask Mrs Wallis' and 'back now, then, to Elizabeth Wallis', which, they say, should have made it clear that the interviews were separate. Whatever is the true view on this question, we do not believe that, in the light of the overall effect of the remarks by Mrs Till, and the remark by the interviewer which immediately preceded Mrs Wallis's closing remarks, any unfairness was caused to Mrs Wallis.
As to the fact that, in the portions of the two interviews which were broadcast, the interviewer addressed Mrs Till, but not Mrs Wallis, by her first name, this does not, in our judgement, amount to unfair treatment of Mrs Wallis. In so far as Mrs Wallis is criticizing the choice of Mrs Till for interview, we are satisfied that the BBC, in the proper exercise of their editorial judgement, had reasonable grounds for seeking to interview Mrs Till.

The misspelling of Mrs Wallis’s name in *Radio Times* was a minor mistake for which the BBC has apologized. We can see no unfairness to Mrs Wallis in this.

In the result, the only complaint which we uphold is the complaint that the BBC failed to inform Mrs Wallis of the use which would be made of the interview.

*The adjudication is signed by Sir Edmund Compton and Sir Henry Fisher.*

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**VIEWDATA**

A non-bibliographic information service, which gives an answer instead of telling you where to look for it, is now being tested by the Post Office. If you are wondering which model to choose for your new car, where to go for next year’s holiday, or how much your shares are worth, just switch on the TV, says the Post Office. Viewdata, to be marketed by the Post Office under the name Prestel, is being developed as a service for the average man in his home or office, where, by pressing a series of buttons on a control device no bigger than a pocket calculator, he can call up on his television screen information culled from a number of data banks, such as the magazines *Which?* and *Exchange and Mart*, the stock exchange and local news files. The information is shown on numbered ‘pages’, each page being a readable display, in colour or black and white, which fills the screen. The correct page is called up by choosing a numbered heading from a categorized contents list. When the required heading is shown, a further choice from its subheadings can be made, and the operation repeated until the specific information is reached. At present there is no single, direct, specific alphabetical index, but development of a list of keywords or a thesaurus of terms is under consideration.

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**Demands of newspaper librarianship**

The Newspaper Division of the American Special Libraries Association has drawn up these specifications for an optimal automated library system:

It should be able to—Index all newspaper stories by date, page, edition, column number, column title, byline, type of material (editorials, letters to editor, etc), dateline, headline, source of material (wire service), section of paper (sports, business, etc), name of reporter if no byline appears, number of words, and whether an illustration accompanies text; expand the number of fields needed for indexing; invert the order in which indexed terms are requested; accept additional search terms and/or broad classification field as may be assigned manually (dynamic parameters); provide a built-in thesaurus which can match index terms, indicate cross-reference, encompass scope notes and display alphabetically similar terms, synonym tables, etc; search on truncated words; highlight search terms by bold face or other means; use unrestricted Boolean operators; organize term files on a random access basis.

If all that sounds a reasonable set of demands for a human being to expect from a robot—in an industry where demands of all sorts are notoriously high—you will not be surprised at the time limits imposed for displaying all this bloodless versatility. The system the librarians want to see must provide an on-line storage capability of up to 2½ billion characters; have the ability to key data from other sources into the data base without destroying integrity; be capable of processing each edition within a 30-minute time period after publication; provide safeguards against unintentional destruction of files and programmes; provide a keyboard which is compatible with IBM Selectric 2, with provision for special function keys; have a retrieval response time of five seconds or less on basic functions; provide easy legible display, without glare; provide abstracts or full text; have rapid printout capabilities.

These exacting demands are the result of listening to the hazy descriptions journalists are apt to give when describing a months-old cutting which they need instantly.