References

9. Bell, C. and Jones, K. P. [In preparation.]

Letters to the Editor

More about computer-assisted indexing

Note by Professor P. A. Samet, President, The British Computer Society

Following my letter to The Indexer (Vol. 11, No. 2, October 1978, p.114) I wrote to a colleague, Donald Knuth, at Stanford University about his experience of computer-assisted production of an index, as he remarks in his series of books The Art of Computer Programming that he had used a computer to help him. I was, in fact, intrigued by his wording, for at the end of the first two volumes inaccuracies are excused by saying that the index had been 'prepared' with the help of a computer, whereas in the third volume the word used was 'sorted'. His reply appears below:

Today I am preparing an index to a 200-page book and it is my firm conviction that no automatic tool is good enough (or will ever be). A good index needs to be thought about and understood—every entry looked up in the text again, and reflected on. . . . I spent six weeks per index in vols. 1, 2 and 3. However, computers can certainly be aids in the clerical parts of this task. I used a simple sorting programme for the initial data reduction. Today I am doing it differently: using a very versatile CRT display text-editor and a few macros to do the whole thing. It's like having a super-intelligent typewriter, making a special-purpose system unnecessary. Anyway, that's my opinion.

Yours sincerely,
Professor D. E. KNUTH,
Stanford University.

The structure of sub-headings

Am I right in thinking that traditional sub-heading procedure in book indexing flows, in terms of subject importance, from 'greater' to 'lesser'? It is, that is to say, linear in construction.

In many cases this seems satisfactory, but I have never felt it to be entirely so for scientific works, because science is not, in this sense, linear; with its constant inter-relationships, it is more of a lattice.

My interest was therefore aroused recently when I came across this idea cogently illustrated in a book, Molecular aspects of gene expression in plants, (Ed.) J. A. Bryant, Academic Press, 1976/77.

The index was excellent: to illustrate my point, it contained under the heading 'Ribonucleic acid' 9 sub-headings and 8 see also references. Looking these up one found that they in their turn had one sub-heading in three cases but 9, 11, 18, 31, and 39 sub-headings respectively in the remainder. The overall result was an admirably integrated format which I do not believe the linear method would have achieved.

Yours sincerely,
CHARLES LISTER.

Indexes are not Frothy

A.R. reports the following passage from recent correspondence with a well-known publisher. He is not sure whether the story has a moral.

A.R.: '... I hope the book is to have an index.'
Publisher: '. . . I appreciate your crusading zeal in the cause of indexes, but feel that in this instance one is not only unnecessary but might actually detract from the somewhat frothy tone of the book.'