For the professional indexer a book needs that listing in the back

Alice Edmunds

The American Society of Indexers (modelled after Great Britain's Society of Indexers) was founded in 1968 to raise the generally low status of indexes and indexers in American publishing, to improve the quality of indexes and to set standards for professional indexers.

One of ASI's most important functions is to provide a meeting ground. Indexing is a lonely, anonymous job, and ASI members have benefited psychologically just from knowing that other indexers are out there too. They meet formally twice a year to discuss such topics as legislative data bases, publishers' views of freelance indexers and getting started in indexing. More informally, indexers like to get together to talk about their work, which fascinates them.

Saying No to No Index

ASI also issues books, articles and guidelines and publishes the 'Register of Indexers', with approximately 200 listings. Together with the H. W. Wilson Company, publishers of indexes, ASI plans to establish an annual indexing award. [Terms of this award are given on page 172. Ed.] Indexers hope such an award will make book reviewers more aware of indexes and will give them impetus to evaluate indexes in their reviews. At the very least, they hope reviewers will fault a book for having no index at all.

To date, this has not generally been the practice. Consider, for example, H. R. Haldeman's The Ends of Power, a major non-fiction book published by Times Books without an index. Thomas Lipscomb, president of Times Books and the book's editor, says the decision to publish a first edition without an index was made because Times Books anticipated a news leak. Expediting publication became the overriding consideration. 'Had we indexed it,' Lipscomb explains, 'we could not have gotten the book to the stores immediately after any leak occurred. It would have taken two to three additional weeks to have published the book with an index. We thought that would hurt sales.' An index has been prepared for later editions and for the paperback edition, and Lipscomb maintains, 'At Times Books we think indexing is terribly important.' He adds that the book's lack of an index does not seem to have hurt sales, including library sales. With the exception of Elizabeth Drew in the Sunday Times ('The book is bewilderingly organized, a problem that is compounded by the fact that there is no index') and Thomas J. Seess in Best Sellers ('Times Books has omitted footnotes, bibliography and index'), no book reviewer has mentioned the omission.

A Series of difficult decisions

Raised in the tradition of Lord Campbell, book reviewers in Great Britain take missing or inadequate indexes far more seriously.

As comments in The Indexer indicate, indexing is not an easy job. It demands, first, looking through the book as a whole so that there will be no surprises in store, then beginning to read on page one, pencil or tape recorder in hand, to identify and categorize indexable material and, finally, assembling the indexable material in order and editing it. Indexing is a series of perpetually difficult decisions, many of them calling for real intellectual courage.

Who belongs to the American Society of Indexers? Three hundred and thirty men and women who live throughout the United States and Canada. They index general trade books, textbooks, encyclopedias, newspapers and magazines. Some specialize in such subjects as law, medicine or Russian history. Some are generalists. Some teach indexing in library schools. Most work freelance, earning $6 to $8 per hour on the average. Some index with 3 in x 5 in file cards in a shoebox, others with a computer. But they all have something in common: they all love books and words and ideas; they are logical and intuitive; they have retentive minds; they are able to deal with the enormous responsibility they feel toward another person's book and toward future scholars. Indexers are very verbal, very articulate, and they enjoy the challenge of coming up with just the right intellectually neutral word.
Basic standards for rating good and bad

To find out whether an index is good or bad, readers can sample a few pages of the text, then look in the index for entries that will lead to the information on those pages quickly and easily, and finish by doing the reverse, going from index to text. But a good index should not only work; it should also read well enough to give a reader a sense of the book.

According to the American Society of Indexers, which is trying to develop standards for the field, if a 600-page book has a 10-page index, it's bad. A good index should have at least five pages for every hundred pages of text (an index can be tailored to size, but only if the indexer is told in advance). If there is no cross-indexing, the index is very bad.

To a professional indexer, though, the worst kind of index is one limited to references to names and places. Creating name and place indexes is a clerical job, not comparable to concept indexing. 'Indexing is a real skill,' says one editor, 'unlike some other jobs in publishing that people can fudge.'

A bad index is not necessarily the fault of the indexer. In fact, professional indexers say that a bad index is usually the fault of publishers and editors who put typographic and economic needs above intellectual integrity. If a manuscript is too long, it is the index that gets cut. If a manuscript is late and the book falls behind schedule, it is up to the indexer to do a rush job and get the book to the printer on time (indexers like to have at least two weeks). Editors and publishers are aware that the lack of an index in a book hurts library sales (The Ends of Power notwithstanding), and have been known to attach an inferior index to an otherwise superior book for cosmetic purposes alone. Some bad indexes are the result of economy-minded authors' attempts at self-indexing (indexers' fees are usually taken out of an author's royalties). Indexers believe that most authors lack the skill to index their own books or any one else's. They certainly lack the necessary objective distance. According to Kurt Vonnegut, whose *Cat's Cradle* may contain the only chapter in the history of fiction devoted exclusively to indexing, an author should 'never index [his] own book' because it may reveal too much not only about the work but about the character of the author as well.

What does the future hold for indexing? The computer age poses no threat to professional indexers. In fact, computers are creating new indexing jobs. An index is important to a book, but is essential to a computerized information bank. A reader may reread a book, if necessary, but there is simply no access to a data bank without an index. An unindexed newspaper or magazine article is as good as lost. As Barbara Proschel says, 'The indexes are taking over our shrinking world. We're the only ones who know where the information is buried.'

Computers will also be used more and more by back-of-the-book indexers to help with some of indexing's dreariest tasks—alphabetizing, for one. A human being will always be needed to do the intellectual work of indexing, however, because a computer can deal only in words, while concepts, not words, are the basis of any good index. Computers need input, and that input will come from professional indexers, preferably from professional indexers who are logical, intuitive, verbal, articulate and just slightly militant.

The 'Shameless Exhibition' pitfall

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A study which attempts to ascertain the present state of journal indexing in the field of the social sciences analyses the coverage by 30 indexing and abstracting services of 655 journals and concludes that during the past 25 years lacunae noted in a previous study have generally been made good by the inclusion of foreign-language and specialist publications. Fragmentation and lack of coordination of interests are also noted, which may account for the fact that social scientists rarely make use of more than one or two indexing and abstracting services.*

M. P.

*Robert Goehlert. The scope of indexing services in political and social science. (RQ 17 (3) Spring 1978, 235-241, 13 refs.)