On-screen index*

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Our speaker demonstrated the Prestel index during his talk with a television set connected by the telephone network to the Prestel computer, controlling it with an auto-dialler.

Those who have a Prestel TV set installed, or their own set especially adapted, can use their telephones to call up any of Prestel's information bank on their TV screen, in letters, numbers and seven colours. One hundred and seventy thousand pages of such information are now available, provided by about 350 organizations—companies, publishers, Parliament, etc.—and called up on 6,744 sets now in use. Unlike the BBC and ITV teletext services—Ceefax and Oracle—Prestel is a two-way system, enabling users to send reactions and messages to the information providers (IPs).

The choice for the user as to which of these 170,000 pages contains the information he requires must be guided by Prestel's index system; one faced with many unique problems.

Only one page of the screen index is visible at a time, a page consisting of a maximum of 22 lines (960 characters). Boolean search strategy cannot be used; a sequence of choices and routes is designed to lead the user through selected sub-groups of information until he lights on the sought page. A very wide range of information is covered in this index, with no central editorial control over information provision; some of the information provided is often changed, deleted, or moved to another location. The user has no help available for his search, as he would have in a library or research establishment, and may not be experienced in locating information; so the system must be easy to follow.

When the system was first introduced, under the name of Viewdata, in 1976, it appeared that users often failed to find the information they sought. To rectify this it was decided to construct an index from first principles. People were asked to sort bits of information into seven groups, which would show how they perceived the relationships between bits of information; thus a consensus of first-level groups was established. Others were then asked to give names to the groups which had evolved and to divide them into second-level groups, narrowing eventually to the headings now used on Prestel. These headings were tested on a cross-section of people and found to be generally effective in leading to the information required.

A new public index for Prestel was constructed accordingly, with the aims, first, of guiding the user straight to the information he seeks; second, of advertising for the IPs.

Each page can show a maximum of 10 choices—that is, 10 routes out; in practice reduced to seven, to allow for cross-references etc. As such a limited number of characters can be shown on a page, abbreviations are used. The user must make the choice from each page which will lead him to the next step on his route, pressing a button on his control panel to call up the next page chosen. The route destination must be complete and meaningful, with the average route length minimized. As long as the system is in use a time-based charge of 1p-3p per minute, depending on the time of day, is incurred; in addition, IPs *may* place a charge on their pages, but are not obliged to do so. These payments are due whether or not the required information is found on the pages called up; so frustration may be expensive.

Different people have different ideas of relationships, so the compilers of the index must allow for users' different internal classifications. Multiple access methods are required; 'Mortgages', for instance, may be approached via 'Houses', 'Finance', or alphabetically; and heavy cross-referencing is essential. The success of any classified index depends on knowledge of the users' internal classification, but this index particularly so, as such a small view of the index is allowed at any one time. The number of uses of frames can be counted, so the most popular routes can be ascertained, and these are listed first.

Colours can be used for coding; for example, figures in red on the Stock Exchange pages indicate a drop in price.

It now costs about £900 to install a Prestel set. On-line printers can be connected to them for £250-£350 per annum.

Looking to the future, Mr Bush told us that automated indexing using keywords, and automated index management, were being considered. Reverse

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indexing, from the page number to the printed index words, is necessary, so that when information is deleted the routes which led to it may be traced. Deleted information cannot now be retrieved, but may soon be able to be stored off-line. Built-in flexibility for evolution is necessary in the system.

Mr Bush suggested that every page of Prestel is in a way an index, in that they all indicate further routes. At a previous meeting some indexes were accused of being the tail wagging the dog. In Prestel, the index indeed seems to permeate the whole, to have become an alter ego or Doppel-gänger.

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The different systems at present used for Videotex transmission and possible future uses are noted by Kathleen Criner and Martha Johnson-Hall in 'Videotex: threat or opportunity?' (*Special libraries* 71 (9) September 1980, 379-95; 4 refs, including a bibliography on Viewdata and Teletex, 1980). A longer review of the subject is Roger Woolfe's *Videotext: the new television telephone information services.* London; Philadelphia: Heyden, 1980. 184 pp. ISBN 0-85501-493-8. £7.00 ($18.00).

Indexes Past

Indexes of the nineteenth century can prove delightful reading now to practitioners of our craft. We should be glad to receive examples to print in *The Indexer*. Here are some splendid extracts from the index to *Latter-Day Pamphlets* by Thomas Carlyle, published by Chapman and Hall in The Shilling Edition of Thomas Carlyle's Works. No date is given for the volume, but each pamphlet is dated 1850, and Carlyle died in 1881. There is of course no credit for the indexer, but the volume is 'edited by Thomas Carlyle'.

ABLE Man, the born soldier of Truth and Order, 91; appointed by 'divine right' to govern, 110; methods of summoning aloft, 156. See Wisest Man.

American Cousins, our, no Model Commonwealth, 17; their noblest Battle yet to fight, 18, 193.

Anarchy or open 'Kinglessness,' 5; Constituted Anarchy, 25, 182, 211; Sorcerer's Sabbath of, 265.

Astonishment, different quantities of, 104.

Biography, no, but wraps in it a message out of Heaven, 277.

Bishops, our, and what comes of them, 25, 137, 270; not our ugliest anomalies, 228; our *new* Souls'-Overseers, 142.

Brotherhood with the base and foolish, 56.

Cant, thrice-baleful universe of, 63, 252; sincere Cant, 263.

Chancellors, and their beaten road to the Peerage, 241.

Churches, our best-behaved of, 221. See Law.

'Crucify him,' a considerable feat in the suppression of minorities, 29, 206. See "Ou' clo'." [sic]

Duke, no one in England so well lodged and tended as our prisoner-scoundrels, 48; Ducal Costermongers, 144.

Etons and Oxfords, with their broken crumbs of mere *speech,* 142, 179.

Exeter-Hall twaddle, 58, 60.

Fiction, idle, intolerable to a serious soul, 278.

Foolish, privilege of the, to be governed by the Wise, 20, 30.

Foreign Office, our, astonishing conditions of, 75; reformed. 122.

French People, the, a kind of Messiah People, very glorious indeed, 4.

Hercules-Harlequin in the Foreign Office, not pleasant to think of, 75.

Horses, Farmer Hodge's, all emancipated, 22.

Intellect, tragic consequences of insufficient, 81 . . .; human Intellect the exact summary of human *Worth,* 91; how to increase the supply, 96; English *beaver* intellect, 157.

James the First's bad reign, 241.

Kings everywhere, in sudden horror, conscious of being Playactors, 5; . . .

Majorities, blockhead, 212, 228.

Money, doomed to possess, 175.

Nawaub, Europe one big ugly, 278.

New Era, our heavy-laden long-eared, 9, 40, 41.

Pig-Philosophy, 268.

Poet, what the, should be, 270, 274.

Premier, mad methods of choosing a, 84, 159; a more unbeautiful class never raked out of the ooze, 114; one wise Premier the beginning of all good, 121. See King.

Protestantism, proper and *im*proper, 260.

Schoolmasters, when useful, 151.

Seventy-four, an English, and its inarticulate traditions, 89.

Shakspeare's *[sic]* scattered tones of a National Epos, 277.

Shams, utter damnability of, 11, 19.

Sincerity, deep awful divine quality of, 263.

Sluggard-and-Scoundrel Protection Society, 57.

Unhappy sugary brethren, 56; happiness not come, 285.