The index to volume 13 of this journal will be despatched with the first issue of vol. 14, spring 1984.

Indexing The Indexer

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The list of compilers of The Indexer's first twelve volume-indexes reads like a roll of honour:

1 John L. Thornton
2 John L. Thornton
3 Gordon V. Carey
4 Margaret D. Anderson
5 F. H. C. Tatham
6 Ken G. B. Bakewell
7 Roger F. Pemberton
8 Frank T. Dunn
9 J. Edwin Holmstrom
10 Doreen Blake
11 Kate Atterton
12 Freda Wilkinson.

It includes the Society's first President, four Vice-Presidents, and four Wheatley Medal winners, one of whom has been further honoured with a Carey Award. All have served the Society in various Offices and/or on such vital long-term assignments as indexer-training and the assessment of Register applications. All were already indexers of distinction and long experience at the time of compiling an Indexer index.

For just over two decades it was editorial policy to give each volume-indexer extensive freedom to display his/her personal virtuosity. Each compilation has its own special qualities, revealing fascinating variations of style, of technique, of decision-making; it has indeed been said with pride that these indexes are living proof that indexing is an art rather than a science. Truly, within the technical desiderata gradually evolved by the Society and embodied in the British Standards of 1964 and 1976, they demonstrate how widely individual indexers may vary in the solution of particular problems, and how numerous such permitted variables are.

During the past few years, I have made numerous analyses of the technical differences (at times I have referred to them as 'inconsistencies', though that was perhaps rather unfair) between the volume-indexes. The content of these analyses could be presented as the main substance of this article, but the result would be lengthy, highly detailed, largely self-evident; in the long run, just plain boring. Readers would find it far more stimulating and instructive to make their own voyages of exploration. That is a much more rewarding way of discovering the artfulness of experienced indexers in handling them.

What else will you discover? That each individual index is a work of art? I hope so. But then turn your thoughts along a different channel: ask yourself the question, how would I set about the task of conflating these indexes into a cumulative index to all twelve volumes? How would I interfile, for example, all the existing entries under the word 'index' and its rather numerous derivatives (including such headings as 'book index', 'card index', 'cumulative index', 'differences in indexing', and many others in which 'index' is not the first word of the entry but may—or may not—be the key word)? Another challenging heading is 'Society of Indexers'. You will have no difficulty in finding others. How can you be sure of identifying, solely from the indexes, all the feature articles that have appeared in forty-eight issues? And so on. Pick your own problem.

An important word of warning: as you undertake this exercise, firmly dismiss any temptation to formulate opinions about the indexing abilities of the individual indexers. It goes without saying that only members of unquestioned ability and experience and reputation have been invited to index the journal. It must be borne in mind, too, that it has been the custom for each volume-indexer to accept such an invitation not as a paid commission but as a voluntary service to the Society. Furthermore, the indexers were operating without established house rules until the late seventies, when brief guidelines began to stipulate a general rather than a specific pattern within which to work. A glance through the Introductory Notes confirms the separateness or independence of the indexes. Six of the twelve have no such Note, and there are some interesting variations in the content of the six Notes which more recent compilers have provided.

The aim of the exercise is to assess the practicability of cumulating the existing indexes. This is a matter to which increasing attention has been given in recent years, particularly by the Editorial Board. Perhaps one of the sharpest spurts to this line of thought has been the chapter in our President, Robert Collison's Indexes and indexing on 'The indexing of periodicals', which is as pertinent today as it was eleven years ago when the fourth revised edition was published. Further pressure has been exerted by the speed of developments in the application of micro-
processors to indexing. Taking most of the manual drudgery out of cumulative indexing is one of the more obvious benefits of the new technology.

When preparations began to be made for the indexing of Volume 12, the primary consideration was to create a clear-cut house style which would provide a pattern for future volume-indexes, thus ensuring that cumulations would present the fewest problems possible. Freda Wilkinson generously undertook the daunting task, not only of preparing the index, but of planning and executing a process of consultation, calculated to ensure the largest possible measure of agreement on a fearsome number of points of detail. Eight colleagues were selected as a representative sample of expert opinion on Indexer indexes, and each of them gave answers (in writing and without collusion) to some forty key questions.

How many correct (acceptable?) answers are there to any question on indexing techniques, layout, content, typefaces, and so on, and on, and on? On only a mere handful of the key questions was there unqualified unanimity. (There should be an introductory note. Headings—except proper nouns—should begin with a lower-case initial. The content of book reviews should be indexed.) Where there was general agreement, there were differences of emphasis or interpretation or presentation. More than half the questions attracted contradictory answers, though opinion was rarely equally divided. Several vital issues were favoured against minorities of two or three. (Word-by-word rather than letter-by-letter. Indented rather than run-on subheadings. Avoidance of prepositions as first word of any entries.) It is interesting, almost alarming perhaps, to speculate what the outcome would be if a full-scale poll of all members were to be held on what are dictory answers, though opinion was rarely equally divided.

In producing the index to Volume 12, as finally published, it was of course the indexer herself who shouldered the responsibility of making the ultimate decisions. Happily—as is the practice in all good publishing houses—she was able to carry out this final operation in close consultation with the editor. The index has subsequently been approved by the Editorial Board as the basis of a house style for future volume-indexes. The entire readership of The Indexer was invited to express views, so that constructive ideas from all interested parties could be considered for incorporation in the master-plan. So few comments were received that there is clearly widespread support for proceeding with volume-indexing along the lines established by the Volume 12 index.

The benefits of consistent indexing are obvious: not only will the production of cumulative indexes become practicable, but users will find it immeasurably easier to locate and retrieve whatever information they may be seeking. Compilers of future indexes, because they will be working to specific guidelines, will be relieved of much difficult decision-making; this will doubtless more than compensate for the restrictive and delaying effect of adhering to an imposed pattern rather than galloping ahead in accordance with the individual routine evolved by each indexer as a personal 'best method' of achieving speed and efficiency.

In short, the indexes will be better but will take rather longer to compile. It has customarily been an uphill task to meet the publication deadline for the fourth number of each volume of our journal, and occasionally this deadline has been deferred, awaiting completion of the index. The Society's Council has therefore approved a recommendation by the Editorial Board that the current issue, and likewise the fourth number of subsequent volumes, be published on time; that the volume-index be included if it is ready, but that it be published separately if necessary after the journal itself, and distributed with the first number of the next volume. (Members of SI will not have to wait so long, as their copies can be included in the Secretary's next general mailing to members.)

There are probably many of us who will cherish with nostalgia the individual virtuoso performances of past volume-indexers. Whatever feelings there may be on that score, readers may now look forward with some pride to an era in which indexing The Indexer should exemplify in model fashion the application of the established principles of the indexing of periodicals.

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Does continuous use of CRTs damage the eyes?

The results of a five-year study by the Association of Ophthalmologists of Quebec at the University of Laval Hospital Centre are noted in Information retrieval and library automation 18 (10) March 1983, 1–2. Visual fatigue occurs, it is reported, but not eye damage. Fatigue can be minimized by better siting of screens, the use of filters against glare, and other mechanical adjustments. The report, Cathode ray tube display terminals and their effect on ocular health, is available from the Association, 2 Complexe Desjardins, Montreal H5B 1GH, Quebec, Canada.

'Index'—the word: P.S.

Indexing gives a splendid new word to the English language in a review by Humphrey Carpenter of Robert Graves: his life and work by Martin Seymour-Smith (Holt, Rinehart & Winston) in The Washington Post, 30 Jan. 1983:

'The biography’s only serious fault is a decline into card-indexery, a mass of largely uninteresting detail, in the final chapters.'