

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Medals for indexers

The award of the Wheatley Medal for 1982 (*The Indexer* 13 (4), 222) to the author of a learned treatise started me musing over the type of book and the type of index deemed 'outstanding'. Looking over the recipients of this award for the last twenty years, I see a fairly representative selection of technical, scientific, and medical texts. Reading some of the comments of the selection panel, I notice that brevity is scorned in an index. The chances of one of my indexes ever being even looked at is thus obviously NIL. I am a member of that (I suspect, quite large) band of indexers handling technical books, who have daily to use a mental shoehorn to serve the reader well within almost impossibly limited space. Our 'normal' brief is, 'there's 7 pages left between the page-proof text and an "even" working (multiples of 16/32/64 pages in a booklet make-up); do what you can with the index, but *don't* exceed 7 pages'.

So, why not have a medal for the best short, precise index? Limit the maximum size of the indexes submitted to, say, 3,000 entries. Judge the quality of the index by its ability to direct and help the reader within the least possible entries. Look for the indexer who has successfully decided on the most space-effective entries, and who has checked and double-checked each entry for its usefulness. All this within extremely limited typographical limits—that is the 'brief' for most working indexers.

Precise, concise indexes are the demand of many publishers, particularly for technical, scientific, and medical texts. Come on, some of you publishers, how about sponsoring a medal for the best concise index? Encourage the indexers who work for you, to make your new titles so complete and useful to your customers, the readers.

Paul Nash,
Shropshire

Law and order, alphabetical?

Michael Gordon's 'market research' on alphabetization (*The Indexer* 13 (4), 255) sounds impressive, until one pauses to realize that his questionnaire was directed exclusively to the *traders*. It is surely reasonable to expect that the customers might have had a look-in!

Put it another way: his 'survey' proves to be a house of cards, which collapses the moment you recognize the one simple flaw on which the whole edifice rests: his assumption that the mental process by which the indexer sorts his entries into order, and the mental process by which the reader finds what he wants, are identical. It

seems to me blatantly obvious that they are *not*. One might as well say that the mental processes by which a competent author frames his sentences and paragraphs is the same as those by which his reader comprehends what he has written. If that were so, every poetry reader would be a 'mute inglorious Milton', and no one would be able to settle down to 'a good read' unless he was capable of producing a best-seller himself. Nor would I (who am musically near-illiterate) be able to enjoy a Beethoven symphony or Bach concerto.

True, an understanding of fundamental grammatical structure, and even of punctuation—not to mention an ability to distinguish one style of writing from another—will greatly enhance our *enjoyment* of what we read. But such an understanding is far from *essential* for our basic *comprehension*; just as I need no mechanical knowledge of what goes on under the bonnet in order to drive my car. The mental processes involved in making and in using an index are complementary, not identical.

A simple test seems relevant: how often, even as an experienced indexer, am I conscious, in *using* an index made by someone else, that the arrangement is either word-by-word or letter-by-letter? Unless I specifically look to see, I may well not even notice that it is a sorry mixture of the two. After all, in something like 95%* of the entries, it makes no actual difference. No, the mental process I employ as an index-user is much closer to the one I use when I am looking for baked beans in the supermarket. It is important for my search that someone has taken the trouble to arrange the goods in some meaningful order; but I do not have to concern myself with the underlying logic or internal consistency of his arrangement.

So (to return to Michael Gordon's students) any difficulty the novice indexer may encounter in applying the word-by-word method tells us nothing at all about its suitability from the reader's point of view. (On the other hand, it may tell us a great deal about these students' potential as indexers. If they have difficulty with a purely routine technique that calls for no more than the application of fairly low-level intelligence, what kind of mess are they going to make when it comes to the rather more subtle and less mechanical aspects of the task? I would argue firmly that any indexer of minimal competence should be able to switch readily from one method to the other if required. This surely is no more unreasonable a demand than to expect a linguist to be able to switch from thinking in French to doing so in German or Spanish; or to expect a mathematician to switch from decimal to binary or to base 7. There is a point of some importance

*A pure guess on my part; but the reader may, if he wishes, carry out a survey of his own: I am not going to do it for him.

at stake here. If the universal adoption of the word-by-word method would persuade some people to stick to flower arranging or crossword puzzles (where they can at least start by going for the anagrams as I do for the soft centres in a box of chocolates), then that seems to me in itself a powerful argument in its favour).

The distressing but inescapable fact is that, however hard I try to prise it open, my mind remains firmly closed on this issue. Regrettably, advocates of the letter-by-letter method are pigeon-holed with flat-earthers or the members of certain way-out religious sects. (This, in turn, says more about me than about them.) In any discussion of the matter, I come back to the simple fact that human beings think, and therefore read, in words and phrases, not in letters. We can hardly be said in our infant years to begin genuinely to *read* until we have passed the stage of 'spelling out' the words. Even in the days when the teaching of reading began with the alphabet, this fact remained true of our reading once we had passed the first significant milestone along the road to literacy. How much more obviously true in these days of 'look and say' and the like! For this simple reason, built into the very fabric of my mental equipment, I do not expect to find 'Northampton' before 'North Pole'—

still less before *North and South* by Mrs Gaskell. If the convenience and needs of the index-user are our paramount concern, the conclusion seems inescapable, even by those who apparently want an 'easy way out' of a not-so-very difficult part of their task.

John A. Vickers,
Bognor Regis

Picture post

I should be pleased to hear from any reader of any index which has been prepared or is being prepared for the famous magazine *Picture post*, which ran from 1938–1957. Many of the volumes contained their own indexes, which this library as the owner of the *Picture post* picture library does possess, and it is consolidated indexing of the journal as a whole in which I am interested. Such an index may have been prepared by a library, and if so, I would very much like to hear of it. Perhaps your readers can help me.

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New indexes

Several new major works have come to our attention. The British Library has announced its *Index of manuscripts in the British Library*. Users of the Department of Manuscripts will be pleased to hear that the thirty-odd separate volumes which at present have to be consulted there will be indexed in one sequence. Further information on this index, due to begin this year, is available from the British Library (Reference Division Publications) or the publisher, Chadwyck-Healey.

Not published, but valuable for students of nineteenth-century history from 1841, is the *Jewish chronicle* index. Former SI chairman John Shaftesley began the mammoth task which has now been completed by Amanda Golby. J. C. Librarian Rachel Silbert describes the meticulous hand-written work as 'one of the last classic indexes'.

On a traditional subject but square in the twentieth century is a data bank now being produced by Art Sales Index Ltd of Weybridge, Surrey. This is *Art quest* which indexes picture sales from October 1970 to date, and aims to answer questions on artists and their works which have changed hands, with prices. As usual with data banks there is a basic annual membership fee and an additional 'connect-time' charge. This indexing service should provide collectors and financiers with a useful addition to the Getty project at the Witt Library of the Courtauld Institute of Art, on which we hope to report in a future issue. *Art quest* is the online spin-off from the *Art sales*

index annual volumes edited by Richard Hislop.

Talking about large useful indexes reminds us that in 1984 we are expecting the index volume to the multi-volume *Oxford history of technology*. The original work is complex and wide-ranging, and indexing must have presented some tough problems for another former SI Chairman, Richard Raper. And a new work by Roger Harper, *Victorian architectural competitions: an index to British and Irish architectural competitions in The builder 1843–1900* (Mansell, 1983) will prove very valuable to British local and architectural historians, covering places, architects and even types of building.

Fram: the journal of Polar history announces a policy of publishing in each issue indexes to previously non-indexed works in the field of Polar Studies. They have provided an index to *Across Arctic America: narrative of the fifth Thule expedition* by Knud Rasmussen (New York and London: G. P. Putnam's sons, 1927), and have added an index to the 20,000-word translation of *Memoir of the celebrated Admiral Adam John De Krusenstern, the first Russian circumnavigator*, first published in 1856 by Longman's, Green, Brown, and Longman's of London. They plan to add an index next to *Gold hunting in Alaska* by Joseph Grinnell—25,000 words and 75 illustrations, first published in 1901. Scheduled for the summer 1984 number is Fridtjof Nansen's *Hunting and adventure in the Arctic* (New York: 1925). Suggestions from the readership regarding future selections for indexing are invited.

J.D.L.