Indexers in clusters

Book indexing course for librarians

A one-day course was held in London on 10 April 1984 by the Library Association, in association with the Society of Indexers, with the aim of providing librarians with an introduction to basic indexing skills. The course director was K. G. B. Bakewell of Liverpool Polytechnic, Vice-President of the Society of Indexers. Some 45 people attended from as far away as Doncaster, Cornwall and Gloucestershire, representing institutions as diverse as the Institute of Latin American Studies, Stoke Mandeville Hospital, and the National Sound Archive.

Lively and enjoyable talks were given by Ken Bakewell on the purpose of book indexes, what to index, editing and layout, and—with Peter Broxis of the Current technology index—the relationships between book indexing and techniques of classification and cataloguing. Alan Seal of Bath University's Centre for Catalogue Research gave practical, intelligible advice on using microcomputers and word processors. Elizabeth Wallis, Registrar of the Society of Indexers and an educational advice worker, provided a crisply clear survey of the business side of indexing, including relations with authors and publishers, and the day ended with an open forum in which the use of computers proved a popular talking-point.

It was a most interesting day, and one must hope that further such courses will be arranged, perhaps including practical demonstrations and group discussions.

A.O.

Publishers and indexers—en garde!

A third panel/discussion meeting between SI members and publishers was held 3 April 1984, the panel consisting of: Anthony Werner, managing director of Shepheard-Walwyn and a member of the Council of the Independent Publishers’ Guild; Sue Bradbury, editor of the Folio Society; Jenny Dereham of Michael Joseph; and Valerie Chandler representing the Society of Indexers. There were altogether nine publishers present—a new high, partly a result of outside advertising of SI meetings.

Discussion waxed eloquent, even passionate. Indexers represented themselves as martyrs to unreasonable demands, particularly for speed; publishers derided this claim, picturing all publishing as a world of speed, the impossible asked of everyone along the line—and not the indexer even in that end-of-line hot seat, but the poor printer, of whom more still is demanded. Quality and schedules were posed as irreconcilable opposites in an eternal conflict; both held by some to have vanished along with hot metal. Indexers suggested that higher fees might be charged for unreasonable speed, incomplete proofs, or the need for very specialized knowledge.

Publishers seemed to have no doubt that they could recognize a good index when they saw one, though they were less clear as to how they did it. Many felt that they wished to employ only good, experienced indexers, but were not so articulate about who was to provide the experience. Some were highly appreciative of SI’s attempts to provide qualifications.

When it appeared that an index would prove over-length, it might be worth the indexer’s consulting the editor before cutting; sometimes allotment of pages would have changed in the interim, and it might be possible to find more space after all. Sometimes the indexer might even be asked to advise as to the length of the index.

It was held a scandal that conference proceedings are so often unindexed: their publication is expensive but necessary, and without indexes they are almost unusable. It was suggested that publishers might complain to SI about unsatisfactory indexes. The publication of ‘Indexers available’ was welcomed; but one publisher suggested that personal contact would remain their most likely impetus for engaging any indexer. He had come to the meeting, he said, because he believed indexes were important, but had never before met an indexer—what a low profile we must have!

Familiar questions were aired again. Where time is short, is it better spent in reading the text before starting work, or in alteration at the end? Should authors do their own indexes, or be looking solely to their proofs at that stage? Indeed, should/could any author read their own proofs? And should they meet their indexers? No, insisted a publisher; authors never like the index to their own books. But one author was quoted as telling his indexer, ‘I wish you’d done the index before I wrote the book!’

Indexers always enjoy meeting each other and talking shop; meeting publishers too on this occasion proved stimulating and rewarding. Publishers themselves commented afterwards that they had found meeting each other too to discuss indexes a bonus of the meeting, and that indexers should make their presence felt at every publishers’ organization. Clearly it is time that we all emerge from our solitary shells and make ourselves known in the market-place.

H.K.B.
The publisher, the librarian and the indexer: a seminar

The Association of Learned and Professional Society Publishers held a seminar in London in May 1984, 'We're all in it together', for scholarly publishers, librarians and indexers to attempt to identify and understand each other's problems in the publishing chain.

Denis Forbes of Cambridge University Press spoke on behalf of the publisher, referring to the impact of computers as increasing efficiency and avoiding postal delay for authors, editors and referees. He foresaw electronic transmission of copy, cataloguing and stock control, document delivery and publishing, as the future norm. Cost trends favour electronics; we must enlarge and develop our accustomed skills to electronic opportunities. Nearly 1000 data bases are now publicly available, mostly of bibliographies, abstracts and indexes; rarely, as yet, full-text systems. He spoke of the experimental use of these by the Library of Congress, and the copyright problems arising from them and from the increasing use of photocopying; 2,000,000 photocopies a year now come from the British Library Lending Division at Boston Spa. Page charges, as imposed in the US, may affect photocopying. One answer to it could be to offer cheaper offprints.

New technological vistas may seem daunting. He asked us, are we going to dive in, or is the water too cold?

For librarians, Fiona Hamilton of Aslib spoke of 'Going round in circles'. She suggested that there are many different kinds of libraries and different kinds of material contained in them. The first difficulty for all librarians is actually getting a user to ask the right question—sometimes what is asked for is not what is needed. The librarian, having discovered what is wanted, guides the users to the right sources, in whatever form, and provides space for them to pursue their research. In some cases, such as online searching, the librarian conducts some research in collaboration with the user.

During the actual publishing process, the librarian may well be completely out of the picture, apart from providing such essential reference books as dictionaries or Fowler's Modern English usage, plus the space in which to use them for proofreading. In an academic library, where a member of academic staff is the author, the librarian may well find that emotional support and endless patience is also required.

After publication, the librarian again becomes a major contributor to scholarly publishing by purchasing one or more copies of the book, journal or article, or whatever was produced. This item will then go through the process of being made available for use by being accessioned, catalogued, classified, and placed in the appropriate part of the library. It is now ready for the next would-be author to come in and use—and so the process starts all over again.

Indexers were represented by Alan Seal, Research Fellow, Centre for Catalogue Research, University of Bath. We append an abridged version of his address.

Indexes from a user's viewpoint

Alan Seal

The Centre for Catalogue Research is funded by the British Library and we carry out research (mainly of an experimental nature) into the provision and effectiveness of library systems and procedures relating to bibliographic records. Most of our work to date has been concerned with the construction and use of catalogues using computers. In the course of this work we have dealt with questions of subject access, online catalogues and user satisfaction.

I am going to concentrate on the provision of book indexes, but I am aware that this forms only one part of indexing work. Periodical indexing is generally done on a continuing basis by the publishers of indexing journals, using permanent rather than freelance staff. The work that our Centre does tends to concentrate on the user, considering what are the problems from the consumer's point of view. I would like now to do the same, first considering whether users are adequately served by traditional book indexes and the way that they are provided, and then discussing what authors, publishers and indexers can do about them. I will concentrate chiefly on publishers since they have most say in what is published and how.

The user

Little is really known about the actual need for and use of indexes. We have to rely on the opinions of book reviewers and indexers themselves, all of whom could be