Producing a revised index

Jean Simpkins

For a newcomer to indexing, the first commission to be received may well be something for which—no matter how conscientiously he may have prepared himself for his new occupation—he may have had no instruction whatever.

I refer to the preparation of a revised version of an index previously compiled by another indexer; required by a publisher when a subsequent edition of the original text is to be issued. For some reason, publishers’ editors seem to think this an easy fool-proof task suitable to an indexer of untried ability. In fact, carelessness and inefficiency in such work is probably responsible for more bad indexes, and for more exasperated users, than is any other aspect of indexing. An established indexer may well reject such a commission—unless he himself produced the original—but a newcomer is less likely to do this, and must find his way by trial and error, like all before him. It seems useful, therefore, to suggest a way of coping with this type of work.

* *

The publisher should supply: a copy of the out-dated text in its published form; proof sheets of the new text with page numbers (unless paragraph references are required); and one or two copies of the old index, which should be mounted so that each column of index has a whole A4 page to itself to accommodate alterations.

The first task is to check the old text against the new. Much will be similar, and in the first chapter some early pages may be identical. But soon, changes to the text will begin to occur, and a line that appeared in the old text at—say—the top of page 12, may now appear perhaps half-way down page 11; in this case, one draws a horizontal pencil line in the margin of the new page 11 at the point where the old text continued on to a new page, writing above it ‘11’ and below it ‘12’. By the time each page of the new text has been compared with the old, almost every old page number will have been entered on the appropriate sheets with the new printed page numbers. Where matter has been deleted, a note to this effect should appear in pencil both on the old and the new text.

During this check through the texts, new material will have come to light. This must be indexed in the normal way. It is necessary to compare the results with the old index to avoid inconsistency and duplication of headings.

Now comes the purely mechanical task of checking each reference in the old index by seeking the page references given there in the margins of the new text sheets. These will appear with the new printed page number of the sheet. Old page references in the mounted index sheets can now be crossed out and new ones inserted—this is where the wide margins of the mounted index prove necessary.

The editing process is less mechanical. Textual deletions and additions may affect the need for subheadings; what was a simple one-line entry may now require half a dozen subheadings. Where three subheadings out of five have been eliminated, the remaining two may well be combined into one line. Cross-references should also be checked.

Sometimes, additional matter may be so extensive that it is necessary to type, from the indexing slips, a new entry which incorporates old and new material.

The final product to be submitted to the publisher will be the mounted sheets of the old index with every page reference either altered or entirely deleted (or pencil-ticked, in the case of a very few entries remaining unaltered), and the typed sheets of riders (one sheet for each entry) covering additional material. If the publisher supplied two copies of the mounted old index, one can be kept by the indexer and the clean copy forwarded.

* *

If asked to produce a revised version of an index which is clearly sub-standard, most established indexers would either reject the commission or ask to be authorized to compile a new index. Even a beginner should have the courage to do this; although publishers pay less for revisions, and prefer them for this reason, they may be open to persuasion if the arguments are well reasoned.

Since poor indexes give indexers in general a bad name, anyone who can improve the quality of revised indexes will be doing the profession of indexing a very good turn.

Salad days

I had a salad. If I were to say that today’s tomatoes are an index of the decline of Western man I should be thought a crank but nations do not, I think, ascend on such tomatoes.

—from Turtle diary by Russell Hoban (Cape, 1975), reproduced by permission.