LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Newspeak?

In reaction to reading Kevin Jones's article in the previous issue of The Indexer, 'Getting started in computerized indexing' (pp. 9-13), may I suggest that there is some danger that automatic indexing by computer could lead to a form of censorship? Writers might deliberately accommodate their vocabulary to the computer, allowing text to be easily accessible, but inhibiting freedom of expression.

Judy Batchelor
Ealing, London

Feminist action

Philip Bradley's comments on Kramerae and Treichler's A feminist dictionary (The Indexer 15 (1) April 1986, p 63) tend to confirm, rather than refute, the opinions he objects to in this excellent compilation of anecdotes and quotations. There is even an indexing joke, cited under 'Actions' on page 33:

'Even the indexing of a book may constitute a subversive feminist action. An index entry in the 1976 edition of Williams' obstetrics, a medical "bible" edited by Jack A. Pritchard and Paul C. MacDonald, reads "CHAUVINISM, MALE, variable amounts, 1-923"; the 1980 edition reads "CHAUVINISM, MALE, voluminous amounts, 1-1102". The preface thanks Signe Pritchard for her indexing skills.'

Janet Shuter
London

von

Recently a reviewer (in the British Medical Journal) of an American encyclopaedia of medicine criticized certain entries as appearing under 'von', e.g. 'von Recklinghausen's disease', as according to him 'von' was a minor German title and the correct entry should have been 'Recklinghausen's disease'. Butterworth's medical dictionary is ambivalent on the matter, for, while having 'Recklinghausen's disease' it also has 'von Willebrand's disease'. But is this difference due to Willebrand's being a Finn?

Have the German scholars in our midst any observations to make?

John Gibson
Wichenford, Worcs.

Data Protection indexes inadequate

A. Sandison, an active member of the Society of Indexers and the Society of Genealogists, was instrumental in obtaining the Data Protection Registrar's concession on book indexing (see The Indexer 15 (1) April 1986, 24-5). He now exposes the great potential weakness of the register: lack of proper indexing. The letter below appeared in the Daily Telegraph, 15 May 1986, and is reproduced by permission.

'... a major purpose of the Data Protection Act is to protect individuals, by allowing them access to registered data from September 1987. That implies that the register must enable them to discover the names of firms who hold, or might hold, data about them. There is as yet no evidence that it will ever do this.

'With a register of eventually well over a million pages, access will depend on the indexes, none of which yet exist. Although a version of the register can already be seen at Wilmslow, it is admitted that the indexes are not even adequately planned. Any information scientist knows that effective indexes have to be designed at the same time as, or even before, the main data base.

'The Register can only be of use to individuals if it can lead them to files held by organisations they would not otherwise have thought of. If they know a firm's name they can inquire direct, without help from any register. Until the registrar has proved that searching for unknown names will be effective and easy, his register can be no more than a useless white mammoth which imposes an enormous burden of red tape on industry and commerce and helps no one.

'Scrapping the register in its present form would be a significant contribution to national productivity and the control of inflation, not to mention common sense.'

J. B. Hodge, Solicitor, writes in The Law Society's Gazette (19 Feb. 1986) of two legal classics:

... when I started in practice my firm had on their bookshelves the two standard works: Rayden and Latey [Practice in divorce law and family matters by W. Rayden; The law and practice in divorce and matrimonial causes by W. Latey]. I asked the reason for this extravagance and to my surprise was told, 'Oh we have Rayden for the contents but Latey for the index!'

... It cannot be pure coincidence that in the index [to Rayden's work] we find 'Sexual Intercourse' coming next after 'Seven years absence', or 'Adultery' coming immediately before 'Advancement'. It seems right that 'Appeals' should follow 'Anton Piller order', and the juxtaposition of 'Bigamy, Birth Certificate and Blood Test' seems most appropriate. 'Insanity' follows 'Inordinate sexual demands'.