Editorial

Art or science?

We are sent queries on indexing techniques that could be resolved back at the ranch by reference to standard works to which every indexer must have access, whether in home, office, or nearest library, where help is at hand. Ingenious as our correspondents can be in seeking out areas of potential confusion, equally diligent in foreseeing them all and proposing solutions are the authors of such mandatory works as *AACR2* and *ALA filing rules*, and the committees of BSI and ANSI that have deliberated to produce guides that will prescribe and standardize usage, to diminish both indexers’ perplexity and inconsistency among published results. This journal frequently notes such publications, particularly in its regular feature, ‘Specialized vocabularies’, and in its review section; and in this issue K. G. B. Bakewell surveys some of the most useful reference books available for our work.

Users of indexes, as much as indexers themselves, like to have established ways of procedure—and users are likely to come by their knowledge of indexing systems chiefly by experience of uniform methods of indexing. So we all should do alike—work by the book. Does this then leave no place for individual judgement and talent? Does the individual freelance, particularly in the arts field, feel mechanized by firm guidance and standardization? That automatic indexing is what he/she will be reduced to *in propria persona* by merely following precepts, with all eventualities foreseen? (That is, even apart from the grim spectre of tendance on computer programs rather than texts.)

The model index framework is standard, but each text is unique, and it is in relating the specific text to the normal structure that individual skills and judgement come into play. The creative element in indexing has often been asserted, and is cherished jealously. This must be the element that deals with content and ideas: analysing the text; recognizing, grouping, and telescoping concepts and their development; breaking down topics into a series of subgroups, and allocating references among them; summarizing abstractions as elegantly as may be in devising concise subject headings which may not themselves appear in the text at all. Herein lies the art of indexing, requiring perceptive reading and critical insight, calling on all our linguistic skills and specialist subject knowledge. SI’s former chairman, David Lee, gave us a fitting maxim in declaring at a seminar of the Association of Learned and Professional Society Publishers, ‘The indexer has to be an artist, to exercise judgement with words’. The late L. M. Harrod, then editor of this journal, held that the divergence in style of the volume indexes to *The Indexer*, compiled by different distinguished indexers, demonstrates that indexing is an art, not a science. And certainly SI’s founder, G. Norman Knight, regarded the subject of his professional labours and published guide as *Indexing, the art of*.

What our many guides and precepts relate to is the structure and arrangement of the index: these matters of alphabetization, punctuation, and layout, which are indeed subject to standardized prescription, constitute indexing’s science. Indexers should have recourse to cataloguing rules for guidance as to names and headings; to thesauri for technical language; to American and British standards for many specific matters as documented by Mary Piggott in the previous issue of this journal (pp. 20–1). Here there is no place for individual variegation, departures from the norm. Here we need exercise only our own skills of information retrieval, to rely upon the paradigms established for us.