Local newspaper indexing

British Library Newspaper Library Seminar: 10 April 1987, York University

This seminar, attended by more than fifty people, proved both interesting and enjoyable.

John Westmancoat opened the proceedings by giving an up-to-date report on the number and type of local newspaper indexes at present in the UK. It seems that there are over 700 such indexes in existence—combinations of card/slip/typescript; cuttings; picture indexes; and private, mainly genealogical, indexes. Not unnaturally, the largest number falls into the first category.

The indexes are compiled mainly by local history staff or volunteers, though the Manpower Services Commission (MSC) has funded 15 newspaper indexes in Scotland and eleven in England. A further breakdown was given as to what periods in time were covered by the indexes. The twentieth century has by far the greatest number, with the nineteenth second and only a handful for the eighteenth. Of course, these indexes are in the main very selective—covering anything from shipping information to local churches. Curiously, the general public seems unaware that there are indexes to local papers available in libraries, while those held by newspaper offices are generally for internal use only.

Eamon Dyas, Information Officer of the British Library Newspaper Library at Colindale, gave a brief account of recent developments in automating the results of their survey of newspaper-indexing projects. The arrangement of fields in the database includes location, county, title, place of publication, period indexed, and holdings. One problem encountered, and not completely solved, was the coding system for counties. The 1974 boundaries were the ones chosen. It is hoped that the survey will be published by the end of 1987.

Geraldine Beare, Vice-chairman of the Society of Indexers, then gave an account of the difficulties and frustrations of using indexes to local newspapers. So often the indexes were non-existent or selective and covering the wrong time periods. Some subject areas were not included; for instance, illustrations, cartoons and photographs; similarly, bylines, and where applicable, fiction. A few suggestions were given as to how to go about indexing papers, with examples from America, South Africa and Australia. MSC-funded projects were mentioned—and criticized—and alternative ways of funding suggested. The idea that these indexes could be marketed and sold was also put forward.

Lunch was a welcome break, although many delegates continued the discussion of the problems of time, finance, suitability and training of personnel.

The first speaker of the afternoon was Sheila Cooke, Nottingham County Librarian, who gave a most interesting talk on the problems of setting up a project to index local papers in her area. Seven years previously the library had approached the MSC for help with this task.

There was a partial index in existence for the Ipswich Journal, but over a 20-year period only 20 years’ worth of this newspaper had been indexed. To qualify for the MSC schemes, a project must satisfy certain criteria: it must be for local community use; it should not have been done before; and permanent staff are not to be involved. Further difficulties such as time, money and quality of staff had to be taken into account. Generally, the MSC would give funds for a year only, so decisions had to be taken as to what kind of index could be compiled in such a short time. There were also practical considerations: whoever did the indexing had to do it from microfilm, and as there was only one reader, this meant slotting it in with the public who also used the machine. Often the ability of the candidates to do complex indexing was questionable, and over the seven-year period only about half of the people who entered the project through the MSC stayed for their full year.

A different story was recounted by Elizabeth Matthews, Senior Local Studies Librarian, Suffolk County Libraries. Here, the county archivist and the county librarian decided to merge their records. It was found that there was an almost complete collection, from 1739, of the Ipswich Journal, and indexing this paper was considered a useful project. In 1981 the index was begun, though from 1800, not the earlier date, regrettably. To date, ten years have been completed, and already the information contained within the paper indicates the rich variety of life in Suffolk. No national or international news has been indexed, except where it affects local issues. There are three indexes: personal names, places, and subjects. Just by looking at the index it is possible to trace, for instance, the Jews in Ipswich; the lack of interest in local politics; and smuggling, which was not so prominent as local legend believed. A most worthwhile index!

John Bennett, from Edinburgh University, returned to the horrors of employing MSC people and indeed of accepting MSC funding.* Once again training loomed large—up to three months before anyone was able to

cope with their task. When asked whether indexes had been published to The Scotsman, he answered no, because the MSC claimed copyright for all material produced under MSC auspices. (It was generally agreed from the floor that this was incorrect.)

The index to The Scotsman is based on the style of The Times index, the Library of Congress Catalogue and the BBC catalogue of terms, adjusted according to local content. Infostar is used for the actual data collection, and the index is prepared daily, with monthly, then yearly, mergers. There are approximately 150,000 entries per year. The index information is on computer from 1983–6, but is not generally available to the public. Altogether 20 part-time and six full-time people, plus one editor, are involved in The Scotsman project. Over the years it has also included one ordinary member of The Society of Indexers and one Registered member (who was excellent!).

To complete the afternoon session there was a fascinating talk by Stephen Torrington, Librarian from the Express and Star, Wolverhampton. Here computers are used through every process, from desk-top publishing to compiling the index. The system was set up in the summer of 1985 using an American software package—basis on a VAX computer. Every evening some 900 ‘stories’ are transferred to the library file, where they are sorted and marked either K (kept) or D (deleted). 300–400 are kept, and any story can be accessed in a wide variety of ways: e.g., length, office, byline, heading, date, photo or a mix and match of words. It seems that every word can be used as a heading and any combination of words also. For the moment, this information system and index is available only at the newspaper office, but it is hoped that links with the local library and University will be possible in the future.

In conclusion, there was a half-hour discussion session. The main points considered were the MSC projects; the problems of training; finance; time; what to index; and how to set up an indexing project within limited means.

Altogether, a most useful seminar, with much goodwill, information and experience!

Geraldine Beare

Reference books for indexers: some comments

K. G. B. Bakewell

Four people responded to my appeal for comments on my article which appeared on pages 131–40 of the April 1987 issue: W. F. Barrett, David Linton and my Liverpool Polytechnic colleagues Helen Chandler and Graham Matthews. I am very grateful to all of them.

W. F. Barrett, of the Council of Europe, points out that there has been progress since the 1982 edition of the EUDISED thesaurus, listed under Thesauri. The revised edition, now called EUDISED multilingual thesaurus for information processing in the field of education, was published in 1984 by Mouton Publishers of Berlin, New York and Amsterdam in nine language versions—English, French, German, Italian, Spanish, Dutch, Danish, Greek, and Portuguese. Each version contains the equivalents in the other eight languages. This edition was not listed in the British national bibliography, presumably because the publishers do not have a British office. Mr Barrett states that work is progressing on a revised edition but that it is no easy matter to manage a nine-language thesaurus. I am sure that all indexers sympathize!

Under The world of publishing David Linton and Graham Matthews both express surprise (rightly) at the omission of Publishers in the United Kingdom and their addresses (Whitaker), which is comprehensive as to addresses, and Cassell & the Publishers’ Association directory of publishing, which lists all members of the Publishers’ Association together with authors’ agents, trade associations, reference books, periodicals, etc.

David Linton points out, as its previous editor, that (i) the publishers of Benn’s media directory moved back to Tonbridge from Tunbridge Wells in July 1985, and (ii) the second volume has been entitled International, and not (as I wrote) Overseas countries, since 1982.

David Linton was also most surprised at the omission, under Guides to organizations, of Hollis press & public relations annual, which he describes as ‘indisputably the contact source for virtually every type of British organisation’. I have to confess that I had never heard of this work before receiving Mr Linton’s letter, so I repaired to Liverpool Commercial Library to have a good look at it. Subtitled ‘The classified guide to press contacts, public relations departments, news information sources, public relations consultancies worldwide and services to communication and the media’, it is arranged in seven sections:

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