Electronic dreaming

With the computer came the possibilities, and with the micro came the dream. Everyone would have their own information system to organize their work and a little machine to take care of all the boring bits. 'Information' would become books through a continuous, electronically mediated process. Yet not all authors, editors, and indexers are switching on their VDUs instead of picking up pens.

Publishers dreamed of being able to generate an index automatically, once they had text on disk and editors had done their work. One program routine would list all occurrences of words chosen for index entries (perhaps chosen simply by eliminating the 'unimportant' words in the text), another routine would alphabetize the entries—time and money saved. Of course it wasn't that easy. In the early 1980s mainframe computers could produce such an index for material handled by their text processing programs, but computer typesetting hadn't advanced enough to be able to keep page-breaks in place. The result was cumulative havoc with the page numbers assigned to index entries.

Some publishers have persisted and are using the latest technology to the utmost, producing collected works and dictionaries. Some publishers have been victims of computer fallibility and now use them not at all. Others use computers only for typesetting, and many accept disks from authors but do all the editing on printouts rather than on screen. Some publishers are happy to receive an index on disk, but most still find it quicker and cheaper for the typesetter to re-key any index but the longest. The incompatibility of different systems continues to cause problems.

Authors were hopeful that the indexing routines in their word processing programs would remove the tedium, the trauma and (if their nerve or patience did not fail at the last minute) the extra expense of producing the indexes required in their contracts. They found that index-making wasn’t as quick or painless as hoped: it was tiring to go through hundreds of screenfuls of text and mark each occurrence of each keyword; the computer took longer than expected to sort the list and the resulting index was a nightmare. The machine, like the unconscious brain of the sleeper, had taken control, and had produced loosely-connected gibberish: long strings of undifferentiated page numbers, scattered relatives, and cross-references conspicuous by their absence. Depending on basically an ASCII sort, not even the alphabetization was reliable. We are told that 80% of authors now prepare their manuscripts on word processors, but we don’t know how many prepare their own indexes, or what facilities they use. The worry is that the machines they trust let them down on important details—details of which they may not be fully aware.

Commercial indexing services quickly caught on to the possibilities of the computer but home-based indexers woke up more gradually. In 1982 (13 (1)) we were hoping micros would be kind and helpful to us, and were given advice on acquiring machines that now seem crude at prices that now seem exorbitant. Though MACREX, the first indexing program written by indexers for indexers, was being refined even then, many computerized indexers were confined to using word processing programs to speed up the work a bit. A preliminary sorting of entries was sometimes possible, but mostly we were happy merely to be saved retyping. Since then we’ve become increasingly familiar with hardware and partisan about software; some of us are now wondering not whether but when to update our equipment. Now there is software to do all the tedious jobs with panache, and remove the interruptions to ‘pure’ indexing.

The computer is after all only a tool, a fourth-dimensional extension of the moving hand of the user, not a replacement for the brain. Though it can speed up the 30% of the work that is mechanical, the thinking person must still do the analysing, rearranging and connecting. But the discipline of artificial intelligence is finding its feet and fifth-generation computers are coming nearer to being reality. (Some say a computer that can truly ‘think’ will ever be only a dream.) Indexing programs are starting to get past the stage of speeding up the mechanical routines and are now starting to shape the actual entries. NEPHIS (see the article in this issue) seems able to turn a neophyte into an indexer: is this the beginning of the end, or the end of the beginning?

We can’t ignore the tide of progress, nor can we avoid the detritus it leaves on the shore. Read, in this issue, how a possible computer-generated fiasco of the Gilbert and Sullivan concordance was averted by shoebox methods. Wonder if Micro-OCP could have coped. Then, thrill to the drama of
the timely rescue (by electronic magic) of an encyclopaedic index from the twin demons of excess length and an imminent deadline. Inform yourself (this is important) about SGML. And relax: thank goodness, there are still pleasurable byways to be enjoyed.

A word for the worried. The takeover of electronic technology isn't inevitable, or predictable, and it certainly isn't coming in one fell swoop. Perhaps it is indexers with shoeboxes who have the really superior information systems. Their brains have accumulated more information than they are aware of—and such wisdom doesn't come with speed.

MARGARET COOTE

Coming events

6-8 December 1988
12th International Online Meeting, Olympia 2, London. Details from Learned Information Ltd, Woodside, Hinksey Hill, Oxford OX1 5AU; tel. (0865) 730275.

A British-Yugoslav Conference of Indexers will be held in Hvar, Yugoslavia, 30 April–3 May 1989. Hvar is a beautiful little town on an island of the same name off the Dalmatian coast, with all the facilities for a small conference. The reception and meetings will be held in the Loggia, a beautiful hall that was once part of the Venetian governor's house. There will be a reception and dinner the first evening, lectures and discussions in the morning and evening of the next two days, lectures and discussions on the final morning, and an excursion in the afternoon to see other parts of the island. A varied series of lectures has been arranged to suit all tastes.

The Yugoslav organizer is Olivera Potpari, a member of the Society of Indexers. She and Sanja Garic, our other Yugoslav member, are looking forward to our support in their endeavours to improve indexing in their country. British participants are advised to combine the conference with a holiday in Hvar by booking a holiday with Yugotours, who are making special arrangements for us. Further details from the British organizer: John Gibson, Landors, Venn Lane, Wichenford, Worcester WR6 6XY.

‘Information technology and the research process’ is the title of a conference to be held at Cranfield, Bedfordshire, 18–21 July 1989, jointly sponsored by the British Library Research and Development Department and the University of Pittsburgh School of Library and Information Science. It will concentrate on fundamental problems of information flow in the research process. Further information from Laurence Howells, British Library Research and Development Department, 2 Sheraton Street, London W1V 4BH.


Practically perfect*

SI’s conference held in Cheltenham in July 1988, with the title ‘Indexing, The Practice of’, successfully focused on exactly that, with workshops, brains trusts, and much lively discussion continued through meal breaks, as well as speakers. The revision of BS 3700, publishers' attitudes to indexes, the treatment of foreign names, subject specialisms and particular index forms, and accreditation and registration, all received attention. It was entirely convivial as well as soundly concerned with the subject in hand. A full report will appear in the SI Newsletter; two papers delivered at the conference will be reproduced in the next issue of this journal.

*like Poppins, Mary

At last!

The long-awaited revision of BS 3700 British Standard recommendations for preparing indexes to books, periodicals and other documents was published early in June this year. It supersedes the previous revision of 1976. The main features of the revision were noted by K. G. B. Bakewell in our last issue (16(1), 42–44). Copies of BS 3700 are available for £15.00 to members of the Society of Indexers from the Literature Manager, Mrs D. Frame, 26 Draycot Road, Wanstead, London E11 2NX. A full review will appear in our April 1989 issue.

Also recently published is the British Standard glossary of terms for micrographics, Part 5: quality of images, legibility, inspection. (BS 6054 Part 5: 1988 = ISO 6196/5: 1987. £12.75 to SI members, if obtained through the Literature Manager.)