Indexing of books in Nigeria: some observations

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A consideration of origin, growth and development of indexing in Nigeria. Casual observation of indexing output and standards might conclude that indexing output in Nigeria has been very limited and substandard, but this study indicates rather that it is still in its infancy. The paper, while predicting a bright future for indexing and indexers, makes recommendations for the production of satisfactory indexes.

Though the history of indexing dates back to the 17th century, book indexing in Nigeria is still at the stage of development and has received very little attention. Ugonna emphasized that 'a certain amount of book indexing has been done for the older University Presses and for the multinational publishers with branches in Nigeria.' We would emphasize that indexing as an art is closely linked with other processes such as the educational development of a country together with the growth and development of the publishing industry in that country. Thus, book indexing in Nigeria has followed closely the progress made in both educational advancement and the growth of the publishing industry.

Prior to the 1960s and soon after, book publishing in Nigeria was controlled by branches of multinational publishing houses, who published even Nigerian authored books in their home base. Hence the need for indexing these books in Nigeria did not arise. At the end of production, the finished product was shipped back to Nigeria for consumption; Nigeria was never meant to be part of the production process at that time. The reason for this side-tracking may have been connected with the urgent need then for books and other learning aids, for education as well as for broad intellectual and technological advancement. There was also a serious lack of machinery and technical knowledge.

At the end of Nigerian independence euphoria, however, there came an escalated quest for educational advancement by the populace, which necessitated the establishment of more universities in the country to meet the surging demand; this in turn gave rise to the establishment of the university presses, which have become major book publishers in the country. Thus, the origin of book indexing in Nigeria may to some extent be traced to the establishment of these presses. As most of the books produced by these presses were written by Nigerians and produced within the country the indexing would have been done locally also.

It is pertinent to note that the book publishing industry was not left completely in the hands of the multinationals and university presses. There were also indigenous commercial companies, government presses and presses of organizational and research institutes. These did not emphasize book indexing in their production. The commercial presses, out to maximize profit, did not quite appreciate the relevance or value of book indexing. At that time it was much easier for them to market their books with this deficiency. Now the situation has changed: the period of enlightenment has ushered in a large number of discriminating readers who see the need for a good index and demand it.

The 1980s have witnessed an upward swing in educational growth and publishing in Nigeria, which has brought about the general need for book indexing.

From our recent investigation of books published during the 1960s, 70s and 80s by Nigerian publishers (including multinational publishers with branches in Nigeria) we found that 77% of 30 books published in the 1980s had indexes. Of 30 books published in the 1970s, 67% were indexed. Of the 18 books published in the 1960s that met our requirements, 62% were indexed.

Result of the investigation

This study covered 78 titles, with 30 titles each from the 1970s and the 1980s and 18 from the 1960s. The titles were written by Nigerians, about Nigeria, or by foreigners on Nigeria and published by local publishers as well as multinationals with subsidiaries in Nigeria.

Accuracy of index: Indexed entries were examined to find out if the locators tallied with the page references in the main text. We found that the adequacy rate for both the 1980s and the 1970s was 80% while that of the 1960s was 55%.

Appearance of important items: Each index was examined for the inclusion of most important items from the text. The 1980s registered 66% adequacy rate, while the 1970s and the 1960s recorded 80% and 60% respectively.
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Subheadings: The indexes were examined individually to ascertain if there were enough subheadings to avoid strings of undifferentiated numbers, and the result showed that the 1980s had 73% adequacy rate while both the 1970s and the 1960s had 80%.

Cross-references: The inclusion of cross-references was also examined and both the 1980s and the 1970s had adequacy rate of 73% while the 1960s had 55%.

Arrangement: Most of the indexes examined were of the single dictionary format in alphabetical order. Upon close examination it was discovered that the alphabetical arrangement was not strictly adhered to; thus the adequacy ratings were: the 1980s, 73%; the 1970s, 80%; and the 1960s, 43%.

Physical appearance or layout: The evaluation was based on adequacy for ease of use and clarity, and not on exact standards for type size or margins. The result showed that the 1980s had 66%; the 1970s, 80%; and the 1960s, 30%.

Length of index: Using the recommended standard for an average index of 5% or more of the pages in the book, we calculated what the 5% should be and matched it against the actual number of pages in the index. For the adequacy rate the readings are as follows:
- within 2 pages of 5% = Highly adequate
- within 3 pages of 5% = Adequate
- within 4 pages of 5% = Fairly adequate
- within 5 pages of 5% = Inadequate
- within 6 or 7 pages of 5% = Fairly inadequate
- within 8 or more pages of 5% = Grossly inadequate

For instance, a title published in the 1980s that had 328 pages of text should ideally have had 16 pages of index entries but had only two pages. Applying the above ratings, our investigation showed that the 1980s scored 9%; the 1970s, 40%; and the 1960s, 18%. The general economic slump of the 1980s and the present devaluation of the Nigerian currency (Naira) have not helped our publishing industry. The prices of both local and imported raw materials have more than quadrupled. To cut down on production costs publishers are beginning either to do away with the entire index or settle for a very scanty one, which could explain the drastic fall in the length of the indexes produced in the 1980s.

Looking at the above performances generally, it seems to us that indexing in Nigeria has not been as mediocre as supposed. It is still at the stage of infancy. In this study we observed that 55 out of the 78 titles examined—roughly 70%—were indexed. Perhaps our findings would have been drastically altered with regard to all the criteria except length of index if the indexing had been in depth. Most of the indexes were very scanty and failed to meet the required standard.

Recommendations

We would like to point out that not all significant characteristics of good quality indexes were studied here. Our evaluation used existing guidelines and standards and its results enable us to make the following recommendations.

1. That all Nigerian non-fiction imprints should be indexed.
2. Effort should be made to keep the length of the index near the recommended 5% of the main text so as to incorporate all the key concepts.
3. If an entry is followed by more than 15 to 20 locators, effort should be made to subdivide the entries to enable easy access to specific aspects of the subject.
4. Important items in the text should appear in the index.
5. See and see also references should be used to connect related items.
6. An introductory note should be provided to explain certain indexing styles, where necessary.

Conclusion

We strongly recommend the indexing of all Nigerian imprints and the formation of a Nigerian Society of Indexers. Such a Society should be charged with the responsibility of setting up guidelines and standards that will harmonize the activities of individual indexers.

References


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Divine collaboration

The Guardian of 30 Aug. 1988 cites, ‘another example of computer name-crunching. Dyfed’s county library service has, by all accounts, an index system which allows up to 30 characters for the author’s name. This can cope (just) with Dostoevsky, Fyodor Mikhailovich and (easily) with Compton-Burnett, Dame Ivy. But the joint authors of that wholly profane work, Elements of Quantity Surveying, emerge as Willis, Arthur James and Christ’.