Indexers in publishing

In February 1989 the Polytechnic of North London and Women in Publishing (WIP) jointly published the ‘Report of a survey into the employment of women in the UK book publishing industry’. The majority of indexers, we have found before, are women; the present membership of the Society of Indexers is 65% women (580 out of 891 members). The findings of this survey, however, which gives an overall picture of the British publishing industry three years ago, and includes a chapter on freelances, should interest all indexers.

The survey was based on a postal questionnaire and interviews covering UK publishing companies in 1987. There were found to be 786 companies, with an annual turnover of £1.6 bn, employing a total estimated 14,000–30,000 people; 17% of them in the editorial departments that are indexers' chief concern. 21% of the women employed in publishing worked in these departments; but 'Men are most likely to be commissioning editors; women are more likely to predominate in copy-editing departments'. The average annual salary in publishing was £11,000; women's average was £9,500; yet, 'Women working in publishing earn more than the national average; men earn less'. 'Women are under-represented in the top tiers of publishing. Men are more than twice as likely to become managers, and more than five times as likely to become a company board director.'

It is not likely that any reader is surprised by these findings. As in the article surveying the Wheatley Medal in this issue, women come second throughout publishing (and indeed life). The report goes on to deal with feminist issues such as maternity leave, child care, family responsibilities, Equal Opportunities policies. The chapter of most immediate concern to our readers is that on freelances—although indexing is in fact hardly noticed in it. Thus, the introduction tells us, 'Publishing is an industry which employs freelances in areas such as editorial consultancy, copy editing, book design, illustration and sales'—not a word of indexing. 'The majority of freelances are women', we learn, and they cost, according to the National Union of Journalists (NUJ), 50% less to employ than in-house employees. The disadvantages and advantages of the freelance life are considered: 'At its best [it] conjures up the image of an independent professional with a skill to sell, enjoying creative control, a variety of work, flexible hours and the ability to command high rates of pay. ... At its worst [it] may be seen as yet another form of homework ... working for low wages, excluded from employment benefits, and with limited control over the nature and flow of work available'. Disadvantages listed included long and erratic hours, financial insecurity, delays in payment, scheduling difficulties, lack of career development. Access to training for the freelance is seen as a particular problem: they are not eligible to attend company training courses, and programmes run by other agencies are costly—while more sophisticated demands are increasingly being made of workers in publishing, and constant updating of skills is needed as technology advances.

The freelances responding to the survey worked predominantly in editorial (women 82%; men 77%). Their education level was higher than that of the labour force as a whole, 88% of the women holding degrees.

Rates of pay for 1987 are told thus: 'fairly low for freelances, the average rate for men and women lying between £7.00 and £9.00 an hour. The lowest rates quoted were £4.50 an hour for proof reading or translation, while designers, illustrators and writers were aware they could make up to £40.00 an hour if working for the advertising and other media industries.' Indexing still invisible here! Later, however, comes: 'Women freelances earned £207 a week on average, compared to £320 earned on average by the men. This variation may be accounted for by the low pay women earned on tasks such as indexing, proof reading and translation.' A footnote to the chapter adds, 'The NUJ Book Freelance Register records the minimum hourly rates recommended by the NUJ in 1988: simple indexing and proof-reading should be paid no less than £8.00 an hour; copy-editing, collating, checking and indexing no less than £9.00; and sub-editing and rewriting no less than £10.00. Freelance rates have been increased by 6% for 1989.' (For comparison: the Society of Indexers' recommended minimum rate for indexing was £6.00 per hour from June 1986–June 1987, rising to £6.75 per hour from June 1987–June 1988; £7.50 per hour June 1988–June 1989; £8.00 June 1989–June 1990; then £9.00.)
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The final subheading in this chapter is 'Lack of respect and recognition shown to freelance skills'. The report itself shows this lack entirely in regard to indexing; it speaks much of sexism and ageism, but practises indexism: not citing indexing as a major freelance option, despite the number of our practising members, the majority of whom are working as freelances for publishers; nor holding it to merit a higher pay level than the lowest. Indexers, as a subgroup of a subgroup (freelances) of a subgroup (women) in publishing, appear here as the third world of the industry, a marginalized body, rather than merely on 'the dusty fringes of the academic world' to which Barbara Pym relegated us.

If our kind so neglect us, our professional striving for proper training, qualification, rates of pay, and regard, must clearly be intensified. This issue of The Indexer includes surveys by Elizabeth Wallis and Nancy Mulvany of publishing in the UK and US respectively as it is likely to develop in the 1990s. Both anticipate a far higher profile and status for indexers than this WIP report suggests. Let us trust, and strive, that it may be so.

References

2. She who must be an indexer. The Indexer 16 (3) April 1989, 192–3.

Coming events

1990

31 Oct.–1 Nov. Text retrieval '90, Bloomsbury Crest Hotel, London. Institute of Information Scientists’ conference on the state-of-the-art of text management, and Software Update demonstrations. Details from IIS, 44–45 Museum Street, London WC1A 1LY.

1 Nov. Indexes and Indexers in art gallery work. Talk by the Keeper of Dulwich Picture Gallery: Society of Indexers members’ meeting. 6–8 pm. The Library Association, 7 Ridgmount Street, London WC1.

4–8 Nov. 53rd ASIS Annual meeting. 'Information in the year 2000: from research to applications'. Toronto, Canada. Details from ASIS, 1424 16th St. NW, Washington DC 20036, USA.


8 Nov. Society of Indexers’ Annual General Meeting. 6–8 pm, Library Association, as above.


Details from Blenheim Online Ltd, Blenheim House, Ash Hill Drive, Pinner HA5 2AE


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1 Feb. NFAIS course, 'Hiring, training and retaining indexers'. Southern California. Details as above.

18 Feb. Congress for Librarians: ‘Cataloging heresy: Challenging the standard bibliographic product'. St. John's University, Jamaica, NY, USA. Details from Dr Bella Hass Weinberg, Div of Lib and Inf Science, St. John’s University, Jamaica, New York 11439, USA. Tel. (718) 990-6200.

25–28 Feb. NFAIS annual conference. 'The information puzzle: putting the pieces together'. Washington DC, USA. Details from NFAIS as above.