

Bias in indexing and loaded language

Hazel K. Bell

Indicates the betrayal of subjective opinion in indexing in five classes: reinforcement of the opinions of the author; deliberate interpolation of the attitudes of the indexer; rigid classification systems imposing assumptions; the selection of terminology implying attitudes; and suppression of ideas from the text in the index. Most important and pervasive is the selection and limitation of language.

We may hope that our work is purely objective, freed by our professional integrity and the standardization of terms from the introduction or promotion of our own values in an index. I hope to show that there have in fact been bias and prejudice in indexing ever since William Prynne was pilloried, fined £5,000 and lost his ears for scurrilous denunciation of actresses in his index to *Histrio-mastix* of 1633, and Lord Macaulay, who 'knew an author's own words might be turned against himself . . . wrote to his publishers, "Let no damned Tory make the index to my History" '.

Bias and subjectivity in indexes seem to arise from five possible sources.

Authorial attitudes

First, strong opinions may feature in the author's actual text, and be lovingly reflected or reinforced in the index—particularly if this is compiled by the author, who seizes the opportunity to further his cause. Hill Burton, in *The Book Hunter*, states plainly that a controversialist, 'after exhausting his weapons of attack in the preface, and in the body of the book, if he is very skilful may let fly a few Parthian arrows from the Index'. And a character in Kurt Vonnegut's novel, *Cat's cradle*, declares, 'It's a revealing thing, an author's index of his own work'.

A. P. Herbert, in the index to his own *Bardot M.P.? and other misleading cases* (Methuen, 1964) enthusiastically trumpets:

Authors:

barbarously used in life; in death
generous natures abused
get nothing out of Arts Council
sacrificed to Privileged Libraries

We do not know who indexed the Introduction to

Text of the paper presented at the Society of Indexers' conference, Edinburgh, 7 April 1990.

Shaw's collected *Prefaces*, published by Constable in 1934, but deeply suspect the hand of GBS. The style and assertions are deliberately and familiarly provocative, and the length at which Shaw's favourite ideas are redeployed in the index is gleefully disproportionate to the number of page references, as witness:

Bible . . . as we cannot get rid of the Bible, it will get rid of us unless we learn to read it 'in the proper spirit', 616; . . . why not bring it down to the ground, and take it for what it really is? 615; . . . Morals, are like teeth: the more decayed they are the more it hurts to touch them 434

No prizes for guessing the attitude to Ronald Reagan promulgated in *The clothes have no emperor: a chronicle of the Reagan years* from a small selection of its 140 or so index subheads under REAGAN, RONALD WILSON:¹

blames Carter; blames Congress; blames the media; blames miscellaneous others; cancerous pimple called 'friend' by; challenge to accuracy of; confusion admitted by; correction issued by or on behalf of; cues taken by; detachment from reality imputed to; disbelief by public of; gloating by enemies of; improbable letters of support cited by; inability to answer questions of; macho bluster of; memory failures of; misidentification problems of; misstatements by; mistakes admitted and not admitted by; provokes unintended laughter; unawareness of; the waking or non-waking of

'No author is more in love with his subject than an autobiographer', suggests Craig Brown.² This is how the 17th-century lawyer, Roger North, in his own history of his family, *The lives of the Norths*, indicates the text under the heading NORTH, FRANCIS:

Mr North modest to a weakness; His skill in the law inferior to none; never guilty of an error to his disadvantage; General scholar and virtuoso . . . His inclinations always to loyalty; Never retrograde; Allowed to be a good judge even by his enemies; His affability and patience

We may perhaps call this an example of *indexing, all in the family*.

A fictitious example of autobiographical prejudice is offered by Robertson Davies, one of whose characters in *The world of wonders* (Macmillan of Canada, 1975) tells an enemy, 'When your autobiography comes out I shall look for myself in the Index under S and C "Squirts I have known, Mungo Fetch", and "Climbers I have encountered, Fetch, M."'.

The feminist Dale Spender quite deliberately undertook to 'work out a new conceptualisation' in the index for her own *Women of ideas*, on the grounds that 'conventional indexes make women's experience and priorities invisible'. She claimed, in a letter to her sister:

We have some superb categories . . . We have fiddled with some of the patriarchal assumptions—the heading 'Economics' is immediately followed by 'Female, (sexual economics)' and contains the subheadings 'Failure to get a man, lucky to get a man, trading one's person (marriage and prostitution)'. The final sub-heading is 'Economics, male'. How do you like that? Women will not have seen their view of the world displayed so explicitly before and I hope it gives validation to women's experience.³

More examples of this consciously provocative and partisan indexing can be found in *The Indexer* of April 1987.⁴ I would regard it as good fighting feminism but bad biased indexing.

Intrusive indexers

My second class of bias in indexing is that deliberately introduced by the indexer, presumably unwarranted, and certainly to be condemned. The indexer can chiefly intrude his own prejudices in the degree of detail and amount of space accorded different characters in the index. A favourite, or one found by the indexer particularly interesting, may have every minor entry elaborated with glowing, verbose subheadings; while those not enjoying favour in the indexer's sight are dismissed merely with a string of undifferentiated page references, the less important perhaps omitted altogether. One criterion of good indexing is that the weight of importance given topics in the index should correspond to that of the text.

We must resist temptation to make jocular insertions indicating our value-judgments: most unprofessional, of course. Into this category comes the famous line interpolated by the indexer-daughter of the author of *Nelson's textbook of pediatrics*, 'Birds, for the, Pages 1–1413', retained knowingly through a dozen reprintings.⁵ Author-publisher Hunter Davies writes of inserting into the index of his own *Guide to the Lake District*, after Dove Cottage and Duddon, 'Dump—see Barrow'.

I found an extraordinary example of an indexer trumpeting ideas not in accordance with the text in the

original version of a sociological book whose index I was revising for the second edition.⁶ The text was liberal in outlook and critical of government policy, but outdone entirely in attitudes derogatory to the establishment by the index, which seemed quite unbalanced. Two particular entries showed subheadings selected with most unprofessional relish:

Home Office: defence of use of drugs; judgment against in European Court of Human Rights; 'lack of leadership'; 'out of touch'; and prison department; refusal to transfer Irish prisoners to Northern Ireland; secrecy and misinformation Stangeways prison; military training of officers; National Front membership of officers; overcrowding; study facilities lacking

I substituted less judgmental terms, leaving the text to make its own political points:

Home Office, in prison system: and Board of Visitors; dismisses visitor; and drugs in prisons; and Human Rights Court; and information; and Irish prisoners; and medical service; and Open University Strangeways prison: officers; overcrowding; study facilities

What bias on the indexer's part can have led to this extraordinary discrimination against the Archbishop of York (John Habgood), and the Bishops of Chester (Michael Baughen) and Durham (David Jenkins), in these entries in the index to *Our God reigns?*⁷

Baughen, Michael
Gloucester, Bishop of
Habgood, John
Jenkins, David
Manchester, Bishop of
Philadelphia, Cardinal Archbishop of
Ripon, Bishop of
Runcie, Dr Robert, Archbishop of Canterbury
Salisbury, Bishop of
Whitby, Bishop of

Imposition by classification

The two types of bias described above are introduced deliberately in accordance with the opinions of the author or indexer. A third sort seems to me to be imposed by the use of standardized terminology, thesauri or subject structures, by which subjects are assigned to predetermined headings, rather than new, specific ones being devised. An official publication that I used to index had a rigid classification scheme, with almost Orwellian overtones. Anything to do with warfare or weaponry had to go under either ARMS CONTROL OR DEFENCE ('Peace, Ministry of?'); radiation under the single heading, ENVIRONMENT AND POLLUTION CONTROL; AIDS under HEALTH. Less idealistic seemed the conjunction of ideas in one group heading, RACE RELATIONS AND IMMIGRATION. Passport regulations and statistics belonged together with control of race riots; a causal connection implied in the index rather than in the text.

It is even suggested in Iris Murdoch's novel of 1954, *Under the net* (Chatto & Windus) that too broad generalization must be essentially untruthful:

It was as if his very mode of being revealed to me how hopelessly my own vision of the world was blurred by generality . . . Hugo noticed only details. He never classified. It was as if his vision were sharpened to the point where even classification was impossible, for each thing was seen as absolutely unique. I had the feeling that I was meeting for the first time an almost completely truthful man . . .

Linguistic limitation

Social embarrassments

The fourth class of bias in indexing causes the greatest difficulty, and is encountered in narrative, humanities indexing rather than technical. It is a question of the terminology available to describe human life and relationships: the limitations of the ideas that can be expressed, particularly as our language evolves more slowly than society changes. A number of terms I have felt the need of when indexing are simply lacking. Social problems are exposed occasionally in the media, as parents wonder how to refer to or introduce the non-married life and love partners of their children. With modern biographies, more and more one requires such terms for glosses in the index. So easy to explain, (wife of MC), (second wife of MC), or to provide subheadings, 'marries BB', 'marries CC', 'marriage', 'relations with wife'. When the ceremonies have been omitted, what terms do we use? Ours not to censor or condemn, but (first mistress), (second mistress), (women seduced by), may appear the only accurate terms available. When women are referred to only by their forenames in the book, as recurrent background figures, we may well want to include them in the index, but must either demand the surnames from the author—these having presumably been deliberately withheld, so unlikely to be divulged for indexing purposes—or, if indexing them just as 'Jane', 'Mary', we do need explanatory glosses—and all we can put is (mistress of MC). And how should we describe forename-only women who are not even long or stable enough relationships to use 'mistress'—may we use 'Michael's girl'? Or girl-friend? One-night stand? We also need a term for a subheading to go chronologically between 'meets MC' and 'marriage to MC'—'courtship' is obsolete—what has succeeded it? 'Pre-engagement'? 'Acquaintance blossoms'?

We lack, too, a term for the mothers of the children of unmarried men. In a recent biography I indexed, the eldest son of the main character died in his thirties, unmarried, father in quick succession of two small children of different mothers. The text dealt with this with loving acceptance. The surname of neither woman was given, and the whole section made one complete

page. As I could not enter unknown surnames in the index, I put the women under 'Jane' and 'Mary', and needed an explanatory gloss—which was bound to appear censorious, because of the connotations of the language available. Under the long entry for the son himself, the problem was worse; a subheading was needed to distinguish this page from the rest of his references. It would have been easier if there had been longer, separate sections for each woman; then the subheadings might have been, 'relationship with Jane; relationship with Mary'. But the two were interwoven, so I needed a general term covering both—not an easy plural. Equally important in the passage were the two resulting children. After rejecting 'Illegitimate children'—accurate but not value-free—and 'Mistresses and children', I entered 'Women and children' as a subheading; neither elegant nor precise, but the best I could devise. Authors can be tentative, discreet, accepting and tactful—how can indexers? We may not intend to show disapproval or disparagement, but cannot maintain neutrality in the absence of non-evaluative language.

Group identification

Some groups are now insisting on their right to self-identification by a name of their own devising to replace that accorded them by the public: 'gays' rather than the traditional 'homosexuals', for example. Sufferers from AIDS are currently objecting to being called 'AIDS victims', wanting fuller descriptions. Disability-related organizations differentiate between the terms 'disabled' and 'handicapped', and may seek to distinguish them in text and index—but a general reader consulting the index may not be aware of the precise distinction used. It may be left to the indexer to determine which is which, in some passages. Some of these groups insist on being called 'people with disabilities'—but surely would never be sought under P? If they are entered there, as wished, with a cross-reference from D, then logically, all types of people in the book should go under P with cross-references. In the index, we cannot use the subtle, probably lengthy, desired term, because we are seeking the most concise ones and the ones most likely to be sought by readers—different criteria from those of the author, and, maybe, of the subject of the text.

Political implication

Loaded language is equally difficult to deal with in political or sociological—even historical—texts. The choice of term may imply judgment between alternative principles or policies. Do we write of Vietnamese refugees or boat people? Terrorists or freedom fighters? Possible choices may forfeit neutrality. Does one refer to race riots thus, or as street violence, or how? References in them to the—demonstrators? protestors? rioters? crowd? mob? hooligans?—and the forces of control can betray allegiance and allot approval or condemnation.

One term must be chosen, and none is value-free. The pen is mightier than the sword—and the 5 × 3" than the pen?

Telling subheadings

Terms used in main headings usually can simply follow the text, being picked out and copied exactly. It is in the summaries provided by the indexer in subheadings, perhaps chiefly in narrative indexing, that we must provide our own terms; and it is here that bias shows. Who records writes history; minuting is power, providing the version of events that will be recalled and accepted: and the wording of subheadings is likely to be original, giving our own interpretation of the text rather than quoting from it; indexer becomes author, and our terminology indicates our assumptions. I find all the main problems of indexing to arise from subheadings, which we must devise, rather than main headings, which we merely have to arrange—a technical matter. *Let me put it this way . . .*, we insinuate in our subheadings.

The index to Elizabeth Longford's 1976 biography, *Byron*, holds a nicely contrasting pair of subheadings conveying point of view. Under Byron, George Gordon, 6th Lord, we find 'his courtship and marriage, 60-79'; while under 'Byron, Annabella, *née* Milbanke, wife of B', part of that passage is indicated by 'vicissitudes of her marriage, 71-7'—a term not occurring during those seven pages.

Assumptions are also made about our readership in our choice of language: ornithology or bird-watching; german measles or rubella. Our ideas of the level of age, intelligence, and education of the readers are betrayed by such choices.

Sexism

The most usual problem of linguistic restraint and control, patriarchal sexism (as in 'The author should contact his indexer') I have never found a problem in indexing: our staccato telegraphese does not admit the use of pronouns. Feminism must intrude, though, in the decision as to how to index women who have been married—is our true name/identity the one we grew up with, or the one assumed on marriage? The relinquishment of the original name does give rise to strong feminist issues. Standardizing practice, so that either *all* women must be under maiden name or *all* under married, seems to give precedence to status over individuality. With a run of three or so women of the same surname, it seems helpful to indicate which started life with that name, which assumed it by marriage; yet the suffixes, Miss, Mrs, or gloss (wife of X), are sometimes seen as belittling. *Née* Smith may be quite superfluous information, if Smith does not occur in the book, and may even need special research to determine. It does seem that marital status needs indication—*Ms* will never do in an index.

Suppressio veri

In the case described above, indexing the family with unnamed mistresses and illegitimate grandchildren, I sent the index to the publisher with a letter explaining all these problems and the solutions I had tried; the various ladies listed by forename only with glosses, (mistress of XX), and the subheads of the son, asking that the author should be consulted about them. I heard no more; but when the book was published I saw that a sweeping, simple solution had been imposed—all the surname-lacking women were omitted from the index, and the difficult page in the son's entry was subsumed in the simple subhead, 'adult'. Do we regard this as justified censorship?

Suppression of textual matter in the index is a fifth form of bias. It may arise inadvertently, from too little space being accorded the index, so that selection for inclusion must be over-rigorous. It may be benign, due to tact and delicacy, as in the case above, or as when one author struck out subheads from an index of mine referring to some folly on the part of his colleagues, telling me it was bad enough to have exposed it once, in the text, without drawing further attention to it! Or the fear of libel may cause us not to repeat in the index possibly actionable matter in the text. We may be legally liable for repeating libellous assertions from the text—even unknowingly and in good faith—or just for indicating where scurrilous allegations are to be found: we are messengers, and may be duly shot.

A Canadian indexer, Eve Gardner, reported disturbingly in the *IASC Bulletin* of November 1989:

A publisher refused to accept an entry for 'Opium' in a social studies book that dealt with the 19th-century opium trade in China. The draft index was returned with the heading crossed out in red pencil. . . . The publisher subsequently stated that opium should not be referenced in the index because 'it would just get the kids excited'. The subject was handled very well in the text and at some length; but the publisher insisted and the heading was removed.

This is surely a very serious example of bias—strict censorship—imposed on an index, separately from the text, and not by the author nor indexer. Let us hope it is rare. It involves another issue currently concerning us—whether we hold the copyright to our own indexes, and enjoy the 'moral right' accorded to authors, not to have their work detrimentally tampered with according to the bias of a third party.

Conclusions

Of these five types of bias, the deliberate ones are of course the easiest to recognize and deal with. It is the inadvertent suggestion of assumptions by classification systems or restricted terminology that seem to me the most insidious, difficult to avoid, even perhaps to recognize.

Linguistic limitation can best be combatted by deploying the widest, most sensitive vocabulary, and I would suggest dictionaries and *Roget's thesaurus* as the most essential reference books for narrative indexers, to seek out the most precise terms and be aware of all their implications. I use thesauri of vocabulary only to find what terms are available; never to know what are preferred by compilers who have not read the book I am working on—I prefer my own terms.

Indexers should certainly strive to maintain a fine impartiality. We can ensure that we allot space and emphasis in the index strictly in proportion to the importance accorded to topics in the text, and eschew introducing fresh matter expressing our own opinions. Our job is to indicate where in the text opinions are to be found, not to reiterate, reinforce or oppose them.

Like the soul in Tennyson's 'Palace of Art', we must
 . . . sit as God,
 Holding no form of creed but contemplating all.

We cannot, though, compose our indexes of the

neutral, nonjudgmental terms necessary for true impartiality, if, in the language which must be our medium, these do not exist.

References

1. Slansky, Paul. *The clothes have no emperor: a chronicle of the Reagan years*. Fireside Books, 1989.
2. See Brown, Craig. My oh my back pages. *Times Saturday Review*, 28 July 1990.
3. Spender, Dale and Lynne. *Scribbling sisters*. Camden Press, 1986.
4. See Sisterly indexing. *The Indexer* 15 (3) April 1987, 167.
5. See Have you heard the one about . . . *The Indexer* 14 (1) April 1984, 77.
6. Fitzgerald & Sim. *British prisons*. Blackwell, 2nd ed., 1982.
7. Highton, Tony. *Our God reigns*. Hodder & Stoughton, 1988.

Hazel Bell is a freelance indexer specializing in biographies, and editor of The Indexer.

To the manna born?

One possible purpose of an index is to arouse interest in the text of the book itself. Certainly, some of the entries in the index to *The manna machine* by George Sassoon and Rodney Dale (Sidgwick & Jackson, 1978) are as intriguing (not to say 'mouth-watering') as the title itself and arouse curiosity as to what unusual information they may be directing us to.

There is, for example, the frequent use of the 'equals' sign, apparently drawing attention to a number of synonymous terms. (This, presumably, is what the introductory note means by the rather cryptic statement that 'many of the identities given in the text are collated in this index'.) 'Heaven = sky' seems straightforward enough; but the significance of many of the others lies well beyond my powers of surmise. What *can* be the significance of 'Ancient = transportable' or 'Anger = nose'—or, still more intriguing, 'Beauty = sewer-together' [an unfortunate ambiguity here, at the very least], or 'Days of old = 13th part of beard'?

There is even an occasional triple equation, such as: 'High priest, breastplate of = radio = *The Oracle*'. And with 'Leviathan = Lord's spacecraft' we seem to be getting into the realms of SF (with more of the F than the S, perhaps). 'Angels . . . explain radio' could belong to a similar realm of fantasy; whereas 'Electrolux principle' seems to introduce a more sordidly commercial touch and arouses a suspicion that this index may have been sponsored. (Now *that's* a thought. Shouldn't we be

exploring the possibility of commercially sponsored book indexes? Will the Editor offer a prize for the best suggestion of an appropriate sponsor for this year's winner of the Wheatley Medal? Or would that turn indexing into more of a sport than an art-form? But I digress.)

It is clear enough from the index that the book has a bizarre theme and is concerned with the Kabbalah and Freemasonry and suchlike matters. To that extent the indexer fails completely in my case to make me want to read the book; but then, I'm the kind of person who is quite impervious to even a modicum of the esoteric. It is arguable that the authors seem to be quite out of touch with the real world as most of us encounter it. But there is one entry at least which suggests otherwise. Indeed, having bridged the yawning gap between the Exodus and the world of telecommunications, the indexer seems to issue a solemn warning, applicable especially to the computer enthusiasts among us:

Moses . . .
 communicates by radio 220
 punishes machine worshippers 200

Back to your shoeboxes, slaves of the midnight oil, before divine retribution befalls you in the form of a plague of viruses.

JOHN A. VICKERS