Self-indexing

T. P. Hutchinson

I am one of those miscreant authors who indexes his own books. Professional indexers are presumably keenly interested in what they have to do to persuade the likes of me to use their services, and I offer here a few observations. Relevant background is that my books are academic works aimed at postgraduates and specialist practitioners; and that I publish them myself. (My books are listed as references 1–3, and the article that prompted this note is reference 4.)

Why?

Here I give my reasons for doing the indexing myself. Some of them could be overcome by the indexing profession. The most difficult would be No. 6.

1. I don’t know how to find a professional indexer. I work in a university, where presumably there is a high concentration of authors, yet no advertising from individual indexers or their society has impacted upon me. If you want to sell your services, you must get such basic information as your phone number, what you offer, and what you charge, over to the potential customer.

2. I don’t know more general things about the indexer’s craft. Importantly, I believe that it is difficult even for a specialist in, say, the indexing of mathematics books, to get to know how my particular sub-topic is organized and how the specialists think about it; and that consequently I would either have to spend considerable time educating the indexer, or accept an index with visible (to me) deficiencies. If I am wrong in this belief, I need to be informed otherwise.

3. Then there are such questions as: (a) What are the general rates of pay of indexers? (b) How quickly do they work? (c) Is it necessary to make arrangements months, or only hours, in advance? (d) Can they work from a draft of the book (to lessen the time from completion of the book to completion of the index)? and, (e) Can they use the same word-processor as I am using?

4. The professional indexer may do a poor job, judging by indexes in books from reputable publishers, and I fear it is just the luck of the draw whether the indexer I contact is competent or not. When you read a review that criticizes the book’s index: (a) you could lobby the publisher to employ a professional in future; and, (b) if you can discover the identity of the indexer, and that he/she was not a member of the Society of Indexers, you could write to the journal pointing this out.

5. Money is important if the indexer is going to do only a marginally satisfactory job, but is not a prime factor otherwise. Printing, advertising and postage are the big bills, and I imagine an indexer’s fee would be only a fraction of any of these.

6. I think I may improve the book by doing the indexing myself. (a) I may notice duplication, inconsistency, or other mistakes. (b) I may make new mental connections between different parts of the subject, which I can then incorporate in the text.

My method of working

Piggott’s evidence about how amateur indexers work was only anecdotal, so perhaps what I do may also be of some interest. Relevant background is that my books are highly structured, with subsections within sections within chapters, and with tables and figures; that I include at the front of them a list of chapters and (separately) a detailed list of contents; that the references are in a single list, with the location(s) where each is cited appended to it, so there is no need for authors to be included in the index; that index entries refer to sub-section, not to page; and that I include some explanation about the index at its start (in particular, mentioning major headings under which many others are included as subentries).

I make a list of the important words and phrases from thinking about the subject and from reading the meatiest chapter of the book. I check indexes of one or two other books on the subject for more ideas. I make decisions about what words to standardize on, and try to think of alternatives to use as cross-references. Throughout, I try to place myself mentally in the position of someone consulting (not necessarily reading) the book. I make decisions about how to subdivide the larger concepts. A special feature of indexing my reference 1, which deals with road accident data from many countries, was to include virtually all the countries of the world in the index; for countries I knew a lot about, such as Great Britain and Australia, there are many subentries, but for many countries (especially the less-developed) the only entry is for one piece of information in one table of data. Then I start the indexing, beginning with one of the most important chapters, adding entries and subentries to the index as necessary. Occasionally, I index a phrase because it is out-of-the-ordinary, and I feel it might lodge in a reader’s mind, not because of its intrinsic importance. The most convenient way of working, I find, is to have a current copy of the index printed with many spaces between the entries, and to handwrite in the locations of occurrence as I come across them and also handwrite in new index entries, then when convenient update the stored index and print it again with many spaces, make handwritten additions and changes to this, and so on. In the final version, entries are in bold type, subentries are indented and in roman, and sub-subentries are doubly indented and in italics.
The result

In advertising my books, I make a point of mentioning the index and how long it is (as a rough proxy for its usefulness). As to what others think of it, I offer the evidence below.

Seven reviewers of reference 1 have referred to the index. They said, 'the index is excellent and complete, and not rendered difficult or time-consuming by the all too frequent error of avoiding redundancy and repetition'; 'well referenced and well indexed'; 'has an extensive index with some 2000 entries'; 'there is a comprehensive index'; 'the "Index" section of the book is comprehensive'; 'an excellent index'; and 'it is very difficult to find anything specific in the book' (but this criticism was merely that the index refers to subsections of the book, rather than pages).

Four reviewers of reference 2 have referred to the index. They said, 'the index is complete and detailed'; 'there is . . . a reasonably detailed index'; 'the authors have tried hard to produce a good seven-page index'; and (a goal for the opposition this, though the reviewer may have omitted to read the explanation at the start of the index), 'I found the index somewhat frustrating'. [See page 126—Ed.]

I know of no reviews of reference 3 as yet.

References


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Clans keep computer guessing

The Scottish Crofters Union is appealing to members to give more than just their surname as identification when renewing their annual subscriptions. With so many crofters named either MacLeod, MacDonald, MacKenzie, MacLean or Campbell, the union’s new computerized register is baffled when it receives a cheque with just a surname and an initial.

The problem will be familiar to anyone trying to contact a MacLeod, Campbell or MacDonald in the Highlands and Islands—there are simply too many people with the same name. The union’s membership includes 435 MacLeods and 430 MacDonalds and the regional telephone book contains thousands.

Fiona Mandeville, the union’s administrator, said that later in the year things would get worse because the computer, unable to identify, for example, which Donald MacLeod has paid up, would confuse the payers with non-payers among its 4,500 members.

Accurate identification in northwest Scotland has been largely by the use of nicknames. For example, the late Scottish television presenter Donnie B. MacLeod did not have a name beginning with B. This was imposed on him at school for identification purposes and stuck throughout his life.

In the north of Lewis telephone book compilers recently decided that the only way to clarify identification was to carry everyone’s nickname.

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Protecting valuable volumes

In The Independent in May 1992, Miles Kington recalled attending a conference on information retrieval in a hotel near Birmingham. Its library shelves held ‘miles and miles of old books’, ‘beautifully bound’. However, when he attempted to inspect them, he found ‘They could not be removed. Someone had drilled a hole through the middle of all the books, back to front, and threaded them on long metal rods, then jammed them for all time in the “library”’. Kington comments—more mildly than most—‘A strange thing to find at a meeting on information retrieval.’