Multi-volume indexing of an economics series

Gary Hall

Indexing a multi-volume work poses particular problems that go beyond those met in smaller works. This article considers problems of pricing, the submission of estimates, and timing in this context, and the special problems caused by the size of the task.

In May 1990 I was approached to give an estimate for an index to a set of books on economics. The series, *Schools of thought in economics*, had already been published, and now the publisher wanted subject and name indexes to fill a separate volume. I began the work in May 1991 and finished in February 1992.

I do not intend to explain how to index a set of books, but I shall deal with two topics which I feel are important to indexes of this size.

The brief

*Schools of thought in economics* is a set of 11 titles, each of a separate school. Since most of its titles are multi-volume, it came altogether to 23 volumes. The series is really a compilation of articles from the academic literature, still in their original typesetting and pagination, with new pagination added. There were 489 articles, making 9,461 pages. The task was to index them all and add volume codes to precede the page numbers for each volume. These codes looked like MX-I, MX-II, etc for Marxian economics, IN-I, etc for Institutional economics, and so on. In the final printed form, these codes would be in bold. The rubric for the index volume explains the codes.

After a trial indexing of an article or two, and a close look at one whole volume, the editor and I decided to aim for a subject index of 20,000 entries plus/minus 10%. This is actually not a high figure for such a mass of material. It comes out at 2.11 entries per page.

I decided to prepare a submission which would lead to a contract.

The contract

In preparing the submission, there were three elements to be considered and reconciled: price, time, payment schedule. I will look at them one at a time.

Price

Price is clearly the most important. How do you set a price when looking at such a mass of material? I decided to try to analyse it by article. Each article averaged 19.3 pages, including appendices, notes and bibliography, leaving about 16 pages of text.

The formula went thus:

- read and mark up one article: 60 mins
- feed into computer: 12 mins
- edit (after all 23 done): 10 mins

Total: 82 mins

(one minute per article makes over 8 hours)

This sum of 82 mins per article comes to 668 hours' work and, at £9.00 per hour (1991 rates), to £6,012. I felt justified in adding a sum for margin of error and for unexpected problems and delays, and rounded the price up to £6,500. In a submission for an index of this scale, no publisher should quibble when you add a reasonable risk factor to any large job. Mine was in the order of about 8%.

Before submitting this figure, I did a bit of 'reverse engineering' on it. Allow for an index of 20,000 entries, for £6,500. This works out to 32.5 p per entry. I normally earn about 26-28 p per entry on economics and related subjects (not that I charge that way, for editors don't like it much, but that is what it often comes out to). I felt that 32.5 p allowed a reasonable safety margin.

After all work was done, I checked on my hourly earnings, having kept track of my time. I actually worked 664 hours, thereby earning £9.79 per hour. I hadn't needed the margin of error, but I do not feel that I overcharged the publisher. I think it was a fair price for the job.

Time

The timing for the job took careful consideration. I recall discussing compilation indexes with Anne McCarthy, who pointed out that you run a risk of cutting yourself off from your regular bread-and-butter editors. I was determined to avoid this. If I had worked a steady 30-hour indexing week, I could have done this index in 6 months. I asked the publisher for 9 months. In this way I could accept some of the indexes that would normally have come my way, and thus keep in touch with those editors who were used to me saying 'yes'. The editor accepted this arrangement, and in fact, they gave me 10 months. The
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actual formula was nine months for building the 23 indexes and one month for the reconciliation and editing.

Payment schedule

The payment schedule was a problem. Taking 10 months over an index is one thing—not getting paid for 10 months is quite another. I initially asked for three payments—after three, six, and nine months, of one third each. The publisher offered a quarter payment after three, six, nine, and 10 months, provided that I submitted rough drafts of seven indexes after three months, and eight after six and nine months. I agreed to these conditions, especially the submission of rough drafts of indexes. The publisher wanted to avoid my running along for something like seven of seven indexes after three months, and eight after six and nine months. The publisher offered a quarter payment after three, six, nine, and 10 months, provided that I submitted rough drafts of seven indexes after three months, and eight after six and nine months. I agreed to these conditions, especially the submission of rough drafts of indexes. The publisher wanted to avoid my running along for something like seven months, then phoning him to say, 'we have a problem: I still have 11 volumes to do'. This condition gave me the incentive to get the individual indexes done to a schedule that the publisher and I could both accept.

In the event, I got it wrong. Waiting for three months for a cheque for the quarter payment of £6500 meant dipping in and out of overdraft. In any future contract of this kind I would either add the likelihood of overdraft interest payments to my submission, or insist on a monthly payment.

Technical aspects

There was another point in my submission. I asked to be allowed to go directly to the type-setter to discuss technical matters. Since the index was to be supplied on disk as well as in hard copy, it was important to resolve any technical hitches early on.

Scale and its problems

This index was like any other economics index, with one difference—scale. In this work, the size of the index became the starting point for questions of style.

Few of the points which follow occurred to me before I started indexing the series. Most emerged as I worked my way through the 23 volumes; some ideas emerged rather later than I would have wished.

The end-user

Who would buy Schools of thought in economics? All 23 volumes, plus the index? Clearly not an individual; only the library of a university, polytechnic, college; occasionally a single department of economics. Where would the volumes be? How could a reader browse among the volumes where access is most probably restricted? What do these conditions imply for index style? Putting myself in the mind of the reader, I felt that as few volumes as possible should be in a single reference. The rough rule was, one volume, one entry—unless there were no way to distinguish the material on a given subject in one volume from that in another.

I ended up with an index that had to go to five levels of entry (i.e., sub-sub-sub-sub-entries). This was a deeper level than the editor originally wanted, but I managed to convince her of its necessity, if people were not to have to take out three or four volumes from the library when a single volume was what they really needed.

Length

In creating sub- and lower-level entries, rather long descriptors were used, unless a short descriptor was totally unambiguous. This resulted in an index of 20,720 entries running to nearly 32,000 lines. But it gives the reader better information about what is in each volume in any one subject than would be the case with terse entries, and I felt this was a valid strategy for the index to adopt.

Main entry sets

The over-lapping nature of much economics terminological meant that there was a problem of horrendously long main entry sets. For instance, in the first stages of the reconciliation, there were over 230 entries under capital, running to 6 pages. Then there were capitalism and capitalists. Large entry sets existed with highly specific main entries such as capital consumption, capital formation, capital stock, and so on. How to deal with these? The policy I deliberately chose was to use as many main entry variations as possible, and thus to reduce on average the number of sub-entries under any one main entry. I know that this is the opposite strategy of subsuming many related entries under the one main entry, a process which is entirely valid in a single book. Here, with 23 volumes, I decided it was not valid.

Cross-references

In an index of such length, where should the cross-references go? In my view they should be at the top of the list, immediately following the main entry, for the following reasons. A reader goes to a main entry. If an entry is not found in the see also list that immediately follows, it will be included within that main entry. In the see also references, the 'parent' main entry was abbreviated to an emboldened initial. This kept the record length down to manageable proportions.

Spelling

With about 470 different authors, variations in spelling of many terms were inevitable. Such small differences as whether or not to use a hyphen in terms like neo-classical would affect the order of the final result. Authors were mostly American or British, so the obvious differences between American and British spelling also had to be considered. The decision on this point was that, since the publisher was British, the index should use British spelling.

Working order

The 23 volumes were indexed individually without reference to one another. Editing then took place in three stages: volume, title, series. Volume codes were inserted when all 23 were finished in rough. The indexes were then merged into the 11 titles, where wording was checked and
standardized. Finally the 11 titles were merged into one index for full cumulation. The 23 individual indexes produced 20,219 entries. After the final cumulation I had 20,720 entries. Almost all of the additional 500 entries were see also references.

Hardware and software support

The computer used was a Viglen 80286 with one megabyte of memory and a 40-Mb hard disk. This was adequate—just. Many tasks ran very slowly—a full re-sort of the final index took four hours, but could have been speeded up by using a smaller record size.

This work was done with the help of the CINDEX indexing software system, version 5.0. By the time I began the work I had become very familiar with the software, so no additional learning of its potential was needed. Complex editing of related chunks of the index was made easy by working in both sorted and unsorted mode and by using the GROUP command. The ability to maintain abbreviation (key-word) files separate from the main index helped, as did printing portions of the index on the screen to check the appearance of the result. CINDEX's SUBSTITUTE command proved most useful as it allowed me to insert the volume codes quickly, check on entries with improperly placed page references, and add a double hyphen to the page references for the benefit of the typesetter's software. CINDEX provided every feature and technique I needed in this work.

Lessons learned

1. Don't do it again—at least not in a hurry!
2. Take materials and printing time into account on your budget; a printout of this index took nearly eight hours, tying up my computer accordingly. I took to printing draft copies of the index overnight.
3. Payment frequency was wrong. I should have asked for payments every month or every two months. If you have to accept longer periods between payments, build overdraft interest charges into your costs.
4. Standardize the spelling early on. Not just the obvious American-British variants in things like labour, but the permutations on hyphenated or un-hyphenated terms.
5. Build a set of targets into your schedule. Offer to send parts (or books) in draft form at set periods if the publisher doesn't suggest it first. This breaks down the task into more manageable segments.
6. Get approval to talk to the typesetter directly. This avoids a lot of problems, as well as the editor's time and nervous energy. I found that I could work happily with a knowledgeable typesetter and solve most difficulties easily. Make arrangements to send a trial disk to the typesetter, with a few hundred entries, to let him try to match your system.
7. Ask to proofread the index, and budget for this. If an index of this size has your name on it—you'll want it to be the best you can manage.

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Oh dear, what can the matter be this time?

John A. Vickers

And still they come . . . Just when you feel confident of having touched bottom, an even more horrendous example of botched indexing rears its ugly head, prompting a volley of mixed metaphors!

There is a case, in the name of kindly generosity, for quietly letting the weakest go to the wall and die an unnoticed death there. There is, on the other hand, a more Spartan case for deliberately exposing the weak and the deformed in the interests of the species. I would like to find some middle way between these extremes of sentimentality and ruthlessness. But, if pressed, then I have no doubt that the inadequate (and, even more, the downright atrocious) index has to be publicly exposed, though with sympathy where it is due and as much understanding as one can muster of what went wrong and why. Only so can the rot be stopped from spreading and reasonable standards maintained—if not advanced. '(S)he did her/his best' is just not good enough to excuse the inexcusable.

After all, the wisdom of consumerism is more and more widely accepted in an age when quality all too often yields to shoddiness under the influence of market forces (our latest and, it seems, most potent idol). Who (except the perpetrators) would defend turning a blind eye to mechanical defects in an electrical appliance, or to shoddy design work or unskilled maintenance in the case of a car or plane? It is perhaps more than time that literate members of the public (which is more than just a circumlocution for 'readers') had some legal protection against incompetent or irresponsible authors, publishers and (of course) indexers.

But I am preaching . . . and to the converted; and on both counts must waste no more of the editor's space, but come to the real subject—or object—of my righteous indignation!

Amos: Victorian Methodist traveller by John Matthews