Scholarly search for the truth, and problems associated with indexing/abstracting

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Points out the dependence of scholars on accurate and impartial indexing and abstracting, with particular reference to the Guido Riccio controversy in art history studies.

In the midst of the so-called information explosion, scholars would be greatly handicapped in keeping up to date with developments in their fields of study by the lack of a key reference tool; that is, efficient indexing/abstracting services of various kinds. Proficiency in modern scholarly research largely depends upon the ability of indexing/abstracting services to provide increasingly reliable help.

Some comments on problems involving abstracting and indexing are found in recent literature concerning scholarly communication. For example, Marcel LaFollette observes, 'indexing and abstracting services will increasingly face the dilemma of how proactive they should become'.1 At a 1987 ASIS meeting Bella Weinberg considered 'Why indexing fails the researcher'.2

It seems, however, that such problems in scholarly communication derive not only from overloaded, rapidly expanding information systems, but also from censorship and misrepresentation of information already normally covered by current services. Problems in this area might also be characterized as bias in indexing.3 Intner has discussed some aspects in terms of censorship.4 The scholarly literature on academic controversies—particularly of the points of view of scholars who challenge traditionally held beliefs of the establishment—seems to produce some bias and suppression in indexing/abstracting.

The Guido Riccio controversy

An example of such misrepresentation recently occurred in the indexing/abstracting of the literature of a crucial phase of an ongoing debate in art history, 'the Guido Riccio controversy' (described by several writers as 'the case of the century' or the 'enigma' of the century in art history studies).5 The details of how this crucial phase was indexed/abstracted should be of particular interest to specialists in the field of indexing, because the situation relates directly to larger problems of bias and reliable service to scholars.

This case study has an ironic twist. At one stage of the Guido Riccio controversy, the art history indexing/abstracting service RILA provided what seemed to be exemplary proactive coverage that could be taken as a model for other academic disciplines. For example, RILA's handling of the Guido Riccio case during the 1980s could have been a guide for the National Library of Medicine and the Index Medicus and MEDLINE indexing/abstracting services. During the 1980s, in the so-called Cell–Baltimore scandal, some scholars believed they detected serious errors in the Cell article (co-authored by Nobel Prize winner Prof. David Baltimore). Enquiries were made of Donald Lindberg, Director of the National Library of Medicine, including: '... considerable damage might be currently being done, in so far as your MEDLINE, Index Medicus, etc., might be indexing erroneous information contained in a Cell article published by Prof. David Baltimore, among others. Is there any way that you can alert readers of medical literature that there might be a problem here? How much erroneous information might be piling up and spreading within the literature ...? ... If there are errors in the Cell article, will you continue to allow, at this point, these errors to be extended and expanded further throughout the medical literature, piling error on top of error ...? ... I ask you these specific questions based on your own following published ideas: "... We must do what we can to limit the damage of errors in the literature ..."'.6 Years since then, no acknowledgement, much less specific replies to these enquiries, has been received.

In the February 1984 issue of News from RILA (the newsletter of RILA), Alice Wohl, the editor, described the Guido Riccio debate in 'In Siena, an Old Masterpiece challenged, a new one discovered'. She included (or appended) abstracts of many articles and books on the subject, including articles from publications outside the mainstream of art history literature.7 Her coverage regarding indexing/abstracting was

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extensive, and she also suggested that RILA might be called on again to deal with the subject. In 1984 Wohl wrote, ‘...the questions are many, and they are not resolved... The range of issues... engages every aspect of the discipline of art history’.8

The controversy intensified, and RILA continued to give ample coverage, very helpful to scholars. Then, RILA was merged with RAA, a similar abstracting/indexing service in France. The merged organization, under control of the Getty organization, is now called BHA (Bibliography of the history of art). Its indexing/abstracting coverage began on a regular basis in 1989, when the Guido Riccio controversy concentrated on discussion of a very sensitive and upsetting topic. A section of the famous Guido Riccio painting had been destroyed (during restorations of 1980–1), and some considered that this destroyed part of the fresco constituted crucial evidence that can no longer be examined and analyzed.

Discussion of the destroyed part of the painting took place, for the most part, in the prestigious art history journal Burlington Magazine, in the form of letters to the editor in 1987, 1989, and 1991.9 No matter what the subject matter, scholars would naturally expect the published abstract of a scholarly indexing/abstract service to be a quite accurate summary, or indication, of the contents of the item abstracted (book, article, letter, review, etc.). The first of the three letters published in Burlington (March 1987) was accurately described in the RILA abstract (15/1, 1989, n. 1554) as follows: ‘Deplores the destruction of part of the border of the fresco Guidoriccio da Fogliano in the Palazzo Pubblico, Siena, during the 1980–1 restoration. Suggests that the missing area was of the utmost importance for the question of the fresco’s date and authorship. Argues that Simone Martini could not have painted the fresco because the fresco overlaps other marks on the wall which are part of a work postdating Simone Martini’s life’.10

Piero Torriti wrote a reply to the Burlington letter of March 1987, which was published in the July 1989 issue. Meanwhile, RILA had become BHA, and though in the new organization top editorial positions did not seem to change significantly, there was a change in how the Guido Riccio material was described, in that the published BHA abstract of Torriti’s letter does not give the reader an accurate account of its contents. The BHA abstract (1991, vol. 1, n. 11370) is as follows: ‘In response to a letter by Gordon Moran and Michael Mallory concerning the destruction during restoration of the fresco of Guidoriccio da Fogliano (Siena, Palazzo Pubblico) of evidence against the attribution to Simone Martini, asserts that the red border as revealed by the restoration is original, and presents new evidence in support of a 14th century date for the fresco’.11

Scholars reading this abstract would conclude:

(1) that Torriti, in his published letter, presented, or provided ‘new evidence’ to support his point of view;
(2) that the disputed part of the painting (that is, the section of the fresco that was destroyed, which included part of a red strip in the lower border) still exists in its ‘original’ form and was not destroyed.

But Torriti did not present any new evidence; he merely repeated previously published facts and theories. Most importantly, anyone who read Torriti’s letter, including the BHA author who wrote the abstract, could see clearly in the colour photograph (published as part of Torriti’s letter as an illustration) that the portion of the red border in question simply does not exist any more—in ‘original’ form or any other form—in the area where we noted it had been destroyed.

We feel that Torriti, the Burlington Magazine editors, and the BHA author have all placed the community of art historians in an ‘Emperor’s New Suit of Clothes’ situation. (In this case, the BHA author, while not an initial protagonist, nevertheless reinforced this syndrome by omitting to point out to scholars that the photograph published by Torriti actually shows the disputed area of the painting to have been destroyed.)

Our reply to Torriti’s letter was published in Burlington Magazine (after no less than five letters of rejection on the part of Burlington Editor Caroline Elam) in January 1991.10 We pointed out that despite Torriti’s claims, his published photograph shows the destroyed area of the painting. We wrote, ‘We observed that a strip of the lower border had been destroyed during the 1980–1 restoration, and now feel that the photographs accompanying Professor Torriti’s letter confirm this observation, in so far as his fig. 48 reveals that part of the border has been destroyed in exactly the area we had pointed out’. We feel that this discussion was the crux, or the key issue, of our reply to his letter.

Nevertheless, in the BHA abstract of our 1991 letter in Burlington, there is no indication that we made this point. Instead, the BHA abstract (1992, 2/1, n. 1246, p. 79) reads as follows: ‘Responds to a letter from Piero Torriti (Burlington 1989...). Authors reaffirm their belief that Simone Martini cannot have painted the Guidoriccio fresco in the Palazzo Pubblico, Siena’.

These two BHA abstracts are characterized by distortion and misrepresentation, with the possible consequence of misleading scholars about a crucial aspect of a scholarly, intellectual debate. This is not the first time that problems involving indexing have risen in the Guido Riccio controversy. A recent editorial in Art Libraries Journal (1992, 17/4, p. 3) discusses problems in this case in terms of ‘“selective” indexing of journals in a major art library’.11
of the IFLA Section of Art Libraries, with the title
"Selective" card cataloging (or in-house screening of
periodical indexing) of art history articles in authors'
files, and the potential effects of this "selectivity" on
the bibliographical entries relating to specific art his-
torical problems: a case study.12 Moreover, ethical
problems relating to this indexing situation were con-
considered by John Swan in 'Ethics inside and out: the
case of Guidoriccio', in which he refers to the 'appar-
tent suppression of a controversial point of view
through selective indexing of materials . . .'.13

It is not now possible to determine whether the
distortions and misrepresentations in the BHA abstracts
are isolated and unusual aberrations, or are related
directly or indirectly to the other problems of indexing
(as mentioned in Art Libraries Journal) that have risen
in the Guido Riccio controversy. We may observe,
however, that when academic controversies are
involved, problems in indexing have arisen in disci-
plines as diverse as art history and medicine.

In his discussion of problems relating to indexing in
the Guido Riccio controversy, Swan states, "The dif-
cult truth is that librarians must be both neutral chal-
pions of access to all points of view and advocates for
the important views that are suppressed or unrepre-
resented".14 From the standpoint of scholarly reference
services and scholarly communication, Swan's observa-
tion would apply to abstracting/indexing services as
well. In fact, with RILA, and especially with the work
of Alice Wohl, the indexing/abstracting of the Guido
Riccio literature seemed to be a living example of
Swan's observations, beliefs, and ideals on the subject.
But in the examples cited above, BHA seems to be
leading scholars astray with a distorted account of
the contents of the latest crucial literature on the
subject. Such activity betrays the true mission of
indexing/abstracting services: to help scholars in their
search for truth. Within such a mission, during aca-
demic controversies, indexing/abstracting services, along
with other scholarly reference services, should be
especially diligent in providing interested scholars with
coverage of the subject matter in as accurate, truthful,
and complete a manner as possible.

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'Because of the miscellaneous character of the
journal's contents it would be very difficult to
index the subject matter of these articles fully and
would involve labour disproportionate to the
value of the material in question . . . Enquirers
after particular subjects should scan the list of
titles.'

(Philip Riden's prefact to his 'An index to The
Reliquary 1st series, vols 1–26, 1860–86'—
Derbyshire Record Society Occasional Papers 2,
1979, vii.)

—But surely the more miscellaneous, the more
need to produce a subject index?