Parkinson's law obtains most rigorously for home-workers, who cannot leave their papers miles out of reach in the office. David squeezes in some other congenial activities, though, lecturing on artistic and archaeological matters, writing on picture libraries, reference work, and videodisks, and chairing the Editorial Board of Learned Publishing. The connection with book and journal publishing, the transmission of culture in the broad sense, has always been important to him; libraries merely one aspect.

David joined the Society of Indexers in 1970, and was appointed to its Council in 1981 as representative of Aslib. He was Deputy Editor of The Indexer for three years, Chairman of its Editorial Board for two, and Chairman of SI for 1984 and 1985. He would like then to have fostered better relations with the book trade, giving indexers the position he thinks they deserve, but his time coincided with the hard work on the BBC's Domesday Project and—another tram passed!

David had an active time working with tough bodies and trade organizations in the videodisk and picture world, and misses those days. A soft indexer from a bureaucratic background, he shows how institutionally acquired practices may be applied in individual freelancing, generating both businesslike efficiency and enjoyment.

Since trading as Professional Indexing Services David has compiled over two hundred indexes, notably to: Journal of the Royal Society of Arts; a handbook on industrial safety; the last two volumes of Asa Briggs' History of the British Broadcasting Corporation; and a most sensitive text, Some other rainbow. This story of Beirut hostage John McCarthy and Jill Morrell offered issues of human suffering and emotion to be reduced to discrete linguistic terms, logically structured: the highest challenge to indexers, he holds. Indexes to other hostages Jackie Mann's and Terry Waite's stories also came his way; though he knows he is a hostage only to freelancing.

H. K. B

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Some comments on ‘Subject analysis and indexing’

Ms Albrechtsen's discussion of 'aboutness' (p 220) contains several misrepresentations and errors. The stature of the great British information scientist Robert A. Fairthorne (who was one of the few people who could rightly claim to have been a scientist first, then doing research on the problems of information) cannot be diminished by uninformed assertions regarding his work, but it seems to me essential to clarify matters for the benefit of a generation of indexers who did not have the privilege of hearing Fairthorne's lectures and reading his thought-provoking papers when they were still fresh.

The term 'aboutness' was coined by Fairthorne alone, not 'by others'. It became popular during the 1970s, and is still a basic concept in topical analysis, although it has indeed often been misunderstood to mean no more than the conventional 'subject' by those who should know better or did not bother to find out what Fairthorne had actually said. Albrechtsen is only the most recent representative of such people when she claims that 'the "aboutness" approaches tended to handle documents as isolated sources of knowledge', which flies in the face of what Fairthorne actually said in one of his seminal papers:

What discourse speaks of,—that is, what it mentions by name or description—, are amongst its extensional properties. What discourse speaks on,—that is, what it is about—, is amongst its intentional properties. This, its topic, cannot be determined solely from what it mentions. For this, one must take into account extra-textual considerations, such as who is using it for what purpose, what purpose the author intended it to be used for, and for whom or for what the librarian, or other manager of messages, acquired it. . . . Topics are not the properties of text marks as such, but of discourse . . . To create or assign topics to a text we must consider it in the wider context of what kind of person uses it for what, what other texts are used, and in what ways do these texts depend on each other.

Here, in a few lines and in lucid prose we have the gist of what Albrechtsen is trying to convey on six pages by means of opaque terminology plus a diagram. Her 'requirements-oriented conception' of topical analysis had been anticipated even long before Fairthorne by virtually every textbook and code of practice on indexing which always stressed the need to keep in mind the requirements of prospective users. The latest manifestations are in the International Standard ISO 9993 which states in section 6.1: 'An efficient index should meet the needs of those seeking
Entries should allow for the different approaches likely to be made by the user...; in the British Standard BS 3700.4 section 5.2.1.1 states: 'The choice of concepts to be named in the index depends on the expected needs of the user and the nature of the document;' and in the draft of the American National Standard NISO Z39.4,3 section 3 states, 'The function of an index is to provide users with an efficient and systematic means for locating documentary units... that may address information needs and requests' (emphasis added).

Even the arch-conservative Chicago manual of style admonishes in its sections 17.71–72: 'In indexing a work, indexers should as nearly as possible imagine themselves the eventual readers, and try to anticipate needs and expectations... it is essential that indexers put themselves in the reader's place'...6

Furthermore, documents and the information they are intended to convey to recipients are by no means only and exclusively 'instruments for transfer of knowledge... aiming at finding pragmatic information'. Only some documents are intended to do that; for example, a book on 'How to program your VCR' (which is, presumably, the kind of information that Albrechtsen calls 'pragmatic'). Other types of documents are intended to entertain; to defend or attack a theory, belief or opinion; to convey an author's feelings and emotions, as in a collection of poetry or in a book of religious hymns; and so on.

Indexers have often been found guilty of inconsistency. Research into this phenomenon has long since revealed that there is little or no inter-indexer or intra-indexer consistency.7,8 In fact, this is one of the most potent arguments for automatic indexing which, even if inadequate or faulty, is at least consistent. If indexers would disregard the terms occurring in a document and those offered by controlled indexing languages in favour of making inspired guesses and conjectures regarding what might eventually be useful for future and perhaps yet unborn users so as to 'convey its knowledge to those interested' (p 222), any trace of indexing consistency would be lost, and users would never know under which terms to seek the information they want or need. (They encounter great difficulties even when index terms are reasonably close to what is in documents.) Incidentally, the phrase just cited clearly endows a document with knowledge. This is not just a slip of the keyboard (no pens any more!), but a prime example of the slipshod use of the terms 'knowledge' and 'information', against which Fairthorne inveighed time and again.

It seems that Albrechtsen is confusing the concepts of relevance and pertinence. A document may be relevant for a user because it answers a specific question, that is, it generates new knowledge or it may relieve uncertainty in the user's mind; it may also be deemed to be relevant to a certain degree because it is generally interesting or provides details and background to what the user already knows; or it may even be relevant if it stimulates the user's mind to work in a different direction or to make a new mental connection between seemingly unrelated concepts and facts (many scientific discoveries have been made that way). Pertinence, on the other hand, is entirely dependent on subjective factors unrelated to a document's aboutness, such as a user's previous knowledge of the document ('I've seen this before'); the level of exposition ('That's too elementary'); the age of the document ('That's too old'); or its language ('I can't read Russian'). Thus, an indexer can only hope to assign to a document index terms that will indicate the relevance of a topic dealt with in that document. What future users will make of it—its pertinence—will forever be beyond the indexer's ken. To cite Fairthorne again: 'An indexer does not and cannot index all the ways in which a document will interest all kinds of readers, present or future.'9

Throughout the paper, the terms 'domain' and 'domain analysis' are being used but nowhere are they defined or explained, as if they were household words which every educated reader would be expected to know. However, these terms have so far not appeared in the pages of The Indexer, nor can I remember having encountered them in any of the published articles cited as references. My guess is that 'domain' is a term intended to supplant 'aboutness' and 'subject' as a much broader and politically correct term, but wouldn't it have been nice to get an explanation straight from the horse's mouth instead of being referred to the author's MSc thesis? Technically, that reference is to a document, but one that is unpublished and therefore virtually unobtainable, so that it cannot be checked and evaluated by a reader. An MSc thesis written in Copenhagen, presumably in Danish (there is no indication whether the English title is the original or a translation) probably exists in a few copies only: one remains with the author, one with her adviser, and there may be one in the library of the Royal School of Librarianship. Anyone who wishes to inspect this reference would have to betake him- or herself to Copenhagen (of which I have fond memories!) or would at least have to engage in correspondence with the school (which may become expensive because dissertations weigh a lot!). While citation of unpublished sources does not constitute intellectual fraud, it seems to me perilously close to it.

At the end, Albrechtsen seems to question the viability of her own 'requirements-oriented' conception, and calls it utopian. Boethius's oft-quoted maxim 'If you had kept silent you would have remained a philosopher' applies to her paper.

HANS H. WELLISCH
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The author replies:

The term 'domain analysis' is not intended to replace 'aboutness' or 'subject'. The concept 'domain analysis' is well known in the field of computer science, in particular denoting the process of systems analysis for designing knowledge-based systems. In library and information science, however, 'domain analysis' has been coined by, among others, Hjørland and Albrechtsen to denote the process of analysing for example, the social context, primary areas of study, knowledge interests involved in a particular knowledge domain with the purpose of designing or reassessing such matters of classification systems or subject analysis tools for indexing.

My thesis on 'Domain analysis for classification of software' is in English and available from the address below.

Refraining to an unpublished work can hardly be regarded as fraud. The Chicago manual of style has several recommendations for how to cite unpublished works (e.g., sections 7.142, 15.29, 16.128). The 'requirements-oriented conception' for subject analysis indexing should not be thought of as utopian, but as raising practical problems for the indexing profession, as well as some theoretical problems in knowing how to assess possible user interests in documents to be indexed. It is generally regarded as good practice in presenting a new thesis to include the possible objections which might be raised against it. Doing the opposite would indeed have been close to fraud.

Although standards on subject analysis and indexing, such as ISO 999, mention the needs to index for the users of documents, their recommendations to take account of user needs are not presented as being primary, since their focus is how to analyse the information in the documents. No available standards provide indications of how to assess any possible user needs, let alone regard them as dependent on domain-specific, societal contexts.

Finally: Philosophers publish too.

References


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Identical and the same?

Hazel Bell's article 'Vive la différence' says there are no synonyms in our language, but I remember being taught at school that 'almost' and 'nearly' are a true and unique pair of synonymous words.

JAMES PARGITER
Chard, Somerset

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR