Whom should we aim to please?

Hazel K. Bell

Considers the views of five different classes concerned with indexes: users, subjects, authors, publishers, and regulators; with their sometimes incompatible expectations and demands.

For whom do we compile our indexes? Whose approval do we seek? There seem to be five different sets of interested parties, each wanting their own requirements met.

What users want

Conventional wisdom has it that we compile our indexes strictly for the users, taking their needs primarily into account. But who are these people, paid so much regard in treatises on indexing? Jean Stirk offers herself as the archetype:

'As someone with an inquisitive mind I am an inveterate "looker-up" and, therefore, a frequent *user* of indexes. ... Through an index I expect to answer any question, and the index to be geared to my particular needs.'[1]

But users come as different types, at different levels, with differing expectations and expertise. We must assess the likely readership for each book, selecting terminology to suit it — rubella or German measles; latin or common names for birds and plants.

Users may have their own peculiar requirements. While indexers are taught to ignore merely trivial mentions of topics in the text, for particular groups of user these may be just the

object of their search. A historian speaking at the SI conference held in Edinburgh in 1990, Rosalind Marshall, begged us to include in our indexes the names of *all* people mentioned, including the most minor references to servants in the background, to help researchers such as herself. These would be wanted by only a tiny minority of readers, and would clutter up the index for the rest, consuming space. Indexers' contemptuous dismissal — 'no one would want to look that up', may unhappily be applied to large passages of books which one finds trivial or silly; the criterion of worthiness of inclusion in the indexer's eyes might lead to blank pages where the index was planned to be. We must assume that, since the book has found a publisher, some people out there must be going to value it.

Another group of users, reviewers, are reputed sometimes to look only at the index of a book, hoping to find there sufficient summary of the text and indication of its chief topics to spare them the reading. Hans Wellisch would regard this as abuse rather than use of the index: he observed, 'It has never been the purpose of an index entry to tell the reader in advance ... what he will find on the page indicated. Index entries are not meant to be mini-encyclopedias'.[2]

The indexed

Users, it appears, are a sufficiently heterogeneous class. But there are others, too, who may be pleased or upset by the selection and expression of index entries. There are the subjects of the index — the indexed themselves, or indexees. Their voice is most often heard expressing desire for maximum mention in the index. 'Shamefully I admit to having bought one or two books simply on the strength of having seen my name in the index', confessed Kenneth Roy in *Scotland on Sunday*, 5 Sept. 1993; 'Itseems some men count their index mentions as others count sexual conquests'. It is obvious how we may please this class of index consulter.

Then there is the question of equality. Suppose that Alastair Richardson and his wife Susannah appear together in a biography, he always more prominently, she merely his companion. Is it worth including an entry for her, either a separate second one, or combined as 'Richardson, Alastair and Susannah', if either way the entry will make a second line, and space is short, line-saving sought? Would it be justifiable to make an entry for the husband only, assuming that anyone wanting to find a reference to his wife would look for her on the same page? Or would this outrage the feminists?

It is with regard to the subjects of the index (with libel proceedings available to them) that we must eschew bias. Those referred to in the text, favourably or otherwise, should not be subjected to the double whammy of insult again in the index, nor effusive reinforcement of praise. As I have stated elsewhere, 'an index is not the proper place for promoting political hostility or partisanship. For sheer, over-the-top attack, look at a few of

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Hail and farewell

This is the first issue of *The Indexer* to be edited by a new team—Janet Shuter, a former Chair of the Society, and Nancy Mulvany, a former President of the American Society of Indexers. On behalf of the Society I should like to welcome Janet and Nancy and to wish them well. We are grateful that two such distinguished members of our two societies have agreed to take on the roles of Editor and Associate Editor and I am particularly pleased that a member of one of the affiliated societies is to be so actively involved in the development of the journal.

At the same time, we are sorry that Hazel Bell has found it necessary to resign as Editor after eighteen years' sterling work. Hazel followed the late Monty Harrod as Editor—a hard act to follow, but she did it superbly, seeing *The Indexer* develop as a highly respected international journal. One member of the Society wrote to me saying that he regarded Hazel as 'an excellent editor—hard-working, thorough, meticulous, willing to listen, pleasant and accommodating.' I would agree, and am most grateful to Hazel for all that she has done.

Norman Hillyer has also resigned as editor of 'Indexes Reviewed', having been responsible for this most valuable feature of the journal since 1978. We are most grateful to him for his excellent work and we welcome Christine Shuttleworth, who has kindly agreed to assume responsibility for this part of the journal.

KEN BAKEWELL
Chairman, Society of Indexers

the 140 subheadings under REAGAN, RONALD WILSON in *The clothes have no emperor: a chronicle of the Reagan years* (by Paul Slanksy; Fireside Books, 1989):

> blames Carter; blames Congress; blames the media; blames miscellaneous others; cancerous pimple called 'friend' by; confusion admitted by; detachment from reality imputed to; disbelief by public of; gloating by enemies of; inability to answer questions of; macho bluster of; mistakes admitted and not admitted by; . . . [3]

Neutral terminology should have been devised to replace these entries (we can't have fun all the time).

Robert-Maxwell-no-relation sued the publishers of a book whose index merged his own blameless references with those of his infamous namesake (reported in *The Independent*, 24 May 1989). Mallory and Moran protested against bias in the abstracting of their letters in the Bibliography of the history of art.[4]

The question of credit for the authors of the texts in multi-author works is most vexed, with implications for indexers. Anne Piternick explained how important it is to members of research teams, however large, that they *all* should be listed as co-authors of published reports of work, 'to indicate [to grant funders] that they had actually performed the work described': 'publish or perish'. Yet, 'the number of authors listed is usually limited in [scientific] indexing services and in citations by other authors'. When authors are listed alphabetically on title pages, and only the first two names are taken for indexing, 'having a surname that falls late in the alphabet may mean that one's contributions are under-represented in author indexes, or in citation analyses based thereon'; while 'the extent to which authors are cited is used as an indication not of the "popularity" of a scholar's works but of their importance to other scholars and researchers'.[5] For readers wishing to trace an article by eight (or x) co-authors, entering the names of just the first two easily suffices; but omission of the remaining six (or y) makes it an index most displeasing to them.

The authors

Authors' attitudes to the indexes to their books have frequently been considered in this journal. John Gibson described 'The highlighting/underlining syndrome', 'a disorder in which the author of a book highlights or underlines a number of words on each page and demands that the indexer includes all of them in the index. . . . Sufferers from this disorder are distinguished by a total ignorance of indexing'.[6]

Nancy Mulvany shares Gibson's attitude to such authors' requirements: 'When an editor insists on providing an author highlight, I insist on a second set of unmarked pages. Usually I put the author highlight in a corner and never look at it.'[7]

The author of the *Encyclopaedia of Social Inventions* was well pleased with his computer use 'to create the index of over 1,200 entries *and* to typeset and lay out this index' in 'one hour, between 4 a.m. and 5 a.m.'. With 'one keystroke on the computer our off-the-shelf software whizzed through the text picking out the headings I had previously marked and putting them into alphabetical order, with page numbers', as he jubilantly reported to *The Times* in November 1989. This 'index' proved to consist of entries under inventors (surnames only), corporate names and titles of inventions, *strictly* by first word: 'Bringing hobbies into the school curriculum' was indexed *only* under 'Bringing'; 'Two Sir Humphreys', a proposal to reform the Civil Service by a system of 'alternate heads', *only* under 'Two'.[8]

Authors' pleasure in indexes seems to be of dubious validity.

I can report having displeased an author who saw the index I had prepared (properly, I still maintain) to his biography of a playwright. At sight of the index, he appears to have called up on his pc screen all occurrences of particular words, printed out the lists of *typescript* page numbers, and sent them to the publisher as 'references the indexer has missed'. They included long lists of titles about which nothing was individually stated; casual comparisons; references within the text of plays; an entry for 'Christ, Jesus' with reference to pages where characters in the plays said, 'Oh, Christ'. References to the Silver Jubilee, and an obscene joke about the Queen, were all indexed under 'Queen Elizabeth II' (under Q). One play was stated to be as central to the playwright's work as six other named works of art to their authors; all six authors were added to the index, with full titles of these works. Long, useless strings of minimal page references cluttered the top lines of my carefully selected and subdivided main entries. Many references were removed from their own entries to swell the enormous entry for the main character: hospitals, and places where he had lived, for instance (while I had already given lists of page numbers for his homes and illnesses under his entry). The author appeared not to realize that a reference could be duplicated, appearing under two headings. Assuredly, not pleasurable emendations for other groups of interested parties in indexes.

Our masters

We compile indexes most usually at the behest of publishers, and must conform to their requirements. While we may consider that a particular book needs detailed, lengthy indexing, it is the publishers who invest their money and know their market, judging the value of an index to their business rather than to the ideal reader. We must accept their limitations for time and space to be devoted to the index, and learn to work within these constraints — an essential skill for an indexer. Coat, according to cloth, must be cut. As Ann Edwards insisted, addressing the 1993 SI conference: 'New Markets for Indexing', 'Whatever sort of index the publisher asks for, that is exactly what you must provide'. It is more than our job's worth to put our indexing ideals before the publishers' practicalities.

Getting it right?

Finally, the possibility of accreditation for indexers implies that there must be a *right* way to compile indexes, correct criteria to be established. To conform to these means pleasing the regulators, the standard-setters for indexes. In their turn, it was claimed by the Chairman of the committee that revised the British Standard on Indexing in 1988[9] that they took particular account of the needs of *users* of indexes.[10] So, whom do they see as being the users? Presumably a composite image of the likely audience for the publications of the ten bodies represented on the committee: the Association for Information Management; the Association of British Directory Publishers; the British Library; British Telecom; Her Majesty's Stationery Office; INSPEC; The Library Association; Oxford University Press; the Standing Conference of National and University Libraries; and the Society of Indexers. Not what I called 'the

man in the armchair': the general reader of non-fiction on whose behalf so many of us work.[11]

Is standardization of indexing practice truly helpful to the user, or are both texts and users too unlike, idiosyncratic, all to conform?

Occasions have been recorded when following the rules has indeed misled the user. I described indexing a simple parents' guide to primary schooling, where those parents' likely knowledge of educational terminology did not coincide with that required by educational bodies compiling their databases, and choices had to be made between them.[11] Geraldine Beare wrote of a discrepancy between abiding by rules or helping readers that she encountered in compiling an index to the *Strand* magazine. She visualized the chase to and fro through the alphabet in an 800-page index, from pseudonym to real writer's name to collaborator and collaborator's pseudonym, with women from their original to married and subsequent names, that would have resulted from following strict precepts of consistency: 'Well, the mind boggles! It might be correct to do all this, but it does take up precious space and could cause annoyance to the user'.[12] Let us not displease our users in the attempt to please our regulators. Surely we must adapt the rules for the convenience of the user? Is best practice uniform practice?

Frances Lennie, mistress of CINDEX, put it: 'We're not building an index to abide by the rules of the index. We are building an index to serve the reader'.[13]

Jean Stirk observes, 'There are rules for strict alphabetical order, but this is not a panacea answer to users' problems . . . what laymen would know these rules?'.[1] Teaching the rules, to laymen and all, is no help, it appears. A survey of the use of indexes by students in the School of Information Studies of Syracuse University, New York, found the common assumption that 'the user of a back-of-the-book index thinks about accessing information in similar ways as a professional indexer organizes that information for access' to be incorrect.[14]

Manuals and standards for indexing ordain properly detailed analysis of the text in hand; provision of introductory notes; discrete page references where appropriate, as: 5, 6, 7, 8-9, 11, 12-13. Contrast this with the precepts of Edinburgh University Press given to the 1988 SI conference: 'one to two percent of the volume is allotted for the index; preliminary notes are not

approved; consecutive page references will always be run together'.[15] Whose behest would we wage-slaves follow?

So, beset by such conflicting claims regarding the structure and contents of our indexes, from users, subjects, authors, piper-payers, and regulators — whom should we seek to please? Make the index full for the publicity-seeker, or cheap for the publisher? Consistent for the regulators, or convenient for the unsophisticated? Cram in the most *recherché* detail for the researcher, or keep it concise for quick consultation? It is tempting to resort to the precept — just please yourself.

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THE INDEXER Thirty years ago

The spring 1966 issue of *The Indexer*, Volume 5, No. 1, extended to 56 pages of text—the longest until then. L. M. Harrod's editorial leads off with, 'The science of indexing has numerous applications for it provides an essential appendix to every book of information, a key to numerous kinds of record, and an essential art of the different forms of information retrieval . . . So vast is the field that, together, these articles offer merely a peep into the complexity of activities which occupy those who call themselves indexers'. This, already, so long before the proliferation of online searching, databanks and CD-ROMs.

The Society of Indexers had held its fifth training course (over four days, with 35 students), and *The Indexer* had become 'a well established and unique journal', with copies despatched to 32 countries.

Margaret Anderson contributed a report of her survey into the length of book indexes, finding that indexes to history books generally fell into the range of 5% to 8% of the text; biographies were more lightly indexed than history, if at all, in the range 1% to 4% of the text; indexes in books

on science were 'more clearly related to the standard of difficulty of the text', with annual reviews of the sciences extending to 15%.

John Martyn of Aslib supplied ten pages on 'Citation indexing', with particular reference to the *Science Citation Index.* He considered, 'scientists are on the whole rather in favour of them, while librarians are much more cautious', quoting from a review of the index to the *Annals of Mathematical Statistics*, 'Librarianship in the future will become a task less for the bibliophile and more for the electronic engineer'—a prognostication now apparently becoming well validated. Delight Ansley wrote of indexing encyclopaedias, considering the *Encyclopedia of science and technology, Encyclopedia of world art,* and the *New Catholic encyclopaedia.* Theodore Hines advances further towards the future with 'A computer code for alphabeting', pleading for 'a general machine-compatible alphabeting code . . . for indexes, library catalogues, and bibliographies . . . a new, logical, Anglo-American, computer-compatible standard for all our work'.

Norman Knight's comments are prolific throughout: he declares 'an encyclopaedia index can never be considered superfluous'; laments the lack of bold face type in encyclopaedia indexes; challenges the use of italics for titles of works of art; pleas for indication of which column