Letters to the editor

from Garry Cousins, Sydney

Logical order

In taking issue with Nancy Mulvany regarding the alphabetization of homonyms, John Vickers (April 1995) and Geoffrey Dixon (October 1995) clearly demonstrate their personal preference, but, in fairness to Ms. Mulvany, it seems to me that both gentlemen have offered only vague assertions to support that preference, rather than explain the logic behind it (it's 'common sense', 'what readers expect', more 'user-friendly', etc).

True, there has been a tradition among indexers in the past that commas be taken into account in inverted headings, and that personal names be given priority in the filing order, just as there has been a tradition that leading prepositions in subheadings be ignored, and that Mc and St be filed as Mac and Saint, but since we can safely assume that the vast majority of index users are neither professional indexers nor library school graduates, and so are not privy to these practices, it does not seem unreasonable to question their application to indexes. As Nancy Mulvany herself says, the major problem with all these odd rules is that most index users have no idea that they exist[1]. Librarians have ben ignoring the comma since at least 1980[2], and Hans Wellisch also recommends ignoring the comma, saying 'the resulting arrangement will . . . be the one most easily understood by users'.[3]

I suggest that most index users know that an index is arranged in alphabetical order, but not much more, and that they, logically enough, expect this order to be applied consistently to all parts of the index.

To test this proposition I decided to carry out a small survey of my non-indexing colleagues to see which filing order *they* thought made more sense. The thirty-one participants included an architect, an arts administrator, editors, an historian, a journalist, librarians (non-indexing), musicians, production assistants, and a public servant.

I sent each person two lists: List A, in traditional (Vickers/Dixon) order, and List B, in logical (ALA/Mulvany/Wellisch) order. In fact, they were the two lists which Geoffrey Dixon gave in his letter, with one modification: the addition of a book title. List A not only takes commas in inversions into account, but also the old 'rule' of person, place, subject, title:

LIST A
London, Jack
London, William
London, Central
London, Diocese of
London Airport
London, Midland and Scottish Railway
London University
London: an illustrated history

List B is arranged strictly by the sequence of words, ignoring all punctuation:

LIST B
London Airport
London: an illustrated history
London, Central
London, Diocese of
London, Jack
London, Midland and Scottish Railway
London University
London, William

Each participant was asked: 'Which order in these lists makes more sense to you? Please tick one.' I received a 90% response, i.e. 28 replies.

The result: *the respondents unanimously chose List B*, that is, the order advocated by Nancy Mulvany. Not one chose the order advocated by Messrs Vickers and Dixon. Even I, with my personal preference for List B, was surprised at this; in fact, as more and more replies came in I began to wish that at least one person would choose List A, lest I be accused of rigging the result! Some typical comments from respondents were:

- 'Would love to know the rationale for List A'
- 'I think [readers] would find List A awkward and unwieldy'
- '. . . this would probably horrify indexers and even most bibliophiles, but List B seems much more logical to me!'
- 'I can see what order is taking place in List A but I think [it] makes for a more obscure index'
- 'Ordering in List B is much more user-friendly'
- 'List B is certainly more logical to me'
- 'Unless "How to use" rules are specified for List A, List B looks logical'
- 'List A made perfect sense 25 years ago when I [worked] as a reference librarian and remembered the "rules" of filing. These days List B is more generally accessible'
- 'I do not understand at all the logic behind . . . List A'
- '. . . there is a better chance of finding your reference in List B'
- 'List B just appears a more logical way of searching for information'

One respondent (an editor who occasionally indexes) chose List B but conceded: 'I personally prefer List B, it makes a good deal more sense from the average reader's point of view, yet I compile and edit indexes according to List A because that's what I've always been taught is "correct" '.

Since The Reader is so often invoked to justify all sorts of indexing practices, this was a most interesting result: though statisticians may take issue with the small size of my sample I think the unanimity of the response clearly shows that practices such as taking the comma in inverted headings into account when filing homonyms, and grouping entries into categories which defy strict alphabetical order, are neither 'commonsense', nor 'what readers expect'.

References

1. *Indexing books*, p. 123.
2. *ALA filing rules*, rule 2.1.
3. *Indexing from A to Z*, p. 153.

from Max Franke, Maryland

All is revealed

In the October 1995 edition, in the 'Indexes Reviewed' section, in the 'Indexes praised' subsection, there appears a brief quotation from William Heckscher's review of Pope John Paul II's book *Crossing the threshold of hope*. Mr. Heckscher praises both the book's English translation and the 'two carefully wrought indexes.' In a parenthetical aside, the editor of the 'Indexes Reviewed' section then wonders if the translator may have been responsible for index preparation as well.

I'm writing today to clear up any confusion. The two tasks were accomplished by different persons. I know for a fact that the indexes to the Pope's tome were wrought by a professional indexer in the shadows of the Appalachians in western Maryland. A proper division of labor was maintained at all times.

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from Elisabeth Ingham, London

Computer-assisted indexing of looseleaf supplements

I index looseleaf supplements by using *two* computers, one with the main index in it and the other with the supplementary index in it. This means that the main index is always up-to-date in my computer and, I am told, is cheaper for the publisher when a new main index is published.

Obviously this deals with superseded entries accurately. When subject matter is removed from the work I delete the index entry in the main index, at the same time as putting the entry, without its number, in the supplementary index followed by 'material deleted'. As long as the subscriber knows that the supplementary index supersedes the main index (and those who don't are known as 'index abusers') s/he will be certain of being completely up to date.

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from Charles Gore, Argyll

We reproduce, with the author's permission, this letter to Margaret Christie from the author of The Scottish fiddle music index.

Music indexing

I would like to thank you for the encouraging tone of your review of *The Scottish fiddle music index* (*The Indexer*, 4 October). I was particularly excited by your opinion of the use of the beat note and its benefit (thanks to Brendan Breathnach!) in making the index easier to use. I'd be most interested to know more about the possibilities of applying this system to classical music indexing. I've often wondered if that would be feasible.

The chief regret about using this system for Scottish traditional music at this point in time is that it will now be a long job to convert the Database to a full-notation structure. This would have been the chosen route if one had ever suspected that it would be practical to 'play' music into a computer and achieve a printed copy from that one action. It

all happens too quickly for most people! The Irish traditional music people have in fact begun indexing the repertoire by a means akin to this (thus sidelining poor old Breathnach and all his labours), but at least I have a database, which they didn't at the outset.

Your last para. refers to the multiple pp numbers and the twin A–Z Indexes. The pp number difficulty arose from the necessity to keep track of the sequence when setting out the book. I left those partial numberings in the print-out for that reason but could not—due mainly to computer ineptitude, I fear—then superimpose consecutive pagination on the whole. Different sections were from different databases anyway.

Just for the record, the 'non-obvious' reason for the two A–Z listings was one which might be anathema to an indexer (?) ... Simply that printed music dating from before 1800 (thus often characterised as 'rare') appears to be stored on microfilm or fiche and is therefore extremely expensive to obtain in copied form. The available 19th century reprints of the older music are almost universally photocopiable and therefore much cheaper. It seemed like the only way to differentiate at the time. I probably would have tried harder to 'tab' the reprints in a single A–Z sequence had I known what I now know. Easy to be wise after the event?

Thank you again for the most useful comments and your concept of 'an inspiring book'. I would love to think that fiddlers were a substantial section of The Indexer's readership but I think that's a touch wishful?

Obituary

Brian Armitage 1923–1995

Brian Armitage was a distinguished medical librarian who subsequently became a successful Registered Indexer.

Brian, a Yorkshireman, went to school in Yorkshire and studied librarianship at the City Literary Institute, London 1950–51. He was Librarian of the Charing Cross Hospital Medical School from 1953–1970 and Medical Librarian and subsequently University Librarian at the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Ghana 1970–74. In 1968 he was awarded the Barnard Memorial prize for 'Distinguished Services to Medical Librarianship'.

For over 20 years he was much sought after as a fine indexer of medical texts. He also had a long and successful association with Churchill Livingstone, who will greatly miss his indexing skills. Brian was notable, too, as the first user of the MACREX indexing program and a significant contributor to its development.

He was a loyal and supportive member of the Society of Indexers and will be much missed at Society events.

Our sympathy is extended to his friend of 50 years, Peter Fidler.

ELIZABETH WALLIS