

Professionalism

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Contrasts technical vs professional aspects of the practice of indexing, and concludes that indexers must take professionalism seriously if they are to raise their own status or contribute to the development of modern information management.

Indexing is the organisation of information about recorded knowledge in such a way that it makes that knowledge as effectively accessible as possible. This definition applies whether the item of recorded knowledge is a sentence, a paragraph, a page, an illustration, an article, a book, a periodical, a sequence of periodicals, some other form of recorded knowledge or a library. The result may be what we commonly call an index or a catalogue, database, bibliography, set of abstracts, synopses, summaries or any other form which meets the definition.

technicians vs professionals

Indexing may be practised at a technical or a professional level. To be practised as a profession the practitioner must have an understanding of knowledge and its manifestations in recorded form. This is a much larger study than the glib one or two lectures at library school would suggest. (I know, I've given these superficial lectures.) When this study is undertaken in sufficient depth the broad base of understanding acquired will enable the indexer to devise solutions to a wide range of indexing situations

The practice of indexing as a technician needs merely a knowledge of the techniques and rules as applied to the particular job: a book index, an entry in a database or whatever.

There are inherent weaknesses in this level, in that the technician does not have the basis on which to decide the most appropriate answer to any particular situation and, if this is all the indexer has, the work will need the supervision of a professional, otherwise uninformed and wrong decisions are inevitable. Following the rules in creating an index may produce a result which is theoretically correct

when judged by the prevailing standards but in the process the technician may not make any useful connection with the reader.

By contrast the professional indexer will have an understanding of readers and will be able to devise an answer which will really help them to sort out the information and through absorbing it achieve knowledge of the subject.

A technician knows and can apply some rules; a professional can, if necessary, devise a new set of rules or otherwise design the appropriate solution to an indexing problem in full knowledge of the theory on which such decisions are made.

Furthermore the professional will know the relationship of the

'index' to the knowledge which it is making accessible, will know the position of the indexer in relation to the others carrying out the various functions in the recording of knowledge: the writers, editors of various kinds, the designers and all the others who create the physical end products whether in the form of books, journals, compact disks, on-line networks or whatever. It follows from this that I consider that in any project which involves the recording of knowledge an indexer is an essential part of the team and conversely, that in the absence of an indexer — a specialist in the organisation of knowledge — many projects are much less satisfactory than they should be.

So how is it that many indexers without any formal study of the matters I have identified produce excellent work? And work which answers all the criteria as 'professional'. It is because, consciously or unconsciously, they have acquired by personal study, experience, observation or some kind of osmosis, the wisdom by which to make right decisions. When we come to award Associateships or Fellowships within indexing we will have an interesting and challenging job setting the criteria by which to identify those members of our associations who have attained the levels set for these awards but have not gone through any formal training.

The knowledge and understanding needed to become a professional indexer has been identified more or less to my satisfaction. Some years ago I proposed a syllabus which included what I then saw as the necessary areas of study. I tried to include these elements in a concentrated one-year full-time course. But this was before the computer had become an integral part of our work, not just as an aid to book indexing, but more

importantly as the medium which carries the largest indexes the world has ever known.

Where were we when the world needed us?

The largest index of them all — the Internet — was developed almost entirely without the help of anyone who knew anything about knowledge, how it is created, perceived, understood, recorded and manipulated. They knew the machine but where were we — the professional indexers — when the world needed us? Sure, the Internet works, but only just. It is over-complicated

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and has to a large extent become a game played by nerds who love to create more and more problems for themselves, the solving of which they enjoy. Largely they have no understanding of the processes of knowledge nor are they particularly concerned about the user of the Internet who just wants to get connected to a large source of information and go as speedily as possible to specific items. And, of course, their work is often attached to those whose interest is entirely commercial. (How many advertisements and other bits of guff do we have to push through to get the information we want? And how often is the information itself clogged with jargon and hype?)

My proposed syllabus, which now implies a longer course, would include a study of what I am describing as the processes of knowledge and of the development of the technology which can be used now or may be available in the future to support these processes. In this we have common ground with the teachers of information science except that that subject has been oriented towards objective (mostly scientific) knowledge to the disadvantage of subjective and creative knowledge.

vision of a world-wide web that works

It is usually assumed that Vannevar Bush with his Memex and Ted Nelson with Xanadu were the pioneers in the development of comprehensive indexing, text and hypertext systems. Not so. In 1934 Paul Otlet, pioneer of the Universal Decimal Classification (UDC) and founder of the International Federation for Information and Documentation (FID), wrote:

We must bring together a collection of machines which simultaneously or sequentially can perform the following operations:

- 1 The transformation of sound into writing;
- 2 The reproduction of this writing in as many copies as are useful;
- 3 The creation of documents in such a way that each item of information has its own identity and, in its relationships with those items comprising any collection, can be retrieved as necessary;
- 4 A Classification number assigned to each item of information; the perforation of documents correlated with these numbers;
- 5 Automatic classification and filing of documents;
- 6 Automatic retrieval of documents for consultation and presented either direct to the enquirer or via machine enabling written additions to be made to them;
- 7 Mechanical manipulation at will of all the listed items of information in order to obtain new combinations of facts, new relationships of ideas, and new operations carried out with the help of numbers.

The technology fulfilling these seven requirements would indeed be a mechanical, collective brain.

Some years back in an address to Australian indexers I looked forward to the day when all of the world's knowledge would be accessible, compressed into a portable package or available via computer networks. I made the observation that, unless these great accumulations of recorded knowledge were effectively indexed the package and the networks would be useless.

Well, that day has arrived and, because there were not indexers of the calibre needed to guide the operation, we have a muddle. Even those relatively simple indexes — library catalogues — mostly use software packages first created twenty or thirty years ago; they have been updated but the limitations of old technology still show through. I ask librarians, who created the package they are using and who did the update, and I am told that it was the nerds. Libraries have systems librarians but most of them are concerned with making the package work in their particular situation, not in devising the better systems which are possible.

One might say that economics play a part in that the creation of new systems is an expensive business. I'm not convinced of that when cost and benefit are assessed, but even if this is true, unless there is a new generation of experts who can bring together all the skills to create the better system, the better system will never be imagined and there will be no-one to let the world at large know that the access to knowledge through its effective organisation is possible and that this access can be carried out so much more effectively than at present.

I repeat, the expert in the organisation of knowledge is or should be the indexer. The profession of indexing has a fundamental importance to human endeavour. We have no excuse for not being ready to meet the challenge when it arrived in recent times with the development of the technology which Otlet envisaged. The pattern and inspiration which we needed were recorded in 1934 and even by then they were based on 39 years of experience. But Otlet wrote in French. Nobody got around to translating his work until 1990 — too late! In the meantime the development of the technology had taken place in the mostly monolingual English-speaking world which until recently was the only world which had any awareness of indexing or much investigation into the processes related to the organisation of knowledge.

Although Otlet wrote his prescription for the technology needed to make all knowledge accessible in 1934 he had conceived and started the great index of all knowledge — the Universal Bibliographic Repertory — in 1895. By 1914 it had 11,000,000 entries. Using cards and files he created the index with its 'hypertext'.

In 1934 he described what he was striving to achieve: A radical assumption would consider that all knowledge, all information could be so condensed that it could be contained in a limited number of works placed on a desk, therefore within hand's reach, and indexed in such a way as to ensure maximum consultability. In this the world described in the entirety of books would really be within everyone's grasp. The Universal Book created from all books would become very approximately an annex to the brain, a substratum even of memory, an external mechanism and instrument of the mind but so close to it, so apt to its use that it would truly be a sort of appended organ, an exodermic appendage.

Otlet went on to expand the idea: Man would no longer need documentation if he were to become an omniscient being like God himself. A less ultimate degree would create an instrumentation acting across distance which would combine at the same time radio, x-rays, cinema and microscopic photography. All the things of the universe and all those of man would be registered from afar as they were produced. Thus the moving image of the world would be established — its memory, its true duplicate. From afar anyone would be able to read the

passage, expanded or limited to the desired subject, that could be projected on his individual screen. Thus, in his armchair, anyone would be able to contemplate the whole of creation or particular parts of it.

how indexers can begin to take control

We, in our various associations, are the identifiable profession of indexing, although in our modesty and, I consider, folly, have presented ourselves to the world as technicians carrying out a minor role appended to the publishing process: an optional extra. The world of technology in its limited understanding of the riches of knowledge with which it deals has left us behind. They do not know that we have any clues as to the organisation of knowledge which they need. We have not told them because for the most part we are not aware that we have these clues. The message is clear. To confirm ourselves as professionals we had better wake up to what we have and get busy expanding it until we can really carry out the job which is implicit in the basic principles of our profession.

Collectively there are a number of elements to which we should attend:

(i) goal

Implied, if not stated above is our goal — to be the organisers of knowledge through the production of all those tools which come under the general name of 'index'. If anyone thinks this is too broad let him or her go off and form a technical association devoted to book indexing and let us get on with our professional job.

(ii) technology

As I have implied above, in many areas we have only a hazy, if any, idea of the range of technical skills which we could develop to carry out our professional purposes. The development of new and improved techniques and the equipping of ourselves to take charge of technical developments by knowing the whole range of matters which need to be brought to bear in the designing and carrying out an 'indexing' project. Whether we personally carry them out or supervise them we need to know what is involved in them, how to relate them one to another and how to steer the project through to the final product.

This may become clearer by comparison with another profession, say architecture. Someone who only knew how to draw plans, but nothing about aesthetics, structures, materials, soil and rock characteristics, professional practice, office management, etc. could never be considered a professional architect. Draughtsman maybe, never an architect. Can you see the similarity? Ask an 'indexer' to create a database design, construct a thesaurus, write a specification for an index of illustrations, compile a subject bibliography. If the reply is, 'I don't know anything about those things, I just do book indexes', the conclusion is:

'You've failed the test. Stop calling yourself an indexer. Only those who have bothered to equip themselves with the knowledge of what is involved in indexing and can demonstrate that they have the knowledge, can think with it, and can use it to create and produce, are entitled to use the name.

If you want to operate at that limited level without getting to know the area within which you are operating you have two choices; either get yourself a

real indexer who is prepared to supervise your work as a technician employee, or start studying to acquire the knowledge. Of course there is a third choice — to get out of this area altogether.

You are too lazy. If you want to bumble along with your limited knowledge you will be an embarrassment to those who are working on making this a profession.'

(iii) ethics

Some time back I proposed to the Australian Society a code of practice. I am not so sure now that a code is necessary or desirable or that it would be effective in the form that I suggested. The rather tough remarks I have just made suggest a possible other approach. It needs to be assumed and, if necessary stressed, that this profession is deadly serious. We are dealing with something fundamental to human wellbeing and development: knowledge. In this there is a heavy responsibility on us. Entrants to the profession need to be aware of this.

'If it is too daunting then leave before you waste your own or our time. If you stay we expect you to take the profession seriously and do your best to enhance it in your own work, that of your colleagues and the professional association.'

If this tough entrance requirement were used we would have a solid band of professionals who would be self-motivated and dedicated to their own best work and that of their colleagues. A code of practice would not be needed. However, I would arrange for the subject of ethics to be discussed as part of the study programme.

(iv) recognition and education for the profession

Following from the remarks on ethics it can be assumed that the professional body should expect the aspiring indexer to work towards and achieve professional recognition as an Associate and perhaps later Fellow, of the Society. Here we have a kind of chicken and egg situation. Until we have formal courses at a sufficiently advanced level we cannot expect there to be a supply of entrants to the profession with the preparation necessary to meet the criteria for the awards. But until we have the criteria spelled out and the awards available there is nothing on which to base courses at a high level.

There is a way to resolve this. Members of the Australian Society, the late Dietrich Borchardt, Kingsley Siebel and I, have all written on this matter over some 14 years. Recently I produced a summary paper which is under formal consideration. Briefly I proposed that the National Committee should nominate those members of the Society who unquestionably have knowledge and ability to produce work at a high level, to be created Foundation Fellows with the assumption that they will act as the committee to set criteria for granting of Associateships and Fellowships. I proposed that, in selecting the Foundation Fellows, we use a process of elimination to narrow the field using the criteria:

- i Is a member of AusSI
- ii Has practised as an indexer for at least a specified number of years
- iii Has demonstrated a broad and deep knowledge of the profession in at least one of the following
 - the design and implementation of a substantial

indexing project, e.g. a major published index or database

- the design and supervision of a substantial cooperative project of indexing
- research and/or teaching of the theory and practice of indexing at a tertiary level
- contribution to the theory and practice of indexing as demonstrated by publications
- successful development of tools and/or techniques to be used in the practice of indexing.

(I estimate that at present in Australia there are perhaps ten members of the Society who meet the criteria.)

When this 'college' had finished its work of creating the criteria for admission to Associateship and possibly refining the criteria for Fellowship, the really hard work would begin. How to persuade some tertiary institution to take on some or all of the teaching or, failing that, how to provide it, using the resources of a small Society. I believe that, if we show that we are serious about our profession we could increase the strength of our societies drawing in others who have not seen us as of relevance or interest because we have pitched our sights too low, on our, at present, slightly above technician level. Otherwise, as Schools of Librarianship and Information Studies are now developing we may have a better chance than previously of getting them to take us seriously and provide most, if not all of the teaching to make a first qualification in indexing.

As to research, I can only speak for Australia and then somewhat tentatively, but it seems that the Schools of Librarianship and Information Studies are already oriented towards accepting research and higher degree work in topics relevant to our concerns. Of course research does not have to be attached to an academic institution. The Australian Society has set aside funds for research projects and has recently decided on the award of two \$1000 grants. Also the National Library of Australia has acted over the past few years as the host for a co-operative research project which has led to the creation of a register of indexes ongoing and closed in the major libraries of Australia.

high failure rate = wrong candidates

Recently Elizabeth Wallis sent me a draft of a paper on professionalism which she is preparing. In it she reported that in the UK 'Many members cast doubt on it [the qualification offered by the Society of Indexers] because it has such a high failure rate.' I quote my comments to Elizabeth:

As to the quoted remarks about the credibility of qualifications offered by the Society of Indexers, I would urge SI not to entertain the idea of lowering the standards because the range covered by the five training manuals is already far from complete if you want to prepare examinees to operate as 'professional' indexers. If the failure rate is high it probably indicates that the wrong people are entering the 'profession'. Such people should be redirected to the technician level tested by the current registration method which tests the ability to follow the rules and standards to produce an acceptable book index.

Having done so I believe you should raise rather than

lower the level of the accreditation exams by including studies and arranging formal teaching and tutorial work in the full range of subjects necessary for 'professional' work. Work, for example, which includes, among other subjects, consultancy, the design of large databases, the creation of classification and indexing schemes, rules and standards, training and supervision of indexing staff, research into techniques and user needs and attitudes. Only after a candidate had passed all these and other subjects such as the nature of knowledge vs. information, its organisation, recording, transmission, etc., and has demonstrated the ability to operate effectively using these studies, would I consider granting the candidate the award of Associateship. When a more advanced ability could be demonstrated I would consider that the candidate could be awarded a Fellowship.

Without this pattern we degrade our profession by calling what is really technician level work professional. It seems that there are those who are not prepared to work at making indexing a profession, to roll up their sleeves, as some have done over many years. That's OK, they don't have to stay if all they want is to be dilettant!, knocking off an occasional book index when they feel like it. It seems there are others who take the view that there is no incentive to study and pass exams since the commercial rewards are small and work is not assured. These are self-fulfilling attitudes. If you want the rewards to be better and the work flow to improve you had better take the job seriously, accumulate as much knowledge about it as you can, get as skilful at it as you can and help your colleagues and your Society

to build up the public perception of it. Recognition, verbal or financial, is not going to arrive out of the blue while you sit and moan about your and our dreary lot.

And stop thinking that indexing is only book indexing. There are all sorts of related jobs waiting to be

done, including the massive job of putting the Internet into order. There are subject bibliographies to be compiled, registers and genealogical records to be sorted and indexed, databases to be set up. The list can be extended. If all you've ever bothered to learn is how to knock off an index to a book on some well-known topic — gardening, biography, cookery — of course you will say you don't know any of these other fields. Study them, delve into the principles, learn all you can about them. If doing so bores you, you are in the wrong occupation. Get out! Otherwise you'll find it fascinating and you may well be surprised where the jobs will crop up and, by jingo! You may just be ready to give it a go.

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