Indexing after the millennium
2 — existing skills influence future development

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The 21st century will offer plenty of opportunities for indexers, whether they work with electronic media or traditional back-of-the-book indexes. Our existing skills are needed to develop new processes.

No doubt, the 21st Century will continue to provide opportunities for those of us who create indexes for online media, such as CD-ROMs, Web documents, and electronic databases. The real question concerns the tools we will be using. Another big question concerns display technology, which has not kept pace with the rest of the computer industry.

Will we still be using HTML (HyperText Markup Language or, as my husband prefers to say, the Hard To Master Language) to create Web documents and their indexes? Probably not. The W3C (World Wide Web Consortium), the organization that helps develop standards for online media, seems to be leaning more toward XML (eXtended Markup Language).

Perhaps there has never been a better time for indexers to make their voices heard. Microsoft Corporation, a big player in the W3C, has expressed interest in sponsoring ASI’s membership of the W3C. No matter what any of us personally think of Bill Gates or Microsoft, I think we would be foolish to ignore the opportunity to help them set standards for the display of online indexes.

What about embedding index markers in desktop publishing tools such as FrameMaker, PageMaker, Interleaf, and Microsoft Word? Those tools are likely to stay around for many years to come; however, I sincerely hope that their cumbersome indexing features will improve significantly.

If you’re not into high-tech tools, there’s no need to worry. Printed books are not going away!

Looking back/looking ahead

Remember the predictions of a “paperless society” in the 1980s when personal computers first became popular? That prediction couldn’t have been more wrong! Nearly twenty years later, paper persists. Why? Chances are, most of us will print out anything over 500 words.

Readability of online documents suffers significantly from poor screen resolution and awkward navigation strategies that have an adverse impact on reading speed. When I attended an STC (Society for Technical Communication) conference recently, I heard someone say that our reading speed decreases by 25% when reading online documents compared to our reading speed for printed documents.

From a practical standpoint, books have enormous economic as well as ergonomic advantages. I have no doubt that printed

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Or if a topic in a list is hidden away out of sight in a scrolling window, a reader will not bother to scroll to look for it, but will just choose from the first few topics that appear. How do we design our indexes for this? How does the index operate on screen? Does it scroll automatically, does it stay up and available, or does it disappear? We need to gain more information about readers’ habits and patterns of use, and incorporate it into our index designs. All these issues affect the way we write indexes for this new environment.

Web indexing

Then there is the Web and all its recent and forthcoming developments. This is the area that is the most exciting to me, and no one can predict where it will wind up. New technologies such as XML (Extensible Markup Language) mean that the Web’s presentation of materials can be handled with much more sophistication, and yet finding the information you want is still the primary goal. The endless search for the best search engine just indicates to me that we still need human analysis to find things effectively. Indexing as it evolves for Web materials is one of the most rapidly changing areas, and we should be actively seeking a role in its development. There should be immense opportunities for indexers not only for Internet materials, but also in the development of Intranet web sites — sites that are built for proprietary or in-company-use only.

I see all these areas — embedded indexing, online indexing, and Web-based indexing — as interesting new challenges for our particular set of skills. We can play a role in helping make access easier, and helping to design how indexes should look when they are not on paper. Developing controlled languages and index formats for these forms of information storage fits perfectly into our specific ways of thinking, and should help keep us busy well into the new millennium.

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The Indexer Vol. 21 No. 1 April 1998
books will continue to be essential as we enter the 21st Century and that some indexers will still be creating back-of-the-book indexes while other indexers produce indexes for various types of online documentation and electronic media.

Economic considerations

Ads in computer magazines are almost mind boggling. The hype factor is designed to make you think that the only way to be successful at anything these days is to rush out and buy the latest and greatest high-tech computers and related equipment.

Simply put, keeping up with new technology is an expensive proposition, and it is not necessarily a guarantee of success. It isn't likely that many of us can afford to replace our old computers, software, and peripherals every six months. How many of us want to invest in anything that could be obsolete in six months ... or even in twelve months? When we do invest in a computer and other equipment, we want to know that it will serve us well for a few years.

On the other hand, most of us can (and do) have money in our budgets for books, whether we go to a bookstore for them or do some Net surfing at Amazon.com and other online bookstores.

Ergonomic Considerations

Compared to online documents, printed books have significant advantages; they are more portable (and they are not likely to break if you drop them!), they do not require batteries or electrical connections, they do not require expensive storage devices, and the resolution of the printed page is far superior to screen resolution.

Unfortunately, display technology has lagged far behind the rest of the so-called digital revolution. There have not been any significant developments in the past five years and, although, improvements are long overdue, there do not seem to be any on the horizon.

Because the resolution of text displayed on a computer screen is, at best, 10 dots per mm² compared to a resolution of 10,000 dots per mm² for information in a typeset document, fatigue sets in more quickly. Consequently, our attention spans are shorter. That is precisely why indexes in online documents are so important!

Something happens to most people when they are online; it's similar to what happens to some people when they get behind the wheel of a car: they want to get there now, and they don't want anything to get in their way! A good index becomes the equivalent of hitting all green lights in heavy traffic. Just as traffic lights must be positioned so drivers can easily see them, indexes in online documentation must be easily accessed and displayed so readers can use them. That's one area where I hope we will see a lot of improvement in the 21st Century.

Navigation tools

Navigation tools for large online documents is another area where I hope to see significant improvements. Full-text search technology is slowly getting better; but no matter how good a search engine is, it is not a viable substitute for a good index.

I wish I had a dollar for every time a technical writer or software developer asked me, "Why do we need an index? We have full-text search!" In response, I ask them a few questions: Does full-text search provide any real topic analysis? Does it have See and See also references that indicate the relationship between topics? Can it distinguish between a passing reference and substantive information? Can it help you edit your text by pointing out inconsistencies in terminology, imbalances (where topics of equal importance do not get equal coverage) and organizational problems? No! Although full-text search can be a useful tool in some cases, it cannot replace a good index.

Likewise, the so-called automatic indexing features in some desktop publishing programs fall far short of providing a real index. As I tell technical writers who attend my Indexing Skills Workshop for Technical Communicators, "The processing required to produce a good index happens between your ears — not on your hard drive!"

Summary

Whether you enjoy working with online documents and electronic media or you prefer to create back-of-the-book indexes, the 21st century should offer plenty of opportunities for indexers. Ideally, online documents should complement print. Not all information is suitable for online distribution, and the market for printed books will continue to grow. In short, we all have a lot of work to do!

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