The Talmud says that “Since the destruction of the Temple, prophesy has been taken away from the prophets and given to fools and babes.” Not being a babe any more, nor wishing to be deemed a fool, I am reluctant to pontificate about indexing in the coming century. All I can do is to share with my readers and fellow indexers what I hope will or will not be the future of indexing and indexes. But before contemplating the future, let me look for a moment at the past.

The need to have tools for the retrieval of information goes back thousands of years. The complaint of the Preacher about there being no end to the making of books (Eccl. 12:12) is not only about the multitude of sources of information but can also be understood as the frustration of knowing that the answer to a question or a problem must be there in those many books, but lacking a key that would unlock the storehouse of hidden answers. In biblical times, human memory was probably the only key available. But at least from the days of the Roman empire, we have certain hints that indexes and abstracts were compiled and used: Seneca advises his friend Lucilius “sume in manu indicem philosophorum” (pick up the list of philosophers) (Epistulae 39). When books were multiplied by the printing press beyond anything the Preacher might have experienced, it took only a few years before those books were provided with indexes, some of which were of high quality. Since then, the indexing of books and later that of periodicals has been the indispensable key to the ever swelling flood of recorded information in all its forms. So it is my hope that the making of indexes will continue to be a central concern of people who create information, those who transmit it, and those who need it.

I also hope that books will continue to be one of the primary forms of information, though other forms, including some not yet envisaged, will complement and perhaps even outnumber them. Human beings will continue to write books for the benefit, pleasure, and entertainment of other human beings, and they will have to be indexed, preferably also by human beings.

That means that indexers, unlike the scribes of manuscripts who were put out of their jobs by the printing press, will continue to provide intelligible and useful keys to sources of information. I hope even that the demand for proficient indexers will grow with the growth and diversity of information media, including those available only electronically and without a physical substrate. The present state of utter confusion created by search engines that rely solely on the words of a text and sometimes on syntactic constructions, is already much deplored and even cursed by users who are either overwhelmed by undifferentiated masses of references or cannot find anything they want or need. The exponential growth of all forms of information will inevitably lead to the need for better filtering methods in order to sift the wheat from the chaff, and I hope that indexers will play a significant role in this operation. That is not to say that computers will not play an important role in such filtering operations, and they will increasingly help indexers to perform the mechanics of their job, but they will, I hope, not supplant human indexers.

The term “cyber-” is nowadays indiscriminately appended to almost anything related to the use of computers and the dissemination of information by electronic means. Few if any people still remember that the term was coined in the late 1940s by mathematician Norbert Wiener, the founder of Cybernetics, the science of control in machines and human beings. He derived the term from kybernetes, the Greek word for helmsman. As the helmsman controls the path of a ship, so the operations and processes in the material world must be controlled if utter chaos is not to reign. Control is thus at the heart of all operations in “cyberspace” (a term definitely not coined by Wiener). This control, in the form of filtering and indexing, I believe, can only be exercised by human beings as far as information is concerned.

Significantly, Wiener wrote a book, The human use of human beings, in which he outlined his belief that control exercised by machines, far from enslaving human beings, will liberate men and women for tasks only they can perform. Let us hope that the coming century will see an increasing use of human indexers for the forging of keys to the hidden treasures of information in all its forms.