Indexing after the millennium

Future conditional

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Considers the future for indexers in book, serial and online publishing. Concludes that although the future of printed media indexing seems secure in our "paperless society", indexers need to promote their existing skills and grasp opportunities in the developing technologies.

I am pleased to have been invited to express my thoughts on the future of indexing, in my capacity as a Past President of the American Society of Indexers (1988-89). In my acceptance speech for the Hines Award (Weinberg 1998b), delivered on May 15 in Seattle, I made several such predictions; I am reiterating some and adding others here. My prognostications are based on environmental scanning — analysis of the published literature and papers presented at conferences in the field of library-information science.

To Nancy Mulvany's question "Will we still have regular book indexes [after the year 2000]?", I answer Yes. I do not believe that print will disappear. Walt Crawford and Michael Gorman (1995) have argued convincingly, in response to predictions of the disappearance of books and libraries, that the paper medium is more appropriate for sustained reading than a screen. This observation is echoed in the latest issue of Independent Publisher (Ott 1998). As I enter Barnes & Noble, awed by the crowded shelves and numerous patrons, I observe, "Here we are in the paperless society."

The number of printed manuals for computer hardware and software is astounding, evidence that the interfaces are not as intuitive as claimed, and that online help is not very helpful. Pat Schuman, a publisher of books in the field of library science, has observed that the only people making money off the Internet are those who are publishing printed guides to its resources. I believe that many reference works will continue to be published on paper, although fast-changing data are more appropriate for the electronic medium.

Indexers of technical documentation should continue to command high salaries, but those who index scholarly monographs will be dependent on the financial health of university presses. A recent article notes that this has improved of late, but the industry remains volatile (Winkler 1998). As libraries are the primary market for scholarly works, I believe that the recent crisis in university publishing was due to the pressure on libraries to transfer money from their book budgets to automation. The persistence of the odious clause in publishing contracts that requires authors to compile their own indexes or have the fee deducted from royalties is particularly harmful to our profession. The consolidation of textbook publishers is not an auspicious trend for indexers either (mergers are usually followed by downsizing), nor is distance education that bypasses textbooks.

Having discussed books, I proceed to serials. A colleague of mine who moderates a listserv recently observed that "paper rules", in advising subscribers to place announcements in a printed newsletter as well as an electronic one. I am increasingly hearing from friends that they are unsubscribing from listservs, because they are overwhelmed by irrelevant messages. I object to the appropriation of the terminology of our field by listserv moderators — the use of the word 'index' for an unordered list of titles, and of the term 'digest' for the unabstracted full text of messages. The claims of software developers to be able to categorize and prioritize electronic messages automatically are ridiculous, in my view.

A few years ago, I wrote an editorial on printed vs. electronic journals and cited several publications in support of my belief that electronic journals will not replace paper ones (Weinberg 1995). My favorite document on this point is an article that presents the advantages to authors of publishing in electronic journals — notably faster feedback — but the authors of this article (Koenig and Harrell 1995) waited a year to have it appear in a paper journal that is widely read and cited. Editors of electronic journals are not inundated with manuscripts, and citation studies of this form show that they have little impact (Harter 1998). Libraries are cancelling subscriptions to printed journals and providing full-text electronic access to their patrons instead; but this is a secondary form, not primary electronic publishing.

The publication of paper journals brings the need for annual indexes and for coverage by databases. Not all journals get an annual index, and there is definitely migration from printed indexes to online databases. As libraries are increasingly mounting such databases alongside their online catalogs, the demand for indexers seems to be assured. The only worrisome factor is that current job ads for database indexers often call for...
piecework (a fixed fee per record) by freelancers rather than full-time, in-house employment.

A very recent book on the new media (Meadow 1998) includes a fascinating graph (Figure A7, p. 248) demonstrating that paper journals “are on a slow increase, but books seem to be growing rapidly in number.” Having presented the positive outlook for indexers who work with printed media, I proceed to discuss electronic publications.

I am in the midst of reviewing the CD-ROM version of *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. The printed version has a sophisticated index that was described in this journal (Posner 1972). This key to the text was omitted from the CD, no doubt because it would involve too much work to update it, to incorporate text from the encyclopedia’s yearbooks. The view that a keyword search capability obviates the need for an index to an electronic document is a dangerous one for our profession. The ambiguity of the term ‘keyword’ in the context of database searching and indexing leads to a lack of understanding of the difference between words in text and humanly assigned descriptors.

Information scientists consider CD-ROM a transitional technology and predict that everything will eventually be on the Internet. I already see this happening in libraries that have Web-based catalogs linked to a variety of indexes. It is time-consuming and expensive for libraries to network CD-ROMs and to explain their inconsistent interfaces to end-users. It is easier for library patrons to access all types of information from a single workstation.

Internet users have become disenchanted with search engines that count words; the search services in which humans select, evaluate, and classify Web sites are now favored. At the 1997 Annual Meeting of the American Society for Information Science, several interesting thesaurus projects for the Internet were described. A growing trend is the creation of end-user thesauri to assist in query expansion, i.e., to link synonyms and related terms to the words input by the user. At ASI’s 25th anniversary meeting, held in 1993, Daniel Uchitelle of the Modern Language Association forecast that thesauri would be the growth industry of the nineties. This prophecy has come true. At a meeting of ASI’s New York Chapter held a couple of years ago, a law librarian predicted that thesaurus developers would link synonyms once and put all indexers out of business. From my consulting, however, I see a great deal of activity in the design of specialized vocabularies that are not included in general thesauri, and I expect such projects to increase in number. The wide variety of businesses represented at my 1998 seminar on thesaurus design supports this prediction.

In presenting the Hines Award to me, ASI Past President Elinor Lindheimer quoted my observation, “There is a serious lack of vocabulary control in the literature on controlled vocabulary” (Weinberg 1998a, p. 22). It is important for us to learn the vogue words that are equivalent to our traditional terms, in order to understand that organizing information in the electronic medium is not fundamentally different from the work we have always done. At the National Online Meeting held right before ASI’s 1998 Annual Meeting, I heard a paper on “data mining” by a consultant, however, I see a great deal of activity in the design of specialized vocabularies that are not included in general thesauri, and I expect such projects to increase in number. The wide variety of businesses represented at my 1998 seminar on thesaurus design supports this prediction.

References


Meadow, Charles T. (1998). Ink into bits: A web of converging media. Lanham, Md. & London: Scarecrow Press. (I am indebted to my Director, Dr. James Benson, for bringing this work to my attention.)


