A plea for bibliographic quality
from Bella Hass Weinberg, New York

I am writing to provide bibliographic addenda to several articles in the October 1997 issue of The Indexer.

alphabetical sequencing

This communication was prompted by Simon Cauchi's (1997) letter to the editor, which states: "...I have tried diligently to find a real-life example of an index in which the same headword is repeated as personal name, place name, subject heading, and title, but so far without success. I think it hardly ever happens" (p. 217).

Trust that Mr. Cauchi grants that catalogs are indexes, I would like to point out that sequences with precisely the headings in List A of his letter go on for pages in printed Library of Congress (LC) Catalogs (both the author and subject sequences) and their successor, the National Union Catalog. (I tried to search the current LC catalog on the Internet, but its new interface does not allow one to browse such a lengthy sequence; artificial intelligence algorithms create a subset automatically.)

The introduction to the last printed edition of the National Union Catalog (Howard, 1982, p. ix) states that the source of its rules for arrangement is Filing rules for the dictionary catalogs of the Library of Congress. The date is not given by Howard, but a code with that title was published in 1956. The Person, Place, Thing, Title rule appears on page 2. The Foreword to this work (Cronin 1956) notes that the code is "an expansion and modification of the classed order outlined by Charles A. Cutter in his Rules for a printed dictionary catalogue, first published in 1876...". In that edition, the person-place-title-subject sequence is given in rule 170, along with a fifth element — form — as well as a rationale: "This order is easy to remember because it follows the course of cataloguing: we put down first the author, then the title and lastly look inside for the subject..." (Cutter 1876, p. 68). The oldest indexing manual cited by Cauchi as a source for this rule is Collison 1953. The rule antedates that source by at least three quarters of a century. I say at least because Cutter refers to earlier British cataloging codes that may contain this rule as well. (There's a limit to the amount of research one can do for a letter to the editor!) It is interesting that none of the filing codes cited above has an index entry for "person-place-title-subject". I found the rule through sequential searches of filing codes, always at the beginning, as if the rule were an axiom. The rule is preserved in the most recent filing code of the Library of Congress, dated 1980.

need for references

Moving from old standards to new, I would like to add a reference to Louise Spiteri's (1997) article on abstracting. She cites the 1971 ANSI standard but does not mention the NISO (1997) revision. Although Prof. Spiteri may have submitted her article before the standard was published, drafts of the revision were widely circulated years prior to that and were discussed in the journal literature; for example, Needleman (1995) details the reasons why ASIS voted no on the draft revision.

The finding of Mathews and Bakewell (1997) that some children misinterpret the dash in index locators as a minus sign is closely related to my report that the comma between locators is viewed by some children as connecting page numbers exceeding 1000 (Weinberg 1996, p. 23). A substantial summary of the article appeared in this journal (Wolner 1996); thus the two articles on children and indexes could have been linked.

I agree with the enumeration in the lead article (Simkin 1997) of the categories of knowledge that an indexer needs to master, and I believe that these are taught in most schools of library-information science. I am surprised, however, that an article authored by a "former manager of library and information services" contains only one word in its title, which will impede free-text retrieval and require text enhancement by indexing services. Moreover, the article completely lacks formal bibliographic references, even for specific documents that are quoted. How would a reader with little background in information science know where to look for Vannevar Bush's or Ted Nelson's works, which are alluded to on p. 179? A lengthy quotation from Paul Otlet is given subsequently, with no indication of the source. This goes against the traditions of librarianship and is likely to create headaches for reference librarians, who may have to do extensive searching to find the documents alluded to but not cited.

In a prior letter to this journal (Weinberg 1992) I provided bibliographic addenda to an article and enumerated the advantages to a journal of having citation links to the literature of other disciplines — notably, more extensive index coverage. The desirability of the latter should be obvious to all the contributors to this journal.

References


Bella Hass Weinberg, Division of Library and Information Science, St. John's University, Jamaica NY 11439
Professionalism — the debate has been going for so long that I forget what I have already said, or, some comments in reply to John Simkin and Elizabeth Wallis

from Glenda Browne, New South Wales

The professionalism debate focuses on the role of indexing societies in enhancing both the quality of indexes produced, and the image and pay of indexers. These two aims can get mixed up, so that quality controls are introduced in an attempt to enhance our image. We can enhance our image by more effectively communicating the importance of the work we do. I would rather see this approach, based on outreach, than an inward-looking attempt to restrict "unqualified" indexers from indexing.

Assessment of Indexers.

Both the Australian and the UK Societies of Indexers already have procedures for the initial assessment of indexers, and these fulfil part of our role in ensuring indexing quality. Other factors such as educational courses, meetings and conferences, and discussions on Index-L are also important. This basic assessment (called "registration" in Australia) needs to be extended so that all indexers can prove their eligibility. Book indexing is easier to assess, but this should not mean that periodical, database, picture, and web indexers are disadvantaged.

Until all indexers have equal access to the basic qualification offered by their societies, no further levels should be introduced.

If I were employing an indexer I would choose one who had achieved registration. The number of unregistered indexers in Indexers Available (Australia) who are getting regular indexing work shows that many editors do not feel this way. The situation is apparently similar in the UK, as Elizabeth Wallis acknowledges: "most editors do not demand any proof of an indexer's professional training" (p. 191). We must let editors know about registration so that they can make an informed choice. However, we should also be willing to listen to them, and to learn what criteria they use to select indexers.

Will more assessment prevent poor indexing? Many poor indexes are made, but we do not have any evidence to show who makes them. My guess is that many are done by first time indexers (including authors). Most people who pursue indexing as a career will become good at it, while those who do not will not get much repeat work.

Practical difficulties

There are practical difficulties with extending assessment to increase professionalism. One is that we are a small profession, with limited, usually voluntary, human resources. The assessment of the index I submitted for registration took nine months. I sympathise with the overworked assessor who was doing this job; however, I do not think we can increase our indexing quality controls until we can be sure of timeliness in our assessment procedures.

I also find it odd that though we are sure that indexing has to be done by a professional, we have no qualms about index assessment being done by amateur assessors. If we are to be consistent we must hire professional educators to do our assessments, or at least to advise on and supervise the process. (Of course many of us feel totally competent to assess indexing, just as many authors feel totally competent to index). Societies must also be willing to bring in outside experts as needed, for example for technical material.

Here are a few specific comments on John Simkin's article.

Information management skills

At first John defines indexing very broadly and emphasises the importance of an understanding of the principles of information management. This approach carries within it a solution. If the result of indexing is "an index or a catalogue, database, bibliography, set of abstracts, synopses, summaries" (p. 178) then the qualification needed is obviously a diploma in information/ librarianship, and professional acceptance is shown by Associateship of the Australian Library and Information Association. However, it is not so simple, as most of us define indexing much more narrowly (quite simply, its product is an index).

Technical versus professional skills

I can't see the point in John's division of indexing into technical and professional aspects. All of the time I spend indexing is professional time. The "rule-based" aspect of any index is minimal; a careful analysis of the content and thoughtful writing of the index for user access form the bulk of the work. This is evident from the many poor indexes created by people who know the "rules" but have no feeling for the work.

Really John's division is into the doing and the managing of indexing. One of the things I like best about indexing is that it is a job where I can have a hands-on role, and still feel that I am intellectually stretched.

In some other fields, at last, technical skill is now being rewarded as much as managerial skill (so that good teachers are no longer promoted to be average principals, and good engineers to become poor managers). But in indexing, where there is very little "management", we now have a proposal to go the other way.

Indexing the Internet

John asks "Where were we when the world needed us?" I ask myself the same thing. I hope that indexers will create a place for themselves in enhancing access to information on the Internet.

But I know that "professionalism" and assessments will not help us. (Which of our would-be assessors are indexing the Internet?) What we need on the Web are enthusiasts with an understanding of the Internet (first) and of indexing (second).

The awareness of web indexing within AusSI started very much through the enthusiasm of one person (Dwight Walker) with the support of the AusSI committees. We need people like this with a vision of the future who are willing to experiment, who will communicate with other stakeholders on the Internet, and will work with them. We need indexing societies with a forward-looking approach and adventurous policies to help us with indexing the Internet.

Our profession

John Simkin says this profession is "deadly serious" (p. 180). It is also fun. In Index-L and in professional meetings you will find a mixture of experienced indexers, learners, and wannabes who share ideas and expertise for the betterment of the profession. This is the approach to quality that I like. It is inclusive, it is positive and it is practical.

Indexing is a pursuit that suits authors, occasional indexers,
Updike on indexing

John Updike is better known as a novelist (the Rabbit series, Bech: a Book, Couples) than as a book reviewer. But from 1960 onwards he contributed reviews to The New Yorker magazine, and a selection of these constitutes the major part of a collection of his essays and criticism, Hugging the shore (a further volume is entitled Odd jobs). His comments on indexes and indexing are worth noting, and I am grateful to Norma Munson of Rockford, Illinois, for drawing my attention to them.

Updike positively rejoices in the index to Boswell, Laird of Auchinleck:

'The superb index runs to 68 pages of double columns; the six pages of "Boswell, James" gather the diffuse material into telling condensations, such as "drinks heavily" (31 references), "ill after drinking" (33), "follows, dallies with, visits prostitutes" (13), and "fears, catches, is cured of venereal disease" (16).'

In passing, he notes the absence of an index in a biography of Vladimir Nabokov in a footnote to a review of another book, a collection of Nabokov's literary lectures:

'Disapproved of by its proud subject, and far from error-free, this biography yet constitutes a creditable, if overanimated and index-free, replication of Nabokovian high spirits.'

Reviewing a book entitled 200 years of American illustration, he contrasts it unfavourably ('for purposes of invidious comparison') with 'another recent omnibus, America's great illustrators, by Susan A. Meyer' which he considers 'practically ideal'.

'And where, oh, where is an index? America's great illustrators has a fine one, although its artists are fewer and coherently grouped. In 200 years, the artists are scattered by the winds of layout through the chronological sections; a short biography of each is given at the back of the volume, but no cross-reference is supplied to the plates of their graphic work in this volume, or to the mention of their names in Mr. Pitz's brief history of American illustration.'

However, Updike's most damning remarks are reserved for Carlos Baker's selection of the letters of Ernest Hemingway:

'As a piece of manufacture and editorial work, the volume warrants an A-, perhaps a B+ ... There is no chronology of Hemingway's life, no bibliography of his works, no glossary of his major correspondents, and no typographical distinction in the index between simple references to a person and letters written to that person. This user found the index erratic. For instance, no reference exists under "Hemingway, Grace Hall" to this definitive blast, in a letter to Charles Scribner, Sr.:

"My mother is very old, her memory is more than spotty and she is addicted to fantastic statements. Lately, because she is so old, I have played the devoted son in case it pleased her. But I hate her guts and she hates mine. She forced my father to suicide..."

'The index also ignores this interesting verdict upon the Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno:

"Do you remember what a dull and conceited man Unamuno was? But often he was right. I used to sit around by the hour waiting for him to be right."'

References


Christine Shuttleworth

Letters to the editor — continued

moonlighters, full time freelancers and inhouse workers. One size doesn't fit all, and I'd hate to think that we are trying to squash everyone into one mould, and sidelining those who don't fit.

Indexing is not a huge profession like medicine or architecture, and this is one of its appeals for me. We are not big enough for large prescribed courses and strict assessment criteria. Indexers come from a variety of backgrounds such as librarianship, publishing and technical writing. These all give useful (although Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno:

"Do you remember what a dull and conceited man Unamuno was? But often he was right. I used to sit around by the hour waiting for him to be right."'

References


Christine Shuttleworth

AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY OF INDEXERS Second International Conference, 1999

CALL FOR PAPERS / EXPRESSION OF INTEREST

The Australian Society of Indexers will hold its second International Conference at Hobart, Tasmania from Friday 27 to Sunday 29 August 1999 with the theme: The August Indexer

The Conference is being designed to address issues relevant to the art of indexing and applications, from local to international: database indexing, back of the book indexing, systems for indexing, web indexing, copyright issues, education for indexing, editing / indexing continuums, indexing of children's literature, legal indexing, medical indexing, indexing of photos, pictures, ...

Papers may be presented as full conference papers, in poster sessions, in workshops or round table discussions.

Excellent opportunities are available before and after the Conference to spend time exploring the beautiful and historical areas of Tasmania.

Please contact the Conference Committee now to express interest in presenting a paper or in participating in the conference. Your name will be recorded to receive further details.

Australian Society of Indexers International Conference Committee, GPO Box 1251, Melbourne, Victoria 3001, Australia

Tel/ Fax: +61 3 9571 6341, email: mindexer@interconnect.com.au

Glenda Browne (Diagonal@bigpond.com)