Indexing after the millennium 6
Standards and good practice

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Calls for an International Society of Indexers to educate publishers in the need for indexes and to sponsor more research, particularly into user needs and habits. Hopes for greater recognition of the value of standards as guidelines to good indexing practice.

My sister died in 1996, shortly before reaching her 70th birthday. My parents were younger when they died. I shall be 69 in the year 2000, so I may well not care very much about indexing after the millennium! I am also wary about making predictions. Don Revill (1984) has quoted a remark often attributed to Samuel Goldwyn: “Prediction is very difficult, especially about the future.” He also cited some examples of poor prediction, such as two from Lord Kelvin — “Radio has no future” and “X-rays will prove a hoax”. Lord Jenkins of Hillhead is reported as saying, about his proposals for electoral reform, that it is always difficult to predict the future until it happens (Parris 1998).

Having got those points off my chest, here are a few hopes and expectations for post-millennium indexing.

Will indexing in 2000 be radically different from indexing in 1999? Indexes will still be needed, indexers will have to compile them and the principles will not change. Electronic transmission will obviously assume even greater importance. A former chair of the (British) Society of Indexers, Jill Halliday (1998), has said that the minimum requirements for setting up as an indexer now include a decent computer and printer, e-mail, answering machine and fax, in addition to such obvious items as reference books, telephone, a filing cabinet, a desk and a chair. This will be even more true in the year 2000. Wilfrid Lancaster (1998) visualizes users of digital library networks themselves contributing to the indexing of resources which they have found to be useful and cites Besser as stating that, if they can develop systems for user-assigned terminology, collection managers can rely upon users to assign terms or keywords. Although the earliest winners of the Wheatley Medal were author-indexers, I think there are obvious dangers in allowing non-indexers to assign terminology. What about vocabulary control, for example? (Of course, Lancaster himself was involved in the Cranfield studies of the 1960s, which suggested that vocabulary control is not as important as we sometimes think.)

Soon it will no longer be necessary to refer to the (British) Society of Indexers, as I did in the above paragraph, because the individual affiliated societies will have been replaced by an International Society of Indexers. Dare we hope that we shall have been joined by some other countries of the European Union?

I hope that the International Society will be able to persuade publishers of the importance of indexes, so that authors will no longer say that they failed to provide an index on the advice of their publisher, as Lord Alton did in a letter to this writer.

I hope also that the importance of standards for indexing will be recognized as much as standards of indexing. Those who are suspicious of such standards should appreciate that they are guidelines to good practice and should be used as such rather than being regarded as Holy Writ. I am delighted that we now have an acceptable international standard (International Organization for Standardization 1996) and am sorry that the United States and Poland did not feel able to accept this.

Although I have my doubts about the desirability of users assigning indexing terms, I would like to see greater attention given to user needs and habits when indexes are being compiled. With this in mind, I hope that the International Society will be able to encourage or sponsor more research into good practice in indexing. Some publishers have indicated that they plan to adopt all or some of the recommendations of the British Library sponsored investigation of indexes to children’s information books (Williams and Bakewell 1997). This is good, but there is room for much more research in the area of children’s indexing alone. The Williams/Bakewell research only covered children aged 7-11 (school years 3-6) and only referred to the technology in passing. Research should also be undertaken into the needs of adult users of indexes. Do they understand cross-references? What system of alphabetization do they prefer? Do they read and understand introductory notes to the index? These and many other questions need to be answered.

Ira Kleinberg (1993) has demonstrated that research is fundamental. It can help to ‘unpack’ the assumptions we hold, which are usually implicit and taken-for-granted. It can help to ‘unpack’ the assumptions held by professional indexers that they are the best qualified to index a document and to demonstrate whether this is really so.

There is much to be done. The future for indexers and indexing is bright, and we need not fear that our jobs will be taken over by machines. As Lancaster points out, it will probably be a very long time before machines are intelligent enough to replace human input completely in the important activity of indexing, if they ever are.

References

