Yesterday is history

The evolution of the Weekly Mail index

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The Weekly Mail began publication during the final years of South Africa’s apartheid regime. This article discusses how the indexing policy was adapted in response to changing political and social circumstances and outlines the problems this has raised for the construction of a consolidated index covering the entire period of the paper’s publication.

In 1985, the Rand Daily Mail, arguably South Africa’s best-known and certainly most liberal newspaper, closed down. It was suffering from financial difficulties brought about by a mismatch between its readership and the desired audience of advertisers but its demise was greeted with delight by the government in Pretoria. The levers of power within the apartheid regime were in the process of being transferred from state bureaucrats to the security forces in the context of a ‘total onslaught’ philosophy that demanded, among other authoritarian attitudes, that the press serve the ‘national interest’.

The launch of the Weekly Mail

In a move that can only be described as a triumph of hope over realism in a climate of increasing state repression, lawlessness and outright violence, the redundant journalists put their severance packages into a new title that they named The Weekly Mail. In order to evade the bureaucratic and financial complications of the Newspaper and Imprint Registration Act (1971), the paper was set up as a club whose members were entitled to receive its publication. Its first issue on 14 June 1985 contained an exposé of the links between the right-wing Mozambican insurgents of RENAMO (also known as the Mozambique Resistance Movement) and the South African police; and articles on the deaths of detainees held without trial, forced removals in rural areas, unrest in general and the disappearance of three significant opposition leaders (the PEBCO – Port Elizabeth Black Community Organisation – Three) in the Port Elizabeth area. Such events received scant coverage in the mainstream press even though (and also, of course, because) they demonstrated the extent of impunity enjoyed by a hooligan authoritarianism that had gripped the country.

The launch of the newspaper had coincided with the declaration of a partial State of Emergency that was soon to become a full-blown national emergency lasting nearly four years. One of the main objectives of the government during this period was to clamp down on the circulation of information both within the country and to the outside world. The opposition was equally determined to maintain a flow of information as a mobilizing factor for both the internal resistance struggle and the anti-apartheid movement overseas (Merrett, 1994: 113–56). So successful was the Weekly Mail in its pursuit of stories at the heart of the disastrous human rights record of the South African government that simply buying and reading a copy became symbolic of defiant opposition; it was a political act in itself. In spite of harassment by the security forces and confiscation of issues from newsagents in June 1986, the paper managed the unlikely feat of surviving until November 1988, when it was closed down for a month under Emergency regulations.

Since then it has flourished and is now the sole survivor of a lamented group of alternative titles that included New Nation (funded by the Southern African Catholic Bishops Conference) and Vrye Weekblad (the radical Afrikaans weekly edited by Max du Preez).

It soon became apparent that given the political circumstances and the Weekly Mail’s content it could be considered a newspaper of record and therefore a valuable reference source for libraries. The quality of its reportage was high and at the start of the Emergency years it was the only paper investigating thoroughly the corruption and darkness at the heart of the South African polity. It was also the only frequently published source of information on the liberation movement in its broadest sense.

In the 1980s there was a growing demand from university students that their courses be made ‘relevant’, that they should reflect the concerns and issues of contemporary South Africa. Some lecturers supported this trend and a flood of students arrived in academic libraries requiring information on ‘alternative’ South Africa. These sort of data were increasingly available from the burgeoning human rights movement and from non-governmental organizations but, apart from the publications of the South African Institute of Race Relations, access to it was a problem. The Weekly Mail’s reporters made good use of these sources while the rest of the press virtually ignored them.

Thus the Weekly Mail became an academic tool as well as a resource for those determined to counter the suppression of anti-apartheid viewpoints by security and emergency legislation; but in order to be accessible an index was essential and this project was taken on by the University of Natal Library, Pietermaritzburg. The primary objective was to produce a tool that could be used by subject librarians in response to students’ enquiries but it quickly took on wider importance.
Indexing policy

Indexing policy started, and has remained, modest. From the outset the aim has been to achieve the antithesis of Wallis’s complaint about ‘innumerable columns of entries to enrage future researchers’ (Wallis, 1987: 185). Beare (1999: 24) makes the point that ‘there is no standard way to index a newspaper’. Indeed, the Weekly Mail index cannot be considered a newspaper index in the traditional sense of the phrase – a true newspaper index would include not only subject headings and page numbers but a description of each article (perhaps the headline) and an indication of its placing on the page, for instance (Semonche, 1986: 27) – but a subject index to part of its contents. The decision regarding what to leave out (Sandlin et al., 1985: 186) was not difficult, driven as the index was by demand and by time available. Similarly, there was little danger of over-indexing (Beare, 1989: 229) as it was decided at the outset to limit each article to two subject descriptors except in exceptional circumstances. This has proved easier to abide by as the index has evolved and concepts have triumphed over corporate names (see below). In spite of its limitations there was the hope, quickly realized, that hours of searching through copies of the paper for articles vaguely remembered would be saved (Beare, 1988: 145).

Indexing was restricted geographically to South Africa and Namibia (still under occupation from Pretoria when the index started) on the grounds that there were many other sources of world news. Other countries were thus not indexed except in cases where the story was about South Africa’s foreign relations. Similarly, indexing was restricted to political and economic news, with art and sport included only where there was demonstrable political content. Place names were generally indexed only in relation to the Group Areas Act and information about bantustans was aggregated under each name.

Emphasis was placed on the names of organizations rather than those of people or conceptual terms. There were good bibliographic and political reasons for this. At this point in South Africa’s history an objective of the authorities was to suppress information about the opinions, policies and activities of opposition organizations aligned with the liberation movement. Rather than scatter references by concept around the index it was decided to consolidate them under the names of specific organizations. The reason for ignoring all but the most important references to personal names was a reflection of the political nature of the times, an era of causes and idealism in which personalities did not play a large part and individuals had good reason to keep a low profile out of range of the security police. For instance, trade unions were comprehensively indexed: the term ‘strikes’ was used only for overview articles and specific strikes were indexed under the name of the relevant union. A similar approach was taken to political organizations. Indexing was restricted to news articles and regular features while editorials and letters were ignored.

Out of this exercise emerged an authority file for the South African condition during the State of Emergency of the late 1980s. In essence it charted the emergence of the African National Congress (ANC) and its allies from the periphery of South African political life. Its contents evoke an almost nostalgic reminder of the times with headings such as ‘affected organisations’, ‘banned books’, ‘clandestine filming’, ‘fun runs (illegal)’, ‘grey areas’ and ‘street committees’; as well as a number of South Africanisms such as ‘askaris’, ‘outies’ and ‘toyi toyi’.

This indexing policy held good for the years of the Emergency in the latter half of the 1980s, during which time the Weekly Mail maintained its essential nature, reporting on the human rights excesses of the South African government and the reactions of non-racial opposition organizations. But after the unbanning of the liberation movement and the release of the most important long-term political prisoners in 1990, the politics of South Africa began slowly to be normalized. This resulted in a change of indexing policy in which emphasis was shifted to concepts as the distinctions between organizations became increasingly blurred. It also led to a more user-friendly index, free of endless see references from acronyms and more economical of space and users’ time. For instance, the three pre-1990 entries ‘South African Jewish Board of Deputies’, ‘Jews versus Apartheid’ and ‘Jews for Social Justice’ would henceforth simply be indexed as ‘Jewish community’; and ‘Khanya House arson attack, October 1988’ and ‘Khotso House bombing, August 1988’ were conflated into ‘bomb and arson attacks’, an approach far more likely to satisfy the general user. Likewise, personal names became more prominent in the index as ideological differences became generally less important, politics focused more and more on personalities and stories in the newspaper began to reflect individual achievement.

At the same time, some regular contributions that had been ignored in the past on the grounds of generality began to be included where it was clear that they had specific subject content. Looking back over the history of the index it is clear that indexing by concept would have been preferable from the outset as this promotes greater constancy in changing circumstances (Einhorn, 1976: 2–3). At that stage the future contours of South African politics and the nature of the Weekly Mail were impossible to discern.

Perhaps the most difficult part of the project has related to continuity. Whereas a book is a discrete object, newspaper stories run and run and it can often be extremely difficult to determine how or when they will end (Coates, 1983: 184; Kyte, 1967: 127). A recent example was the ‘McBride affair’ in which it was initially impossible to determine whether his arrest and detention in Mozambique was a story about a maverick individual, official relations between two governments or the machinations of remnants of the apartheid state. Even today there is little real clarity and the indexer has had to settle for the unsatisfactory term in the previous sentence. Stories that appear to be about corruption (one of the most used headings in the new South Africa) and are indexed as such are often transformed into either more general investigations of whole sectors or specific allegations against individuals.

The index has of course faced that perennial problem of the subject cataloguer – consistency in the use of headings (Perica, 1975: 3). To a certain extent, because just one indexer has been working on the same title for 15 years, it has been possible to develop and sometimes amend retro-
spectively the subject heading authority file as part of the indexing process (Knee, 1982: 101). Indeed, maintaining consistency has meant coping with an evolving thesaurus of the South African condition; during the years of apartheid such a publication was based on the Weekly Mail index (Merrett, 1993). Deployment of the subject descriptors was another issue and, as Christie (1986: 92) emphasizes, the index required headings specific enough for the researcher but also capable of being grouped into categories for broader searches.

Fifteen years of experience of the Weekly Mail index has led to considerable sympathy with Ahmed’s opinion (1991: 257) that ‘newspaper indexing is an intellectual exercise needing creativity, imagination [and] general knowledge’. The success of an index of this type requires a significant depth of knowledge about the subject content and its context: in this case the politics and historical background of South Africa. The paper has to be read thoroughly and with a view to reducing each article to its essential descriptors, thus bringing together related content while eliminating the trivial and the transient. The key content of an article is sometimes buried deep in the text: even the first phase of inexperienced indexing proved that headlines were not to be trusted at any cost.

Generally speaking, direct headings and natural language have proved best suited to the approach of users, but all indexing activity is of course also an exercise in classification. One of the main advantages of a manual index over online retrieval from an electronic publication is the indexer’s ability to group descriptors and provide the user with an overview and structure to the newspaper’s contents (Dewe, 1972: 58). In the case of the Weekly Mail index, the following have consistently been grouped in this way as subdivided class headings of long-term use: assassinations, boycotts, broadcasting, children, churches, farmers, housing, local government, massacres, murder, police, press, prisons, regional government, schools, violence, women, and workers. In themselves these give a clue to the condition of the South African police. A well-constructed index is not simply a mechanical tool but is capable of inspiring in the user creativity and new lines of enquiry.

**Online archive**

The issue of manual indexing of hard copy as opposed to online retrieval from an electronic version is forcefully put by Steemson (1994: 21), writing about Express Newspapers in London:

> We chose human brainpower for entering index references rather than the cheaper option of full-text automation. No full-text system invented can emulate the trained selectivity of the human mind, or the creative intuition of an experienced librarian.

These are important sentiments for the Weekly Mail index in the light of the fact that an electronic version of the newspaper has been available for several years and for a while threatened the continued existence of the manual project.6 The text-only, online archive is retrospective to 1994 and covers South African news, including sport and the arts, although catalogues of African news and book reviews are also available.

The most obvious reason for continuing to index manually for the users of hard copy has been the Third World context: most users do not have access to a computer and the Internet. But in many cases the manual index has proved quicker, easier and more adept at picking up significant information or articles. In early September 1999 some typical searches were run on the electronic archive for the current year. Use of the term ‘Mandela’ produced 222 hits while ‘women’ retrieved 385. Manual indexing over the same time span pointed to three and eight relevant articles respectively, emphasizing the difference between qualitative indexing based on human judgements about relevance and topicality and a mechanical exercise conducted by a computer that sucks up terms from a vast database with all the subtlety and discrimination of a vacuum cleaner. In the case of the term ‘women’, the manual index was even more user-friendly because it broke down the entry by using subheadings such as ‘in politics’, ‘and the press’ and ‘and violence’. By way of contrast, electronic searches were conducted using terms considered less likely to result in hits. ‘Cuba’ produced 12 even though the paper had published only one major article on that country; and the search ‘blue AND crane’ pointed to two articles. One was on the sought-after bird under threat in the Eastern Cape; the other on an operation conducted by the South African National Defence Force in cooperation with the Southern African Development Conference, illustrating yet another drawback of automated retrieval from full-text databases – an inability to contextualize and the favouring of recall over precision.

**Conclusions**

Newspapers reflect the nature of the societies in which they are published and their indexes ‘must be made to fit the time, the place and the occasion’ (Friedman, 1942: 23). The Weekly Mail index was a response to a particular combination of political and social circumstances which changed after the paper had stabilized itself. Radical changes in the nature of South African society resulted in a newspaper that altered with the times and required a new indexing direction. The drawback of changing direction in midstream is that now that a consolidated index, at least for the years prior to the electronic archive, is an attractive proposition and could be a valuable tool for historians, its realization would involve an almost total re-indexing of the first five years.

**Notes**

1 The first part of this title is based on a quote from Kyte (1967: 127).
3 For a history of the Weekly Mail see Manoim (1996). The paper was to change its name briefly to the Daily Mail from 15 June to early September 1990; and on 19 May 1995 it became the Mail & Guardian in recognition of a long-standing relationship with the British Guardian after a brief interlude as The Weekly Mail and Guardian.
The first volume in the series was Weekly Mail index 1985 published in 1992 by University of Natal Library (Pietermaritzburg) as no. 2 of its publication series. Its 1994 volume appeared under the title Weekly Mail and Guardian index but since 1995 it has been known as the Mail and Guardian index. There has been one supplement entitled Prisoners of conscience, 1986–1989, which listed those persons described in the weekly feature ‘Apartheid barometer’ (series ISBN 0-86980-717-X).

An askari was a freedom fighter turned by the South African security system; an outie is a down-and-out; and the toyi toyi is a dance accompanied by militant sloganeering used during demonstrations.

The electronic archive of the Mail & Guardian may be found at http://www.mg.co.za/mg/archive/.

References


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