Indexing as hard labour: another international instance

Hazel Bell’s note (The Indexer 22(2), October 2000, p. 71) brought to mind a Kalamazoo Public Museum project circa 1972/73. At that time the museum was administratively part of the public library where the Local History Department was engaged in genealogy documentation. Mr Alexis Praus, director of the museum, trained a Junior Chamber of Commerce service group, members of which were incarcerated in Jackson State Prison of Southwestern Michigan located about 60 miles east of Kalamazoo, to index the very early years (1834–1854) of what is now the daily Kalamazoo Gazette.

That 20th-century JC group attempted to index both all personal names as well as 19th-century subjects. Every name entry was scrupulously checked by genealogist Mrs Ellie Milliken, whose Kalamazoo volunteers worked in the same close quarters as the library’s local history staff. Such entries included individuals who were listed as having mail waiting for them at the post office. Kalamazoo was then very much a Michigan frontier town, established in 1829, with Michigan not achieving statehood until 1837 as the 26th state of the Union. Subject entries devised by that JC group, however, were made before the Kalamazoo Public Library staff established its current Gazette subject headings system. Ms Catherine Larson, now head of the Local History Department, reported that they look awkward and are unexpectedly inconsistent. Mrs Marjean Gladysz, the library’s chief newspaper indexer, kindly told me that the news portion of the prisoners’ index entries ‘were not as decisive’ as the personal names. Whereas all names from the Jackson project are in the library’s current online database, the subject entries are not. They were not totally ignored and still exist, but only on microfilm.

Whether indexing members of the JC group considered their task ‘hard labour’ is open to speculation. Nevertheless, they performed a valuable service for historical purposes.

Diane Worden, Kalamazoo, MI

Book indexes in France

I enjoyed Professor Bella Hass Weinberg’s article on ‘Book Indexes in France’ (The Indexer 22(1), April 2000, pp. 2–13), and was especially impressed by her discovery of the dearth of subject indexes in France, despite the fact that they appear to have been invented in that country. The irony is delicious, as is Professor Weinberg’s understatement that it would be inadvisable for American or British indexers to relocate to France. One can’t help wondering just what there is in the French character – such as an innate want of curiosity or an assumption of omniscience – that makes readers and researchers indifferent to the absence of indexes in their books. I can’t accept the diagnosis of mere ‘laziness’ expressed by the professor of library science whom Professor Weinberg interviewed. It’s what I would call a lazy diagnosis. I am more inclined to agree with her conclusion that the lack of indexes is related to the economics of publishing. But if that is the case, why doesn’t the French reader protest the flagrant omission?

As a lexicographer, I was also interested in Professor Weinberg’s findings about early glossaries and dictionaries. The latter’s close relationship to indexing usually escapes historians of lexicography, who tend to think of indexing as a late and discrete discipline.

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The unknown Mr Frederick Page

In Hazel Bell’s article on The fortunes of Harriette (‘Publishing and prostitution’, The Indexer 22(3), April 2001, pp. 33–4), she queries in passing ‘Mr Frederick Page (who he?)’. It is not surprising that he is largely unknown – he was the most self-effacing of men. Working as an editor at Oxford University Press (OUP), he influenced many writers, saving them from errors, and encouraging the as-yet-unpublished. He was one of the originators of the Oxford dictionary of quotations, and he edited several of the Oxford Standard Authors series. He worked at OUP from 1899 to 1952, not retiring until he was 73, and even then continuing as Editor of Notes & Queries until three years before his death in 1962, aged 83.

My own recollections of him date from the 1950s, when he was editor of Notes & Queries. Typically, his name did not appear on that journal, nor was it on the NdQ notepaper (which had his home address) – he just signed himself ‘The Editor’. I was at that time contributing replies to queries and also book reviews, but over a period of a dozen years I did not know his name.

As indexers, we often complain of a lack of recognition of our contribution to books; in contrast, Frederick Page was content to be behind the scenes as a literary midwife.

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Do indexes influence purchasing habits?

Susan Olason’s article, ‘Let’s get Usable!’ (The Indexer 22(2), October 2000), was a refreshing reminder that our product has value only if it saves someone else time and effort, and her conclusions about index structure give much food for thought. But one section raises a more fundamental issue. Commenting on the finding that index quality was more important than the author’s reputation or even the price in determining purchasing decisions, she pointed out that ‘indexes directly affect publishers’ profits and authors’ reputations’. Of course we already know that librarians and
academics base their influential selections largely on an analysis of a book’s index, but Ms Olason’s findings suggest that almost everyone might. My own employer’s postbag confirms the importance of indexes in book-purchasing decisions by IT professionals, so we may be directly addressing a much larger group of people than we have hitherto realized.

Two consequences seem to me to flow from this. The first is that we can perhaps do better in promoting our profession than to send publishers offprints of ‘indexes censured’ (a thankless and unprofitable activity, as Hazel Bell has pointed out on SIdeline*). While publishers see an index as no more than some kind of free after-sales service to help readers find a half-remembered text fragment, some will continue to regard it as optional, bothersome and therefore dispensable. If they can be persuaded that, unlike commissioned introductions and highly selective review quotes, it is trusted as the principal indicator of a worthwhile purchase, they may just begin to change their views.

The second consequence is that, particularly before changing our approach to publishers, we need to be sure our own practices are appropriate to a dual role. Do our indexes clearly proclaim the virtues of the particular edition in which they appear or are they geared solely to the retrospective retrieval of textual minutiae? A trivial example: I recently indexed a book on a new version of an established software product and proposed a substantial index section, identifying the new features of this particular release over its predecessor. This violates the ‘rule’ that, whereas the index to a book on Jeffrey Archer might be expected to have half its entries under ‘A’, one on designing suspension bridges conventionally avoids entries under ‘suspension bridges’. Yet each hesitating purchaser, deciding whether (s)he really needed the new book, would surely seek this information, and this information only, before deciding to part with his or her money. So is providing that not our job?

Indexing as promotion (which will in any case be anathema to some) requires us first to know the book’s alleged originality and strengths. How many of us routinely get this information with our commissions? If indexes do indeed influence purchasing habits, some hard evidence should be available, perhaps from comparative sales of an early edition of a work without an index and a subsequent one with (or, regrettably, vice versa). Does anyone know of such instances? It might be argued that this crucial but under-acknowledged role for indexes will be undermined now more and more books are being bought, index unseen, from online booksellers, but I’m not convinced.

In July 2001 we had the first plaintive call to make our indexes, instead of our tables of contents, available on our own website. A new generation of information consumers has arisen, believing that the incomplete and uneven results of a naive internet enquiry represent adequate research into a subject and suspicious that they might be as well served by machine-generated concordances as by traditional indexes. They’re wrong on both counts of course but, while they still hold the printed word to be more trustworthy that the trans-sient content of their screens, we need to impress on them that it’s the permanent accessibility of book information that sets it apart. And, if future books are still to provide that accessibility, we must enlist the support of wavering publishers now. Might we persuade more of them by offering our skills less as disinterested academics and more as a potent and cost-effective extension of their sales force?

Bill Johncocks, billj@wrox.com

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I never knew indexing could be such fun, with a little help from a Furby. [’What can she mean?’ asks Rosi Davis, who submitted this item.] What about the revelations that, in communicating, we can lie, cheat, misinform with such ease, but can learn so much from nature? The lecture on Invisible Learning outlined the need to really understand one’s audience – particularly vital when they do not like reading, but need to absorb the messages.


*The SI email discussion list, 20 March 2001.*