Changing boundaries

Looking at the cross-section of articles we have chosen for this issue, I am reminded that although the world of indexers and abstractors is seemingly a small one, the breadth of our interests and expertise is large. Changing technologies have changed our professional world, demanding not only that we adjust the mechanics of how we work, but that we perceive the spaces we work in differently. Ironically, the Internet has forced us to expand our conceptual horizons, all the while reducing the space between our selves and the information we use and process. For example, on the one hand we are envisioning new tools and products that it would not even have been possible to think about clearly without the hyperlink paradigm that allows us to venture conceptually outside the boundaries of sequentially ordered information. On the other hand, we can consult specialized databases and other information sources from the comfort of our own chairs. Horizons approach and recede, leaving us with a sense of instability perhaps, but also with a sense of limitless possibilities and with a need to think about what we are doing and why.

Do we know our options? Do we stop to think about them often enough? Jillian Tomm reminds us to consider what we would like our expanding world to look like, and even whether we can exert some control over what will happen. Is it possible to entrust information access to commercial concerns and to still safeguard our principles of access equity – to draw the boundaries in a manner that creates a balance of interests? Information ethics consist of complex knots of issues, but if we do not stop to tease out the strands of implications, to sometimes simply cut through the razzle-dazzle of what we can do to reach the core of beliefs about why we do what we do, then we are giving up our responsibilities to our clients.

When we look at some of the boundaries we have established for ourselves and ‘think bigger’, we can envision developments within the profession. Jillian Tomm’s discussion uses Nancy Humphrey’s concept of mind maps (thesauri developed using back-of-the-book indexes) as the stepping-off point. Whether or not the mind map concept is fully practicable, it is a stimulating direction to consider. We will not move forward very quickly as a profession without such innovative ideas. Looking at the broader picture of thesauri as indexing tools, Michèle Hudon argues that there is no reason to accept the established thesaurus constraints – we have the tools that enable us both to conceive the thesaurus differently and to actually create a thesaurus that is much more sophisticated in its functions and applications. We need to think ‘outside the envelope’ of past practices.

Similarly, Hope Olson and Lisa Given apply the measures of the indexing world – precision, relevance, recall, etc. – to the world of organizing research data, moving the concepts outside their traditional spheres in order to ‘organize knowledge in a new and creative way.’

But this is a practical profession, and moving forward cannot be just a series of theoretical exercises, no matter how stimulating. As Bella Hass Weinberg notes in her discussion of a 16th-century index: ‘Examining an index published nearly 500 years ago allows us to reflect on how far we have come in the presentation of indexes and in guiding users of them’. Deirdre Grist’s overview of parliamentary indexing anchors the practice of indexing solidly in user needs. If we do not keep our clients clearly in view, all the envisioning in the world will lead to naught.

Indexers are largely self-educated and mutually educated. Yes, courses exist, but they exist primarily because there are indexers willing and able to give them, and they correspond directly to a need to know things that indexers perceive as self-evident, but that the rest of the world perceives as odd (‘Oh, do you actually have to read the book…?’) How we teach ourselves and our colleagues, and how we create and choose resources to help us in our work really matters. No one else is going to do it for us.

So, in practice, where are we going and how are we getting there? Noeline Bridge looks at the difficulties of verifying and analysing personal names and presents a variety of websites that can be used to augment print resources, an excellent example of judicious ‘in-your-armchair’ research in which the disappearance of physical boundaries makes the lives of indexers easier. Fred Brown shares his experiences in the application of adult-education theory to the training of technical writers – professionals who are often required to create indexes with no training in the theory or methodology of indexing. He finds that ‘teaching techniques based on discovery, real problems and sharing can provide a basis for training and “inspiring” indexers of the evolving future media.’

And what kind of resources do we turn to when we are teaching ourselves? Comparing the major indexing texts is like comparing ‘apples, pears and oranges’, according to Ruth Pincoe – all of them are tasty and good for us, but there may be occasions when you would choose one over the others. Which leads to an interesting sidelight on the indexing world and how it perceives itself in terms of international boundaries. Two of the authors are American and one is British, and the question arose as to whether this might affect a choice among them. Neither Ruth Pincoe nor I, as editor, had even considered this aspect, and when we paused to think about why we had not, we realized that as Canadians we work with a variety of practices all the time, and that we perceive the style variations to be publisher-driven as opposed to nationality-driven. One publisher may follow Chicago manual of style for page reference style, another Hart’s rules, and a third some odd amalgam – we have to be able to handle any of these. It seems that the situation is similar in Australia, New Zealand and South Africa (thank you to all the people who cheerfully and quickly responded to my questions about this). Part of this, no doubt, is due to the fact that in addition to British roots, we deal with the realities of American subsidiaries and international markets. However, the creation of internation-
ally accessible databases, and similar initiatives that cross national boundaries via the Internet, has surely decreased the visibility of national boundaries. Perhaps this is another case of boundaries in flux that indexers are taking in their stride.

I would like to thank the members of the editorial committee – Noeline Bridge, Susana Gomes and Christina Davidson Richards – for their hard work and positive spirit, as well as everyone who submitted proposals, gave feedback, and generally supported this project. The biggest thank you goes to the authors who came through with the articles and then responded with good humour to my niggling queries and requests for changes.

Christine Jacobs, Guest Editor
Indexing and Abstracting Society of Canada/Société Canadienne pour l’analyse de documents

Mary Piggott, 1912–2003

We are saddened to announce the death of a distinguished founder member of the Society of Indexers, Mary Piggott, formerly Reader in Librarianship at University College London. Mary helped to raise the profile of indexing and contributed to the development of the Society over many years, serving as Librarian, Assistant Editor of The Indexer, and as a member of Council and of the Wheatley Medal panel, culminating in her period as President (1995–7). A full obituary will be published in the next issue of The Indexer.

Situations Vacant

Reviews Editor for The Indexer

After almost 20 years, Philip Bradley, MA, MPhil, FCLIP, is relinquishing his post as Reviews Editor. We are sorry to lose him and we would like to thank him for his admirable contribution to The Indexer over such a long period. We wish him a very happy retirement.

A successor to Philip is now required (Nancy Mulvany will continue as North American Reviews Editor). The successful candidate will have the responsibility for selecting appropriate books for review in The Indexer and suitable reviewers, who may or may not be members of the Society of Indexers. A full job description for this enjoyable and interesting post, for which an honorarium and expenses are paid, is available from Christine Shuttleworth, Executive Editor (see inside front cover), to whom applications should be sent by 31 May 2003 (enclosing a brief CV and covering letter).

Production Editor for The Indexer

The Editorial Board are also inviting applications for the position of Production Editor, which falls vacant on 1 January 2004. The job entails coordinating the editorial and production stages of the journal, from receipt of articles to the appearance of the printed journal issue, and involves liaison with authors, editors, typesetters, printers and other Editorial Board members. Ideally, candidates will have some experience of project management and editorial work on journals. For further details and a full job description, please contact Ann Kingdom, Production Editor (see inside front cover). Applications, enclosing a brief CV and covering letter, together with the names of two referees (personal and work-related) should be sent to the Executive Editor, Christine Shuttleworth (see inside front cover) by 31 May 2003.

SOCIETY OF INDEXERS CONFERENCE 2003

A Scots Quair*
27–29 June 2003 Strathclyde University, Glasgow

Booking form and further details are now available on the SI website: www.indexers.org.uk

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Gather with us in Scotland’s friendly city: Glasgow. Make and renew friendships. Learn about the latest indexing techniques. Find out what our customers (authors and editors) think about us as indexers. As well as workshops for beginners and specialists, we will be looking at the ways indexing is changing, and how we could react.

After (or before) the conference, which is being held in the heart of the city and runs from late Friday afternoon through to Sunday lunchtime, why not stay on and explore Glasgow and its beautiful surrounding countryside?

All rooms are bookable for an extended stay (Thursday 26 June to Monday 30 June) but no extra rooms are available from Tuesday 1 July onwards. If you are thinking of booking extra nights, please contact paulnash@zetnet.co.uk as soon as possible.

*Quair = a literary work (in Scots language).