In defence of the professional indexer

An article by David Henige in the July 2002 issue of the Journal of Scholarly Publishing caused some ripples in the indexing community and gave rise to the following responses, which were published in subsequent issues of the journal.

From Nancy Mulvany

I thoroughly enjoyed most of David Henige’s article, ‘Indexing: A User’s Perspective’ (JSP, July 2002, 230–247). His passionate and eloquent argument for the inclusion of good indexes in scholarly books is most welcome. That Henige also appears to understand the qualities of a proper index adds even more weight to his fascinating article.

However, as a book author (Indexing Books, University of Chicago Press, 1994), a professional indexer (18 years), and former teacher of book indexing (15 years) I must take exception to Henige’s cavalier treatment of professional indexers. Henige writes (p. 234):

Professional indexers are well trained in isolating subjects, devising relevant sub-headings, noticing and querying discrepancies, and the like. What they are less good at is reading the minds of their authors to the degree that they understand the proportionalities involved, the crucial connections to be made, or alternative nomenclatures that are not specified in the text. In short, they cannot do as good a job as any author who is intent on providing good access and who might also, through experience, be as aware of the tricks of the indexing trade.

I will admit that it is not our job to read the minds of authors, nor is the audience for the book expected to read an author’s mind. It is part of the job of a professional indexer to understand the proportionalities involved in the text, to make crucial connections, and provide access to alternative nomenclatures. There are no ‘tricks of the indexing trade.’

In the years that I have taught university-accredited indexing courses, I have come to one conclusion: few people (10 per cent or less) demonstrate an ability to index well (see N.C. Mulvany, ‘Teaching Book Indexing: A Curriculum,’ The Indexer 23:1(2002), 11–14.). I have had many book authors in my classes. I can assure you that they do not bring any special abilities to the task of indexing. This is not to say that authors can never index their own books well. Certainly a few are up to the task. This has been demonstrated over the years by the occasional awarding to author-indexers of the Wilson Award (American Society of Indexers) and the Wheatley Medal (Society of Indexers) for excellence in indexing.

Henige’s dismissive treatment of The Indexer as an ‘advocacy publication’ (p. 238) deserves comment. In addition to the British, American, and Australian Societies, the Canadian, Chinese, and South African Societies should have been included in the roundup of professional organizations that sponsor The Indexer, a peer-reviewed publication that has been in circulation since 1958.

Again, returning to dismissing professional indexers as well as our journal, Henige adds ‘professional indexers, whose role, I have already argued, should be no more than fallback for authors who will not or cannot accomplish the index themselves.’ He then cites (note 19) an article about indexing fiction, calling it ‘counterproductive.’ How odd. The indexing of fiction is not counterproductive nor is it new. Samuel Richardson indexed his own novel, Clarissa, in the mid-1700s. Clarissa is considered by some to be the first English novel and it was indexed by the author. In 2000 AMS Press published Samuel Richardson’s Clarissa: An Index written by Susan Price Karpuk. The entire 476-page, large-format book is an index to that novel.

With good cause Henige bemoans the lack of indexes in scholarly books. I, too, am always surprised when university press books lack an index. The cases I have inquired about all resulted from the author attempting to write the index. I have been told that the author’s index was ‘too embarrassing’ for the press to publish, that ‘the author became overwhelmed with the indexing task and did not let us know in time to contract with a professional indexer.’ Just last year, I submitted to the author and the university press an index. The author proceeded to ‘edit’ (I say, ‘butcher’) the index to the extent that I asked that my name in the credits be removed. The resulting index was a professional embarrassment, the editor agreed and kindly removed my name from the credits.

On page 235 Henige discusses publishers and space allotted for the index. Some authors specify in their contracts that a certain percentage of book pages be reserved for the index. Professional indexers who are asked to provide an index to a book that lacks room for a proper index often turn down those jobs. In addition to adding a signature of pages – which does happen – there are other ways to copy fit an index. When space is tight and the integrity of the index is jeopardized, the professional indexer will discuss various options with the production editor.

Wearing yet another hat, I have reviewed many book contracts from academic/scholarly publishers as a Contract Advisor for the National Writers Union (UAW Local 1981). As a rule these contracts are abysmal in many regards. In particular the ‘standard’ clause that states ‘the author shall provide the index’ should be negotiated. While not perfect, my contract with my publisher specified that the cost of indexing would be shared equally, with my portion charged as an advance against future royalties. This allowed me to contract with an excellent professional indexer. Yes, it’s true, the author of Indexing Books did not write the index to her own book.

My publisher and I agreed that a well-written index for my book was essential. As the author I needed someone, not to read my mind, but read my words with fresh eyes. Someone who could understand the proportionalities involved in the text, make crucial connections, and provide access to alternative nomenclatures. Someone who could do all of this within three weeks and do it well. In short, I needed a professional indexer.

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From the Society of Indexers

May we add some further comments to those of Nancy Mulvany (JSP, October 2002), who welcomed several aspects of David Henige’s article ‘Indexing: A User’s Perspective’ (JSP, July 2002), but deplored his dismissive attitude towards professional indexers?

We must take issue with Henige’s assertion that books are usually best indexed by their authors, for two reasons. First, indexing demands a certain mindset that not everyone has. Indexers are good at organizing things into logical patterns and imposing order on chaos; to produce a complex index that makes a lengthy and complicated text into a useful reference work gives them immense satisfaction. These skills are further developed by training and, above all, experience. Every index brings up its own problems, but experience helps the professional to deal with them efficiently and successfully. Authors indexing their own books, even if they have a flair for indexing, are probably doing it only for the first (or perhaps second or third) time. At the same time, they will be checking the final proofs and perhaps also doing a regular job, and will not be able to devote themselves entirely to the index in the way that a professional indexer can.

Secondly, the very fact that the author knows his book inside out, having just written it, means that he is not necessarily the best person to index it. The indexer’s job is to create an information retrieval tool that will work efficiently for all the different types of index user who will read or consult the book. Not everyone will want to read the book from cover to cover; some will want to dip in, finding the parts relevant to them, and others may be seeking just one small piece of information that may be in the book. The author probably envisages a certain sort of reader, but there may be others with only a marginal interest in the subject who can still find information relevant to them if it is covered in the index. An indexer coming fresh and open-minded to the text will find it much easier to cater for all these different needs than the author, who by now may know the text too well to look at it from new angles.

David Henige may not realize that the indexing profession contains many highly qualified subject specialists who are certainly capable of ‘reading the minds of their authors to the degree that they understand the proportionalities involved, the crucial connections to be made, or alternative nomenclatures that are not specified in the text.’ To turn the tables, any indexer will tell you that authors who express themselves clearly are easy to index – it is the books that ramble from subject to subject in a vague and undisciplined way that cause the problems!

Henige’s remarks on the use of computers in indexing also suggest that he is not aware of the existence of dedicated indexing programs for professional indexers, such as Macrex and CindeX™. Unlike the crude automatic indexing programs supplied as adjuncts to word processors to which he seems to refer, these programs require the intellectual input of a trained professional, who will ignore unimportant references and select the terms that are actually likely to be sought by the user.

Finally, he refers to the ‘Indexes Reviewed’ section of The Indexer, the international journal of indexing. The introductory note to this section makes it clear that ‘Our reproduction of comments is not a stamp of approval from the Society of Indexers upon the reviewer’s assessment of an index’, so it is perhaps not quite fair of him to complain that ‘the opinions of reviewers rather than indexers are represented, not always a good thing’. But ultimately, surely it is the opinion of the user, for whose benefit the index is created, that is the most important.

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From the American Society of Indexers

There is much in David Henige’s article, ‘Indexing: A Users’ Perspective,’ that I agree with. He has made a fine argument to the effect that far too many books are published with a poor index or no index at all. He’ll get no argument from me on that point. I would like, however, to clear up what I suspect is a confusion on his part about electronically produced indexes and to address his claim that the author is the best person to index his or her own book.

Henige is quite right when he suggests that indexing software cannot write a proper index. But let’s be clear about what we mean by ‘indexing software’ and just what it claims to do. Some programs build a simple concordance of all the nouns in the text, that is, an alphabetical list of these words with no analysis behind it. Indexing functions attached to word processing programs do even less than that. Such programs cannot distinguish between, say, dogs (the canine kind) discussed on p. 23 and the author’s whimsical passing mention of his tired dogs (the podiatric kind) on p. 157 and will mindlessly produce the entry ‘dogs, 23, 157.’ Nor can this kind of program opt to omit the latter entry (which is a passing mention) or pick up a discussion of canines on p. 80. That’s because computers just don’t get homonymy or synonymy, let alone metaphor, irony, whimsy, and the like. A computer can no more create an index than a pencil can write a book. But that’s not to say they aren’t both useful tools. Dedicated (i.e., stand-alone) indexing software, such as CINDEX™, SKY Index™ Professional, and Macrex, are powerful and efficient tools that take over such tasks as sorting and formatting, allowing human indexers to spend their time on the more creative and conceptual elements of indexing: term selection, phrasing, structure, and so on.

Henige also says, ‘Professional indexers are well trained in isolating subjects, devising relevant sub-headings, noticing and querying discrepancies, and the like. What they are less good at is reading the minds of their authors to the degree that they understand the proportionalities involved, the crucial connections to be made, or alternative nomenclatures that are not specified in the text.’ He says, in short, that authors are the best equipped to index their own books. I have several problems with this argument.
First, Henige is assuming that anyone who can write well enough to get a book published can also craft an index. However, indexing is a form of technical writing that is quite different from writing a monograph and requires different skills. Many authors who’ve tried it can attest to this. As a professional indexer who has worked with authors and editors over the past nine years, I can’t tell you the number of times I’ve been handed a project because the author became overwhelmed or because the author-written index wasn’t up to the Press’s standards and had to be redone. Or the number of times an author has said, ‘Thank you for your hard work. I couldn’t have done anything close to that.’ Or the number of times an editor has told me, ‘the author has decided to index it herself, and I couldn’t talk her out of it.’ Editors know well enough that subject expertise does not equal indexing expertise.

Second, understanding ‘the proportionalities involved, the crucial connections to be made, or alternative nomenclatures that are not specified in the text’ is exactly what trained indexers are good at. The typical professional indexer is a well-educated and intelligent reader who thinks analytically, drawing out the concepts and making the connections. To say that an indexer is only good at ‘isolating subjects, devising relevant sub-headings, [and] noticing and querying discrepancies’ is like saying that an editor is only good at correcting punctuation and grammar.

Third, to say that an indexer would have to read the author’s mind to understand the proportionalities and connections says less about the indexer’s lack of subject expertise than it does about the author’s writing skill. If an author cannot write so as to make those connections clear, just imagine what kind of index he or she will produce.

Fourth, Henige implies that authors should index their own books because they are closest to the material. Actually, that may be a reason not to. Authors sometimes lose their objectivity about their own writing, whereas professional indexers have the detachment needed to keep the audience’s needs in mind at all times.

I don’t mean to suggest that no authors are good at indexing, only that professional indexers are usually better at it than authors. To my knowledge, no study has yet been done that tests the usability of indexes written by authors versus professional indexers. My money is on the professional indexer.

Carol Roberts, Board Member
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