The Atlantic Monthly’s ‘proper-name index’

Benjamin Healy

Magazines must change constantly to stay fresh and keep up with the changing times. When The Atlantic Monthly was casting about recently for something to add to its editorial mix, the 147-year-old magazine of arts, politics, and criticism turned to a tried and true form: the index. In November of last year, Cullen Murphy, the managing editor, asked me to create an index for an issue of the magazine as a pilot project. To keep the task focused and manageable, he suggested two restrictions: index only the names of people mentioned in the issue, and adopt a tongue-in-cheek tone to keep things interesting. The inspiration for the latter had come from his own book, Just curious (1995), a collection of essays capped by a light-hearted narrative index of his own creation. (Sample entries: ‘personal demons: proliferation of, as workhorses of growing service economy, 171; speculation, medieval and modern, about origin of, 173–74’).

At the time, work was underway on the January/February 2004 issue. It offered a wealth of promising absurdities, both tragic and humorous, in articles such as a lengthy piece by James Fallows about faulty planning in the run-up to the Iraq war; an expose by Kim Jong Il’s personal chef about the North Korean dictator’s prodigious appetites, and a profile of Hank Fraley, a quietly heroic offensive lineman for the Philadelphia Eagles.

When I started the project, I was admittedly an indexing novice. Like most readers, I expected indexes to appear as if by magic, and was more likely to attribute their existence to a cosmic accident, rather than to the efforts of someone trying to create a useful and crucial reference tool. My prior experience with offbeat indexes extended little beyond reading the one in Gary Larson’s Wiener dog art, a treasury of Far side cartoons. Headings for every cartoon in the book begin with the letter ‘T.’ Examples include: ‘The one about the octopus convention [...] 30’ and ‘The one about the frog mobsters [...] 9’.

Nevertheless, I plunged in with a home-grown brute-force method, scanning articles for mentions of interesting people and plugging them into what I took to be a standard indexing model, with a twist. Among the entries from my first outing were:

Fraley, Hank, impressive dimensions of; ironic relative invisibility of, given importance and significant bulk of
Kim Jong-II, as murderous strongman; as impulsive gourmand; Jet-skiing abilities of
Rumsfeld, Donald, trademark swashbuckling panache as ultimate Achilles heel of

As I worked I began to see my task as something quite different from typical back-of-the-book indexing. I was attempting to create something suggestive rather than something exhaustive. I was trying to catch the reader’s eye to draw him or her in to an article he or she might not read otherwise. (Just what, for example, might ‘Tracy, Spencer, as civilizing force,’ refer to?) In effect, I was trying to direct people toward what they aren’t looking for. Accordingly, whereas a typical book indexer might aspire to concreteness and completeness, I began to think of my task as an exercise in omission and vagueness, presenting a few tantalizing, mysterious details that leave readers wanting more (and telling them where they can find it). Although some of the early entries may have been a bit wordy, I felt I was generally on the right track. When I showed the results to Murphy, he agreed. The index was mocked up on an outside flap attached to a small number of issues circulated in the magazine’s offices in Boston and Washington D.C. Some months later, the editors decided to include an index on the last page of each issue, beginning with the June 2004 edition.

In choosing to run a monthly humorous index, The Atlantic was venturing where few magazines had before. Although most periodical indexes are purely functional, magazines have occasionally taken on the indexing task with a bit of mischief or humor. Consider the editors of Spy, Fame, and Quest, three Manhattan-based magazines (listed here in ascending order of reverence of tone), who in 1989 manfully set about cataloguing all the names dropped in Andy Warhol’s diaries, which had been published without an index. (Spy’s contributions were especially acid. E.g.: ‘Avedon, Richard, [Warhol’s] thoughts on horribleness of, 4.’)

More recently, the humorist Christopher Buckley obliged Bill Clinton with the same favor this past summer by offering a tongue-in-cheek index to supplement the straightforward one in the former president’s memoirs. (Sample entry: ‘Tomorrow, Don’t Stop Thinking About, 334–953.’) Websites have joined the supplemental-index fray as well. Political insiders hoping to discover whether they are mentioned in One-car caravan, Walter Shapiro’s indexless chronicle of the early stages of the 2004 presidential campaign, can thank an ABC News intern who indexed it and published the results on the Internet at http://abcnews.go.com/sections/politics/Politics/shapiro_index_031107.html.
Shapiro wrote in his book’s introduction that he decided not to include an index because he hoped to spare his readers the status anxiety associated with the infamous ‘Washington read’:

This egoistic ritual inspires either the transient joys of relevance or the lasting agonies of rejection. To spare everyone further emotional turmoil, I have dispensed with the editorial feature that has caused more heartbreak than the senior prom.

But just as easily, it seems to me, an index can be a source of sweetness and light, and it was with that in mind that I set out to create something humorous and useful (perhaps in that order) and something that would, with luck, enhance readers’ appreciation of the magazine. (See also ‘The Washington read’ and the ‘Clindex,’ page 61.)

The Atlantic’s Boston offices overlook the site of a gigantic public works project known as the ‘Big Dig.’ Over the past several years, the city’s main traffic artery has been rerouted underground without an interruption in service, an effort which one local newspaper compared to performing open-heart surgery on a marathon runner in the middle of the race. Indexing a rapidly changing issue of a magazine as it speeds through scores of last-minute changes is hardly the same thing, but it is not without parallels. For this reason, I wait until the last week of the issue’s production cycle to begin indexing in earnest. I receive proofs for each piece as it is set in type, but I read them initially simply to get the gist, since they are likely to change due to extensive editing and fact checking. By the last week, though, when most of the magazine is essentially finalized, I gather up the most recent proofs for each piece and go through them with a highlighter, picking out all proper names. Meanwhile, in a Word file, I enter names that might make for interesting entries, noting common bonds across different articles in the magazine and jotting down possible subheadings as I go. In trolling through the magazine, everything is fair game, including letters to the editor and short stories. When an item is fictional, I take pains to say so, lest a reader think that a preacher named Roscoe G. Holybone was actually martyred in Georgia or that the Pope has been the target of a terrorist plot. I have not had occasion thus far to index an item from a poem, but I am open to the idea – as soon as a terrorist plot. I have not had occasion thus far to index an entry describing open-heart surgery on a marathon runner in the middle of the race. Indexing a rapidly changing issue of a magazine as it speeds through scores of last-minute changes is hardly the same thing, but it is not without parallels. For this reason, I wait until the last week of the issue’s production cycle to begin indexing in earnest. I receive proofs for each piece as it is set in type, but I read them initially simply to get the gist, since they are likely to change due to extensive editing and fact checking. By the last week, though, when most of the magazine is essentially finalized, I gather up the most recent proofs for each piece and go through them with a highlighter, picking out all proper names. Meanwhile, in a Word file, I enter names that might make for interesting entries, noting common bonds across different articles in the magazine and jotting down possible subheadings as I go. In trolling through the magazine, everything is fair game, including letters to the editor and short stories. When an item is fictional, I take pains to say so, lest a reader think that a preacher named Roscoe G. Holybone was actually martyred in Georgia or that the Pope has been the target of a terrorist plot. I have not had occasion thus far to index an item from a poem, but I am open to the idea – as soon as a poem featuring proper names comes along. For reasons of space and because they are identified in the table of contents, I do not include authors’ names.

The first pass complete, I set the proofs aside, and turn to the list I have compiled, reading it on its own terms and injecting humor as I see fit. Then I make another pass through the proofs, rereading the entire magazine and asking myself if the index holds together as a coherent whole and faithfully captures the issue in miniature. Are subjects that remain. Thus did an entry describing Madonna’s open-heart surgery on a marathon runner in the middle of the race. Indexing a rapidly changing issue of a magazine as it speeds through scores of last-minute changes is hardly the same thing, but it is not without parallels. For this reason, I wait until the last week of the issue’s production cycle to begin indexing in earnest. I receive proofs for each piece as it is set in type, but I read them initially simply to get the gist, since they are likely to change due to extensive editing and fact checking. By the last week, though, when most of the magazine is essentially finalized, I gather up the most recent proofs for each piece and go through them with a highlighter, picking out all proper names. Meanwhile, in a Word file, I enter names that might make for interesting entries, noting common bonds across different articles in the magazine and jotting down possible subheadings as I go. In trolling through the magazine, everything is fair game, including letters to the editor and short stories. When an item is fictional, I take pains to say so, lest a reader think that a preacher named Roscoe G. Holybone was actually martyred in Georgia or that the Pope has been the target of a terrorist plot. I have not had occasion thus far to index an item from a poem, but I am open to the idea – as soon as a poem featuring proper names comes along. For reasons of space and because they are identified in the table of contents, I do not include authors’ names.

The first pass complete, I set the proofs aside, and turn to the list I have compiled, reading it on its own terms and injecting humor as I see fit. Then I make another pass through the proofs, rereading the entire magazine and asking myself if the index holds together as a coherent whole and faithfully captures the issue in miniature. Are subjects of personal profiles adequately represented? Did I dwell too long on a passing reference to Bo Derek just because it struck my fancy? By the time I have completed this second pass, I usually end up with around 1,800 words of text, about half again as much as will fit on the page.

At this point, the index is put into the four-column layout used in the magazine, making it easier to gauge the amount of material I need to cut to fit the allotted space. I show copies of the draft layout to Murphy, a deputy managing editor, and two copy editors. After I have incorporated their suggested changes, fact-checking begins. Every piece published in The Atlantic is assigned to one of six fact-checkers (of whom I am also one), who verify each fact, quote, and assertion included in the piece. The index is no exception. The fact-checkers sign off on entries related to pieces they worked on, and flag references to be deleted or modified. Occasionally, a fact-checker will point out that a certain entry goes a bit far afield of the relevant text, or is so compressed as to be misleading about the nature of the reference. In those cases, I make revisions. As a general guideline, I try to keep the index focused on the foibles of the published and famous, including private citizens only in descriptive non-mocking contexts.

Over time, the mechanics of the process have become routine but the creative challenges inherent in the Atlantic index remain. In order to engage the idle reader flipping through a copy at the newsstand, for example, the index’s mischievousness must be immediately apparent and not seem confusing or out of place. To address this, each installment begins with a few funny or informally worded entries to signal right away that this is not a straightforward index. Hence the first headings of the first three installments: ‘Albright, Madeleine, undignified metaphorical posture assumed by, 64; ‘Allen, David, as organization guru, 171–176; as ringer for Dana Carvey, 176;’ and ‘Abelard, Peter, as scholastic castrato, 125; sadomasochism and, 125; as father of Astralabe, 125.’

While book indexers can decide based on the finished manuscript before them whether to play it straight or go the tongue-in-cheek route, I have committed myself to humorous indexing and am taking it on faith that I shall be able to sustain the humorous approach as the content changes from issue to issue. A recent front-line dispatch from Fallujah is an example of an article poorly suited for light-hearted send-up, although it was one of the issue’s marquee offerings. As a result, it received only one entry: ‘Smith, Jason, Marine captain in Fallujah, caffeine intake of, 124; as man of a less complicated age, 126.’ This dynamic cuts both ways, of course, as writers with more colorful language and off-the-wall similes may be over-represented in the index.

Perhaps the most persistent consideration, though, is space. A typical single-month issue of The Atlantic runs to around 160 pages, approximately 60 of which are devoted to ads. The double issues for January/February and July/August run to more than 190 pages, of which a similar proportion is devoted to advertising. The typical issue of The Atlantic, then, has an index ratio of around 1 percent. For the July/August issue, the index page was redesigned slightly to make room for a graphic and byline that reflected the visual theme of the rest of the magazine. As a result, there was a bit less room for text, tightening the belt even further. While the June issue had room for 109 headings, the next two installments held 99 and 94 headings, respectively.

At times, the space crunch can be helpful because it forces me to thin the ranks of less important entries and tighten those that remain. Thus did an entry describing Madonna’s role as a voter-registration spokesperson undergo a bit of strategic compression. (An article about political fund-
raising in Hollywood mentioned that Madonna had appeared in an ad in which she threatened to spank people who did not vote in the next election.) The entry originally read, ‘Madonna, as get-out-the-vote spokesperson, 80; as spanker, 80.’ In an effort to save space, I decided to combine the two, which yielded ‘Madonna, as get-out-the-vote spanksperson, 80’ – a formulation that arguably describes her contributions to the political process more precisely than the two separate entries would have.

As Hazel Bell once detailed in these pages, bias should be an indexer’s constant concern. Nevertheless, the Atlantic index is inherently biased, if for no other reason than that it carries a byline. ‘Limitation of language’ is hardly a problem (see Madonna reference above), but since the index is selective rather than exhaustive, my emphases and viewpoints are unavoidably everywhere. That said, the index’s agenda is straightforward and non-threatening: 1) to create something free-standing and humorous; 2) to help readers get a sense of the breadth of material in the issue; 3) to bring in new readers. Number 1 can be a corrupting impulse, I suppose, but I hope that the writers’ words and insights shine through most strongly so that numbers 2 and 3 get equal play.

Occasionally, the indexing has been an interesting exercise in serendipity, as colorful figures pop up in multiple places in the same issue. Why, for example, in unrelated articles in consecutive issues, would boxing promoter Don King and French philosopher Simone Weil be mentioned, when one would suspect that they have scarcely been mentioned in the same breath before? And occasionally we find strange consecutive bedfellows, such as Tom Selleck, Jessica Simpson, and Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Husseini al-Sistani, as happened in the September issue. One can only blame fate and the alphabet.

I have also begun mulling a theory that those with surnames beginning with letters early in the alphabet are more likely to gain notoriety than those with latter-half names. In the June index, ‘Nishi, Takeichi,’ the first latter-half name, did not show up until almost a third of the way through the fourth column. In the July index, ‘Nixon, Richard’ kicked off latter-half names sooner, at two-thirds of the way through the third column. Marion Morrison may have made it big by leaping to the end of the alphabet as John Wayne, but perhaps this trend bears further watching.

Thus far, response to the index has been mainly anecdotal and generally positive. A number of people have told me that it makes the magazine more navigable and stands on its own as something entertaining to read. As of this writing, I have received one index-related letter to the editor. A reader wrote in to ask if he might have detected a subtle anti-actor bias because a number of actors were listed as sub-headings but not given main headings of their own. (I plead innocent.)

All in all, I hope that readers of the magazine find the index to be entertaining and useful, and that indexers find it to be an acceptable curiosity and not an affront to accepted standards. Whatever the case, I am eager for feedback and input from the larger indexing community.

References

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Indexed world history database
So from the start my digital world history has been written as an indexed database rather than as word-processed text. Each of some 9,000 paragraphs, amounting in all to about a million words, is a separate record. This means that the narratives can be read in an exceptionally flexible way. The battle of Agincourt, for example, is in the history of the Hundred Years’ War, but also in the histories of France and England. From any paragraph you can choose to navigate backwards or forwards on any of the three interconnecting themes without losing your way. I believe this approach to information will become standard and will cause future generations to view the retrieval systems in books much as we now look at the limitations of the scroll.

The same is true of the index, the new tool made possible by the codex with its separate pages. It has been, for the most part, a blunt tool. With digital information each paragraph can be separately indexed. A click leads you to the exact place. No more of that agonising search in a dense page of text, often to find only the briefest mention of a name.

Two recent highly successful and respected works of twentieth-century history have index entries beginning: ‘Lenin, Vladimir Ilyich, xi, 8, 11, 15n, 71, 103, 126, 127, 128, 130–1, 132, 126’ (followed by fifty-seven more of the same) and ‘Lenin, V. I. 58, 60, 61, 62, 63, 125, 179’ (twelve more). I will leave it to readers of History Today to identify the works in question from their shelves. But how many people will have chanced their luck with any of those forbidding numbers? My case rests. Let the digital age commence.

[Bamber Gascoigne’s free digital world history is at www.historyworld.net.]