

Vive la différence! The survival of the softest

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ABSTRACT: Discusses the differences between indexing printed and electronic texts, and between technical and 'soft' types, and suggests that regulations and standards now adopted for indexing meet the requirements of electronic information retrieval and technical texts, but not of traditional, extra-disciplinary book indexing. The unorthodox, individual index may have much merit.

Printed books and their subject indexing preceded such high-technology, massive electronic projects as now dominate the information-retrieval scene. I wish to champion our origins, amid continuous forecasts of the paperless society and of the death of the printed publication, prized by Milton as 'the precious life-blood of a master-spirit embalmed and treasured up'. (1) Would anyone speak so of a databank? Books are the tools of scholarship; electronic databanks are the subjects of mechanical information retrieval. Old-fashioned indexers like me work on printed texts, subject-indexing.

Norman Knight was another. He founded the Society of Indexers in 1957 as a solitary freelance indexer who 'did not know the name of a single other person who worked in this field'. (2) The society grew and extended, to include Institutional Members; and the image of the indexer became blurred. Affiliated societies were established overseas. By 1979 the Indexing and Abstracting Society of Canada's 'most dominant group', a member recorded, was the large national indexing and abstracting services. . . . While some IASC members are professional indexers . . . the majority of members are librarians. The genuine freelance *non-librarian* book indexers seem . . . to be a relatively small group within the Canadian Society'. (3) At least the distinction was still observed. Writers in *British librarianship and information work 1976-1980* had 'some difficulty in isolating indexing from cataloguing and classification, information science and even bibliographical work'. (4)

But among the institutions there are still individual indexers; among the electronic databases there are still printed books; amid the regulation and standardization there are still originality and creativity. Squeezed into a corner remains a group of those 'genuine freelance non-librarian book indexers'. I feel I should burst into song like the actress in Sondheim's musical, 'Follies', proclaiming on behalf of back-of-the-book, extra-disciplinary indexers, 'I'm still here'.

Indexing is not the same as librarianship. Librarians deal with publications *en masse*, collections of books, cataloguing volumes as wholes. With information scientists, they have been described as dealing in 'the bibliographical units that act as surrogates for the authors' works: catalogue entries, references, or citations'. (5) Book indexers should focus not on surrogates, but on the works themselves, closely and directly.

A further line of development within our profession leaves me not even squeezed into a corner, but out on a limb. Within the field of the printed book, a whole series of subject specialisms has been hived off, so that archaeological, legal, medical, and such esoteric types of indexing have each been ascribed their own lore necessitating special subject expertise, highly valued. Such specialisms all relate to specific academic disciplines. One might describe all these as *dry* texts: using 'dry' in sense number 14 of those listed in *Collins English dictionary*, 'lacking warmth and emotion'.

The non-specialist indexer, who may claim highly-honed indexing skills – the ability to interpret and analyse text, recognize the most significant elements and concepts, and express these in the most appropriate, concise terms – is left with the residue, when the dry texts have been hived off. This residue consists of the entire central core of published books, just concerned with people and their personal experiences: a residue so general, covering so many areas of life, as to be unclassifiable as a subject specialism; though it includes such genres as biography, popular history, travel, how-to books at a popular level: any texts that are not dry and disciplined, but, to use the dictionary opposite, do contain 'warmth and emotion'.

I have endeavoured to find a term to describe these ordinary types of books, that are the stuff of general publishing for the general reader. 'Narrative text' implies continuity and story, but does not sufficiently convey my intended human themes. 'Humanities' of course includes its own disciplines, such as philosophy and linguistics; I just mean, 'books about people and their personal experiences'. The epithet, 'fine indexing' brought accusations of elitism in the *ASI Newsletter*. (6) 'Extra-disciplinary' is a terrible mouthful. I am tempted to call it 'pure indexing', but will settle on 'soft'.

Not to be classified under a subject specialism is to be mainstream; but this is to be regarded, with some condescension, as merely generalist. Generalists may regard specialisms as limitations. Compare the medical profession, where, in the UK at least, the revered specialist focuses on particular organs or diseases, while it is the general practitioner who deals with whole people, including their behaviour, emotions and lives. The increasing emphasis on subject specialism in indexing comes hard on those, like myself, who graduated in English – looked on as very much a general, mainstream discipline. We all know English.

Many of the standards, rules and conventions that our craft has adopted in accordance with the major developments in technology and scale since the founding of SI, do not properly apply to us surviving back-of-book soft indexers. We are different. Difference implies individuality; specificity rather than specialism. And I say, *Vive la différence!*

Regulation

Indexing has become ever more strictly regulated, with training courses and established standards. I do not feel that these can apply equally over such a vast, disparate field as indexing has become, embracing at once enormous databanks and the smallest literary pamphlet. They have been imposed to meet the requirements of the new developments — and left the original soft-text indexers behind, the new rules not appropriate to their needs. Regulation implies correctness, uniformity and predictability. These do not seem to me to apply to soft indexing, its coverage including warmth and emotion — qualities that are not necessarily uniform or predictable in human life.

Who regulate us? Bodies of bodies. Remember that Government Education committees monitoring the nations' schools are often seen as out of touch with the experience of the teacher in the classroom; Health Departments with the doctor in his surgery; military HQ with the soldier's life in the trenches.

Standards and standardization

The British Standard on indexing of 1976 was prepared by a committee comprising representatives from five professional organizations. (7) It was revised in 1988 by a committee representing ten bodies: the Association for Information Management; the Association of British Directory Publishers; the British Library; British Telecom; Her Majesty's Stationery Office; INSPEC; The Library Association; Oxford University Press; the Standing Conference of National and University Libraries; and the Society of Indexers — which thus constituted but one tenth of the committee preparing standard its members should work to (and was in fact represented by librarian-members). A fellow back-of-book indexer recently described the result as 'over-ambitious, cumbersome, dogmatic, contentious; and drawn up by the wrong people'. It seemed to depart from what earlier recognition it had accorded to indexing soft texts. For example, the earlier rule for order of precedence so useful to indexers of biographies, 'person/place/subject/title' (as for instance, Wells, H. 6.; Wells,

England; wells, sitting and sinking; *Wells: a report*), was replaced by clause 6.2.3, 'Headings beginning with the same term should be filed in the following sequence: term alone/term with subheading(s)/term with qualifier/term as first element of a longer term'.(8)

The Chairman of the Committee claimed that it took particular account of 'the needs of users of indexes.' Users of the publications of many of the bodies that prepared the standard are unlikely to be individual readers of the type for whom I prepare indexes to soft, people-centred books (British Directory Publishers; British Telecom). The committee was remote from the individual, soft indexer, and from the general reader of printed books — the man in the armchair. For one example: the standard prescribes (clause 7. 1 'The index should be prefaced by an introductory note, explaining the indexing decisions that have been made'. No doubt invaluable for information scientists retrieving items, especially electronically. But few individual, general readers are expert users. They browse in indexes to see what may be there. They may well not consult preliminary notes. If they read, 'The system of alphabetization is letter-by-letter', they are likely to wonder, 'what else could it be?'. Their needs may even be in conflict with those of information science bodies.

For example, I once indexed a simple parents' guide to primary schooling. Whether the child could start school at the age of four or five was much considered, and was a topic first-time parents were likely to seek. I was sure they would look under 'age' to find this, and put 'age of admission' in the index. The correct thesaurus-term would have been 'admission, age of, but I thought this unlikely to occur to many parents. I did not give duplicate entries, both 'admission, age of and 'age of admission', as they would have appeared together as the first two entries, and looked absurd. But an indexer-colleague who worked for an educational body insisted that I should have chosen 'admission, age of, and never mind baffling the simplest parents, as this was a Standard heading for their databases. I preferred to cater for the individual readers in question, rather than meet standard regulations for information bodies-at variance.

The singer, not the song

Regulations for indexing are concerned chiefly with the *structure* of the index: the hierarchy of subheadings and layout, the network of cross-references. This is very much easier both to legislate for and to assess than is the relationship of the index to the text itself, sample page by page and entry by entry, which I find much more important in soft indexing.

The most prominent assessment of indexes in the UK is the annual award of the Wheatley Medal. My impression is that while the actual indexes are scrutinized, with particular attention to conformity to rules and standards, and internal consistency, the relationship to the text itself, page by page or entry by entry, is little investigated. Indeed, I was told by the very winner of the Wheatley Medal for an index to medical journals that they did not actually *read* the articles through, but indexed them from the abstracts and keywords. How the text is rendered into index entries seems to me far more important than how ready-made entries are arranged.

If indexes are to be judged by their structure, it is those to dry texts that will attract approval. In the thirty years of the Wheatley Medal's history, only *three* soft texts have been selected to receive it. As Mary Piggott observed, 'Most of the medals had been awarded to compilers of bibliographies or to indexers of a long sequence of periodicals or of related documents'.(10) These are likely to have complex, geometrical index structure, with terms ready specified.

A fourth soft index was noted by the panel in 1991— that to a thousand-page biography of Charles Dickens — and commended, though not awarded a medal[11] The indexer, Douglas Matthews, commented (in a letter to me):

You are right about this kind of index receiving very little attention from the Wheatley judges. I have noticed the same thing myself over the years, and there seems to be a number of reasons, mainly to do with having to consider abstract rather than concrete matter, and trying to assess on the basis of value judgment rather than straight, clear fact. It must be so much easier to judge a legal, technological, scientific or medical work than a philosophical, literary or even biographical one, where in a sense the indexer is an interpreter, not just a reporter of the text.

That is what we soft indexers do: interpret rather than report, supplying terms rather than repeating them. It is a more delicate task

to index such perceptive, creative, human-focused texts, than conformist technical ones. We work from within the unique text, analysing and interpreting it, not by imposing standard structures and vocabulary from without.

To conform to strict control is a matter of training; to exercise freedom of choice, responsibility for one's own decisions, maintaining high standards rather than practising standardization, is more difficult. Indexing soft texts is not a soft option.

The hobgoblin (12)

Regulation also implies consistency, much enjoined for indexers. Consistent, dry texts and disciplines, to be searched by computer programs, of course require consistent indexing. But human lives are generally not lived in accordance with strict principles, and irregularities in lives that are being indexed, variations in significance in soft texts, must be met by flexible indexing practice. If you are working closely in accordance with an individual text, taking each decision strictly on its own merits, I have suggested that index entries should be selected, not uniformly according to category — easy as that is to specify — but by individual degree of significance — a matter of more difficult interpretation, mentally assessing each reference.(13) Page breaks are as random as the alphabet, and indexers are servants to both. A mid-paragraph page-break may fall in a discussion or account of a relationship so that the relevance for the index entry for one ends earlier than the apparently complementary one.

Inconsistency seems clearly apparent in the structure of an index, where assessors may scrutinize it. The indexer's discrete decisions may be seen as valid only on careful comparison with the actual text. I would not want to implement a decision that seemed wrong in a particular case, with what Henri Bergson calls 'obstinacy of momentum, (14) simply because it was the right decision in other similar cases. A rigid rule in indexing may be, for instance, that *all* peers shall be indexed under their family name, or *all* under their title. David Lee advocates that each should rather be indexed by whichever type of name they are best known, so most likely to be sought, than all be treated blindly alike.(15) Again, to save space, a full title may be added to most names in the index, but withheld where it would extend to another line, or where it is not so significant as others in that book; acronyms may be spelt out in the index or not on grounds of space-saving or familiarity rather than consistent practice.

Truth, in truth, opposes rigid generalization, as is shown by a character in an Iris Murdoch novel:

Hugo noticed only details. He never classified. It was as if his vision were sharpened to the point where even *classification was impossible, for each thing was seen as absolutely unique*. I had the feeling that I was meeting for the first time an almost completely truthful man . . . (16)

Robotic rule

Computers, of course, require absolute consistency, and arrange all your entries for you, including subheadings, according to the prescribed code. For soft indexing, I maintain there should be no rigid code for subheadings arrangement, at least for the longer entries, leaving the indexer to determine the order by her own judgement; so in my view, software programs are not suitable for soft indexing.

Right-thinking

Regulation also implies orthodoxy. Last year the Society of Indexers published a booklet in which I offered my own ideas on the indexing of narrative texts.(17) It was well received and reviewed. Some of its ideas are unorthodox, though. For example, I argued that the recurrent, minor appearances of characters through people's lives and the records of them may necessitate strings of undifferentiated page-references in indexes to biographies, honestly indicating series of minor references. I also encouraged the use of AND in subheadings in soft texts, to stand for 'relationship or dealings with' and avoid *excluding* aspects of relationships which should be indicated comprehensively. The Society was cautious to the point of hand-washing, insisting that a disclaimer should go on the first page: 'The views expressed in this paper are those of the author, to whom the Society of Indexers suggests all responses be addressed, at' — my home address.

Speak to me softly

The official criteria for the language to be used for indexing also militate against soft-text indexers. Dry texts comprise hard facts, expressed in direct statements, in the basic, barest, standard vocabulary of the discipline; thesauri may be relied on for the selection of terms. Dry texts are structured in clearly defined sections and subsections, often ready-provided with headings, subheadings and sub-subheadings, maybe even with numbered paragraphs, so that the closing of each reference, as well as its term of entry, is quite authoritatively indicated. The sole aim is clarity; it is purely information-bearing text. For such texts in periodicals, abstracts are provided, with keywords for abstracting and indexing services, so that their indexers are spared — God forbid — the need actually to read the texts.

Soft texts, by contrast, are the individual products of imaginative writers with particular vision, expressed in sensitive, subtle language that may contain and use much more than mere information. In human-focused texts, the meaning may be conveyed by implication, deploying linguistic skill, rather than always being directly stated. The vocabulary may be chosen for its originality, sound, and association, rather than common or standardized terms being relied on.

Soft indexers cannot resort to thesauri to control synonyms and to select 'preferred terms'. In literary terms, indeed, there are *no* synonyms in our language: there are subtle variations of terms. A sensitive author will make a deliberate choice of words, *le mot juste*, and it would be an impertinence for indexers to PREFER others. Our range of vocabulary should be sensitive and subtle to meet their individual perception and expression.

The chief art of indexing seems to me to lie in the devising of terms, which soft indexers have to do. G. V. Carey, indeed, considering the indexing of biographies, declared, 'the compilation of subheadings is, to my mind, the task that calls for the indexer's highest skill of all.'" Many, especially main entries, we can simply lift from the text, as the British Standard enjoins (clause 5.1.2: 'Headings should be chosen from the terminology employed in the document). Soft indexers must themselves, though, supply subheadings to convey the tenor of the text indicated — generalizations or *précis* of the events described — contrary to this BS ordinance. Such terms may not occur in the unbroken, subheadingless prose of soft texts. To take ready-made, standard terms from a thesaurus may be to distort the particular meaning, to replace it with what the indexer — or thesaurus compiler — thinks the author *should* have implied, or what similar texts imply on the point, or what has most closely approximated to that idea previously. To conform to those, the misleading term is slapped on; cramming concepts into ill-fitting hand-me-down coatings rather than providing them with proper made-to-measure suits. Bella Hass Weinberg has noted that even predetermined lists of subdivisions in subject catalogues and periodical indexes do not permit exact specification of the aspect or point-of-view of the topic. (19) How much more clumsy to impose standard terms on individual experience! She distinguished between subject and topic: the standardized *aboutness*, merely indicating what is referred to, and the particular *aspect*, what is said of it; conveying the individual comment can be more helpful in an index, and for soft texts needs careful wording.

A famous entry in F. A. Pottle's index of 1950 to Boswell's *London Journal* perfectly illustrates the most felicitous, individual choice of terms for subheadings.

Lewis, Mrs (Louisa), actress. JB to call Louisa in journal; receives JB; JB visits; JB's increased feeling for; JB discusses love with; JB anticipates delight with; JB lends two guineas to; disregards opinion of world; discusses religion with JB; JB entreats to be kind; uneasiness of discourages JB; JB declares passion for; promises to make JB blessed; . . . makes assignation with JB; consummation with JB interrupted; . . . JB likes better and better; JB's felicity delayed; . . . JB afraid of a rival; JB feels coolness for; . . . JB incredulous at infection from; JB enraged at perfidy of; . . . JB asks his two guineas back; . . .

That is both a delightful and an efficient entry, but it also illustrates some of my serious points. It defies two precepts of the British Standard. Pottle's terms must surely have been devised by himself (interpreting a first-person narrative), not 'chosen from the terminology employed in the document', or from some thesaurus of amatory

phraseology; and note the profusion of prepositions in those subheadings. The Standard insists (5.2.2.4), 'Prepositions should be used only if their absence might cause ambiguity'. There can be little ambiguity in the meaning of that entry; but the prepositions help the narrative flow, avoiding the staccato effect of preposition-less technical indexes. In soft indexing, there is much virtue in prepositions. Then, note the arrangement of those subheadings: chronological, not alphabetical; run-on, not set-out.

One is one and all alone

Advocating individuality, I wish to be more positive than the mother watching a parade who proudly observed, 'Everybody's out of step but our Bill'. I must stop whining about — effectively — discrimination, and point out the positive merits of the exceptional. It is given recognition even in our official terminology: the Wheatley Medal is said to be awarded for 'an outstanding index', suggesting a departure from the norm; perhaps the best indexes must break the rules. And the father of indexing himself, Henry Wheatley, observed, 'Indexes need not necessarily be dry'.(21)

These are the terms in which the fourth index to win the Wheatley Medal, that to Hakluyt's *The principall navigations voyages and discoveries of the English nation*, was described:

A remarkable index. . . constructed on a most ingenious plan, reminiscent of the well-known Chinese box . . . *Such an arrangement. . . would not serve for a normal index. . . but it is perfect for this special text. . .* her index is outstanding for the intelligent, imaginative . . . way . . . she has solved . . . problems (22)

An *Indexer* article by William Heckscher had a title telling in this context: 'The unconventional index and its merits'. It concerned his index to a text by Joachim Cámerarius on an engraving by Albrecht Durer; an index a reviewer described as: 'elaborate, highly unconventional . . . he allows himself to be guided by free association rather than by strict scientific reasoning'.(23) Heckscher summed up his ideas thus:

A good index should be more than merely a taciturn sign-post erected after all the rest has been done and is immutably crystallized . . . the carefully tended cemetery of the ideas expressed in the to-be-indexed text . . . serving more imaginative purposes: . . . to sharpen the perspective of the text, to supplement as well as elucidate textual content. Above all, it may be made so readable that one may begin with the index, deriving from it such pleasure as will stimulate eagerness to turn back to the text, perhaps piecemeal rather than as a continuous whole . . . I prefer the Index which has a life of its own, which may pride itself on being the child of imagination, and which should enable us to expend a peaceful evening in bed, reading such an Index, as if we were reading a good novel.(24)

We cannot all hope to compile such indexes, normally, indeed.

Bookworm's-eye-view

Indexing seems to me to have become swamped by regulation, establishment of standards, information science bodies, and attempts at automation. Yet indexers serve the world of letters, where originality, extending the boundaries of human knowledge and imagination, should count most. The greatest writers are unique, with a personal insight, vision, and powers of expression. They need individual indexers to work flexibly on their soft texts.

I have heard members of the Society of Indexers say they had considered breaking away to found their own society of book indexers — and they were not wholly joking. I deplore their even having to contemplate such a course. To quote from another Sondheim lyric, in *West Side Story*, surely, 'There's a place for us'. So many other societies, powerful giants, exist for the information scientist and the data-bank manipulator: the Institute of Information Scientists, the American Society for Information Science, the Institute for Scientific Information, the National Federation of Abstracting & Information Services . . . while we mere soft back-of-the-book indexers have nowhere else to go. We want professional association, respect, and criteria recognized as appropriate to our type of work; we want it accepted as worthwhile, a proper part of scholarship. Where else should we seek all these but within the existing societies of indexers? Please don't disregard us and bypass us because dry texts bring career promotion; print seems humbler than electronics; individual texts are smaller than databanks. In the realms of knowledge, statistics are not the most significant factor.

I wish merely to remind us all of our origins, which modern developments seem to attempt to transcend and discard; and to claim recognition for the value and difficulty of the work of the individual indexer, struggling alone through pathless soft texts. *Vive la différence!*

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Paper presented at the American Society of Indexers' conference, 'Indexing, providing access to information: Looking back, looking ahead', Alexandria, Virginia, 22 May 1993.

— by Hazel K. Bell, in *The Indexer* Vol. 18 No. 4 October 1993